CONSORTS AND REVELATION IN EASTERN TIBET:
THE AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF THE TREASURE REVEALER
SERA KHANDRO (1892-1940)

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Religious Studies

University of Virginia
January 2007

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the biographical writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Treasure revealer Sera Khandro (1892-1940), who was one of only a handful of pre-1959 Tibetan women to write her own autobiography. She was one of the few women to become renowned as a Treasure revealer (gter ston), or one who discovers scriptural and material Tibetan Buddhist revelations. Her biographical writings include an extremely rare and unpublished 407 Tibetan folio-page autobiography and a 248 folio-page biography of her main spiritual consort Drimé Özer (1881-1924). These writings offer a previously unavailable vantage point from which to examine 1) the process of Treasure revelation and its role in Sera Khandro’s early twentieth-century religious communities (chos sgar, gter sgar), 2) the purposes and social dynamics of consort practices from the emic perspective of a woman who participated in them, and 3) the ways in which one Tibetan woman represented her self and her gender through the literary genre of Tibetan autobiography.

The focus of this study is twofold: 1) to read Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings as literature, analyzing the ways she crafted her self-narrative, and 2) to read her writings as a resource for understanding more about the community contexts of Treasure revelation and its associated consort practices. Chapter One narrates the dramatic plot of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography, emphasizing her tension-filled descriptions of community life in Lhasa and Golok. Chapter Two explores Sera Khandro’s relationship to the mythological history of the Treasure tradition and analyzes the connections she makes between Treasure revelation and social and environmental well-being. Chapter Three focuses on literary analysis, exploring the ways in which Sera Khandro articulates her autobiographical self.
Chapter Four portrays how consort practices fit into Sera Khandro’s community life, which was replete with the jealousies and love that always accompany human relationships. Chapter Five presents Sera Khandro’s representation of her relationship with Drimé Özer, bringing the subject of consort practices out of the sterile domain of religious dictum and into the uncharted territory of a Buddhist love story.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Dissertation could never have been possible without the support of Chatral Sangyé Dorjé, who believed in me enough to lend me a copy of his precious manuscript of Sera Khando’s *Autobiography* and to answer my many questions about Sera Khando.

The kindness of Khenpo Sangyé from Gyalrong (Khenpo Tupten Lodro Tayé), who painstakingly read both Sera Khando’s *Autobiography* and Drimé Özer’s *Biography* with me over the course of several years, can never be repaid. Everything I have understood about Sera Khando’s writing is informed by the endless hours of energy Khenpo Sangyé invested into this project. His insight into Tibetan language, idiom, and religion opened up a new world of thought for me, and I will always be grateful for this enrichment.

Many other Tibetan teachers have offered invaluable support and patience in answering my many questions. They include, in order of chronology, Lama Dorjé of Chamdo, Alak Zenkar Rinpoché of Dartsedo, Khenchen Tashi of Lhagang, Khamtrül Rinpoché of Lhasa, Khedrup of Serta, Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok of Serta, Gelek Pema Wangyal Rinpoché of Padma, Tsültrim Dargay of Serta, Pema Ösel Thayé of Serta, Khenpo Tenzin Özer of Tarek Monastery, Khandro Rinpoché of Darlak, and many others.

I am grateful to my dissertation committee for offering me invaluable advice, suggestions, comments, criticism, and ideas for future research. Special thanks to my main dissertation advisor Prof. David Germano, who has applied his visionary mind to mentoring me throughout my years of graduate education and who invested great energy into reading previous drafts of this dissertation. Also special thanks to Prof. Janet Gyatso for taking the time to participate in my defense and for providing helpful comments. Prof. Karen Lang has been a steady source of support throughout my graduate studies, and Prof. Nicolas Sihlé and Prof. Kurtis Schaeffer have made important contributions to this work.

My fortunate circumstances affording me the freedoms and advantages necessary to devote my attention to researching and writing this dissertation have been made possible by a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant (2004-2005) and a Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Writing Fellowship (2005-2006). I am appreciative of the opportunity these grants provided me with to devote my attention single-pointedly towards this study.

I would like to thank the many friends who have helped me through this project in innumerable ways. Among them are Britt Marie Alm, Jikmé, Christina Monson, Marian Morgan, Heidi Nevin, Susan Nevin, Jann Ronis, and Tenzin Thosom, to name only a few.

My parents, George and Lee Jacoby, and my partner, Antonio Terrone, have sustained me throughout this and all my endeavors and I could never have completed this work without their encouragement.
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Introduction

Sera Khandro’s\textsuperscript{1} (1892-1940) writings are extraordinary not only because they include two of only a handful of female-authored auto/biographical writings in all of pre-1959 Tibetan literature, but also because they open a window into the community contexts and social practices involved in the process of revealing Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and sacred substances called Treasures (\textit{gter ma}).\textsuperscript{2} Written from the perspective of a woman who was herself a Treasure revealer (\textit{gter ston}) and a consort (\textit{gzungs ma}) to male Treasure revealers, her auto/biographical writings include a long autobiography and a biography of her main consort Drimé Özer (1881-1924), one of eight sons of the prominent nineteenth-century Treasure revealer Dujom Lingpa (1835-1903).\textsuperscript{3} These works provide vantage points on the revelation process as it existed in Sera Khandro’s early twentieth-century religious communities in the Golok region of Eastern Tibet, offering new insights into questions such as: (1) How do Treasure revealers such as Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer discover Treasures and what relationship do these Treasures have to their revealer’s social and environmental contexts? (2) Given her unusual status as one of the few female Treasure revealers, autobiographers, and prolific writers, how does Sera Khandro portray her female gender and its significance? (3) What does it mean to write an autobiography in a Buddhist context in which the autobiographical self includes a host of dialogic encounters with divine interlocutors? (4) What are the roles of consort practices in Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writing and how do consorts relate to each other and to their male partners? (5) How does Sera Khandro represent her relationship with her main consort Drimé Özer and what is the
significance of her writing two biographical works, one about her partner and one about herself?

Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings, comprising a total of 655 Tibetan folio pages, are rich in details that contextualize Treasure revelation in the early twentieth-century religious communities in Golok in which she lived, in particular Dartsang (Zlar tshang) in Serta County and Banak (Pan nag) in Padma County. Additionally, when examined using tools drawn from literary analysis, her writing presents interesting insights into the ways in which one elite female spiritual figure chose to portray herself, her gender, and her religious career in written form for the benefit of future generations of her disciples. Hence, in the chapters that follow, this study seeks to analyze Sera Khandro’s writings both as auto/biographical Tibetan literature and as resources for contextualizing the religious phenomena of revelation within the communities in which Sera Khandro lived.

Sera Khandro’s autobiographical writings present an account of life in early twentieth-century Eastern Tibet from the rare perspective of an elite religious woman. Beginning with her childhood experiences growing up in a wealthy half-Mongolian, half-Tibetan noble family in Lhasa, she recounts the dramatic end to her life in Central Tibet: in order to escape from an arranged marriage at the age of fifteen, she ran away from Lhasa with a group of traveling pilgrims from Golok headed by the man who would be her future teacher and spiritual consort, Drimé Özer. Sera Khandro’s courageous decision to travel to what appeared to her as the barbaric land of nomadic Golok and to commence a religious life there was met with many hardships. Among them were near-starvation, extreme cold, and hostility directed at her by Golok locals reluctant to include a young
female outsider from Central Tibet into their religious communities. Sera Khandro began life in Golok with little financial or community support. Her autobiography recounts her gradual rise from working as a servant girl and later being involved in a turbulent relationship with her first spouse Gara Gyalsé (with whom she had two children) to gaining increasing recognition as a Treasure revealer, as a dākinī, and as Drimé Özer’s prophesized consort. The climax of her narrative is her long-awaited reunion with Drimé Özer, with whom she lived for four years until his untimely death at the age of forty-four. By the later part of her forty-nine-year life, when she lived at Sera Monastery from the age of thirty-four onwards after Drimé Özer’s death, she records being in heavy demand to give religious teachings. When she was not traveling and teaching, she spent her time in retreat writing down her revelations and her auto/biographical recollections in a meditation cell perched high on a mountain overlooking the vast alpine landscape surrounding Sera Monastery in Serta County, Golok. Chapter One of this study narrates Sera Khandro’s dramatic life story, highlighting the themes of community tensions, homelessness, impermanence, and love that pervade her account.

Sera Khandro’s eloquent writing style illustrates not only her own individual development as a Treasure revealer, but also the larger social, physical, and spiritual environment within which her revelations occurred in early twentieth-century Tibet. Her writings emphasize the dynamic interrelationships necessary for successful revelation to occur, called auspicious connections (rten ’brel). These include finding the proper time, place, consort, and doctrine holder (i.e., disciple, chos bdag) required to reveal a particular Treasure. Beyond this standard list of criteria necessary to reveal Treasures, Sera Khandro highlights the connections between divine prophecy, successful revelation,
physical health, and community and environmental stability. She interprets physical illness, community unrest, and environmental crises to be products of demonic intervention, a scourge that can only be cured by proper ritual intervention such as Treasure revelation. Thus, the role of a Treasure revealer is one of mediating between divine, demonic, and earthly forces in order to restore equilibrium. This role was not unlike that of the local political leaders with whom Treasure revealers interacted closely in the unincorporated land of early twentieth-century Golok. After providing an overview of the history of Tibetan Treasure revelation, Chapter Two explores the ways Sera Khandro modeled herself and her consort Drimé Özer on the divine progenitors of the Treasure tradition, Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava. The chapter also describes Sera Khandro’s representation of the revelation process, highlighting the interrelationship between processes of the human body (such as illness and sexuality), the social body of communities in which she lived (disputes and cohesion), and the body of text, the revealed Treasure scriptures, that she produced.

Essential to the Treasure revelation process and to Sera Khandro’s understanding of herself is the agency of a plethora of divine forces. Female divinities (dākinīs), Buddhas, accomplished masters (siddhas), oath-bound autochthonous Tibetan land deities (gzhi bdag, gnas bdag), and powerful demonic forces (bdud) permeate Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings with their own voices and intentions. Dākinīs’ prophecies and extensive accounts of her visionary experiences traveling to elaborate Buddhahfields and interacting with myriads of divinities occupy forty-six percent of her Autobiography. The central role that these encounters take in her writing depicts a self in which Sera Khandro’s personal agency is determined largely by divine forces. Chapter
Three of this study draws on insights from Western literary theory and studies of medieval Christian hagiography as well as Buddhist Studies materials to explore the rhetorical devices with which Sera Khandro articulates her autobiographical self. A key facet of this self is the narrative role played by a heteroglossia of dialogic voices ranging from divine to demonic. Sera Khandro’s divine visions help her to articulate a strong sense of self, speaking what Sera Khandro cannot express in her own voice – that she is an incarnation of the paradigmatic Tibetan female divinity Yeshé Tsogyal, that she is one of the few authentic female Treasure revealers, and that she, like Yeshé Tsogyal, is a Ḍākinī empowered to take on male consorts for her own spiritual benefit. The affirmations that Sera Khandro’s divine interlocutors provide balance her own insecure and often negative self-perceptions that are reactions to the difficulties of her worldly life. These difficulties included financial distress, isolation in the foreign land of Golok, recurrent physical illness, marital disputes and eventual separation from Gara Gyalsé, problems being accepted as a female Treasure revealer, and intense depression following the deaths of her loved ones. The encouragement Sera Khandro’s visionary experiences afford her despite these earthly sorrows allows her to represent herself as a spiritually empowered agent in a Buddhist context in which independent selfhood is an illusion.

The multiplicity of voices in Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* reflect what some theorists of western women’s autobiography describe as a “relational” quality of women’s autobiographical selfhood, referring to a self represented in relationship to others. However, rather than being characteristic of her writing as a female, the relational quality of Sera Khandro’s autobiographical self reflects a Tibetan social world in which the individual is ineluctably connected to his or her wider community and
environmental context. I suggest that the rhetorical significance of Sera Khandro’s dialogic writing style is that it enables her to strike a tenor in her self reflections that is neither overly self-aggrandizing nor detrimentally self-humbling. This balance allows her to articulate her spiritual successes and her worldly challenges effectively in order to serve as a role model for future generations who is both approachable in her humanity and extraordinary in her divinity.

A key theme of the dialogic interactions that pervade Sera Khandro’s self-narrative is her female gender. Divine ḍākinīs and important male teachers in her worldly life infuse Sera Khandro with positive interpretations of her female body, counteracting her own repeatedly negative valuations of being female. In Chapter Three, I depict the mantra-like regularity with which Sera Khandro emphasizes the trouble she experiences as one with an “inferior female body” who strives to accomplish spiritual goals. I suggest this is not only a reflection of the gender discrimination she clearly faced in early twentieth-century Golok society, but is also a self-humbling strategy she employs to balance out the laudatory claims she simultaneously makes of being an extraordinary female Treasure revealer and an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal.

One of the most interesting aspects of Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings is her in-depth presentation of the religious purposes, community dynamics, morality, and interpersonal sentiments associated with consort practices, the topic of Chapter Four. Her writing explains consort practices via a Tantric understanding of the human body in which manipulating the subtle body physiology of channels, winds, and seminal nuclei (rtsa, rlung, thig le) produces physical health, spiritual realization, and aids in producing Treasures. Beyond this, Sera Khandro portrays the ways in which she and those in her
communities interpreted these religious applications of human sexuality in often divergent and always controversial ways. Her writing betrays a pervasive tension in the religious communities in which she lived between celibate monastic and non-celibate Tantric interpretations of moral behavior. In Drimé Özer’s biography, she portrays his dilemma between choosing a celibate path versus living as a non-celibate Tantric practitioner (a mantrin, or sngags pa) as well as ḍākinīs’ strong opposition to his monastic yearnings. Similarly, in her autobiography, she constantly reiterates ḍākinīs’ divine injunctions to engage in consort practices despite her apparent reluctance. Through this interplay between divine commands to engage with consorts and her descriptions of their personal disinclination to do so, Sera Khandro presents herself and Drimé Özer as moral, non-lascivious religious figures striving to live in accordance with divine prophecy.

Divine visions offer Sera Khandro encouragement to pursue a religious career as a female Treasure revealer even though her mundane social circumstances seem only to discourage her. Similarly, Sera Khandro’s attempts to actualize the ḍākinīs’ prophecies to engage with specific male consorts arouse repeated social tensions in her community life. Sera Khandro recounts recurring jealousy and in-fighting between female consorts of male Treasure revealers in the different communities in which she lived. Additionally, she records tensions between herself and nuns who disapproved of her in-between status as neither married laywoman nor celibate nun (jo min nag min). Fear of negative gossip about herself that she frequently mentions elucidates the tensions associated with her indeterminate social position as a non-celibate woman living at times in monastic religious centers, as a bi-racial Central Tibetan woman living in faraway Golok, as a
Treasure revealer, visionary, and author who also was female, and as a consort to men who already had consorts. Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings thus contextualize consort practices in real community contexts; they ground ephemeral philosophical interpretations of sexual yoga in concrete social realities rife with jealousy, competition, disagreement, and, of course, love. In doing so, her writings present a vision of consort practices in which women were both agents and objects of exchange between powerful men. Consort relationships in Sera Khandro’s communities were thus neither entirely gynocentric nor misogynist, but involved complex dynamics characteristic of human relationships despite their rarified context as part of the path towards realizing Buddhist enlightenment.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, spotlights the way in which Sera Khandro describes her relationship to Drimé Özer, which I suggest can be read as a love story. Buddhism generally holds true to its Indian roots as a renouncer’s tradition in the sense that Indian and then later Tibetan Buddhism didn’t incorporate the sentimental and amorous devotional tones of other Indian religious traditions such as that of the bhakti tradition closely associated with Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. However, I suggest that Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writing resembles bhakti devotional literature in that the love between Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer is a central part of their path to enlightenment. Her auto/biographical literature thus presents a Buddhist liberation story in which enlightenment is not to be found in solitary meditation underneath a bodhi tree, but rather through the union of method and wisdom in sacred partnership. In Sera Khandro’s writing, sexual yoga is not only about manipulating channels, winds, and seminal nuclei in order to engender spiritual liberation within an individual practitioner; it
is also an aspect of an emotionally charged relationship with her consort, Drimé Özer. It is not surprising to find a sacred partnership such as theirs within literature connected to the Tibetan Treasure tradition given that the Treasure tradition claims (one version of) its mytho-historical roots with the eighth-century divine couple Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. Sera Khandro places her love story with Drimé Özer in the sacred history of the Treasure tradition, understanding herself and Drimé Özer to be incarnations of the divine couple from whom the Treasures originate.

Hagiographies of Yeshé Tsogyal are the main literary influence for Sera Khandro’s self-narrative, a theme to which I will repeatedly return throughout this study. Just as Yeshé Tsogyal had one main guru and consort but also had other consorts who aided her spiritual development, likewise Sera Khandro has her Padmasambhava, Drimé Özer, in addition to other temporary consorts. Just as Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava are a timeless and inseparable couple, so too are Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer; they are promised to each other in each and every future incarnation, locked in a partnership that defies the separation of death. The power of their intention has not been forgotten by contemporary Treasure revealers in today’s Golok – Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok (b. 1944) and his recently deceased consort Taré Lhamo (1938-2002) describe themselves as modern emanations of Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro, drawing explicitly on the paradigm of the inseparability of the divinely prophesized Treasure revelation couple that Sera Khandro emphasized in her auto/biographical literature.
**Methodology**

In his analysis of medieval European hagiography, Patrick Geary suggests that “not only can hagiography be used for incidental historical information, but it can and must be a privileged source for the study of social values.”\(^{10}\) Drawing on such insights, this study seeks to read Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings as literary reflections of the social world that she inhabited. Throughout this study I focus on what I would suggest is a mutually illuminating project of reading Sera Khandro’s biographical writings both as literature, analyzing the ways in which she constructs her self-narrative, and also as a resource contributing to a social history of the early twentieth-century Eastern Tibetan religious communities in which she lived. Therefore, questions germane to this study are: 1) How does Sera Khandro represent herself as a Treasure revealer, as a woman, and as a self worthy of being the subject of an autobiography? 2) How does she describe the religious communities involved in Treasure revelation in which she lived – what is the relationship between monasticism and consort practices in these religious communities? What is the nature of relationships between women and men who were involved in Tantric consort practices in these communities?

I am primarily interested in examining Sera Khandro’s writing as literature and not in engaging in the hermeneutical enterprise of interpreting the veracity of her visionary and revelatory claims.\(^{11}\) Rather, I analyze the ways in which Sera Khandro represents herself, her partner, and their communities through the conventions of Tibetan Buddhist autobiography and biography. Within this, my primary focus is Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* and secondarily Drimé Özer’s *Biography* since her *Autobiography* is one of the very rare sources in Tibetan literature depicting the process of Treasure revelation
and consort practices from the perspective of a female Treasure revealer. A study of Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* thus balances the almost exclusively male-authored narrative and prescriptive accounts of Treasure revelation that form our understanding of this distinctive type of Tibetan scriptural transmission in which women are frequently represented as aides to men’s realizations but rarely as agents.

In his pioneering analysis of autobiography, Georges Gurdjief suggested that autobiography “shows us not the objective stages of a career – to discern these is the task of the historian – but that it reveals instead the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale.” But the meaning of the autobiographer’s tale is constituted in a particular social/cultural context; the autobiographer’s self-narrative describes her own life as much as it depicts the social world in which she comes to know herself. The self she projects is not a direct window into her subjective experience but is rather an intentional perspective on her life written for distinctive personal/political reasons with a particular audience in mind. Hence, in his study on American autobiographical writing, Robert Sayre reminds us that, “Autobiographies, therefore, may reveal as much about the author’s assumed audiences as they do about him or her, and this is a further reason why they need to be read as cultural documents, not just as personal ones.” Thus, this study of Sera Khandro’s biographical writings explores the ways in which one extraordinary Tibetan female Treasure revealer and author represented the intricacies of her visionary and sentimental life as much as it explores the social and cultural context of her prolific literary productions.
Sera Khandro’s Writings

Sera Khandro’s autobiography is an extremely rare document and has never been published in Tibetan or translated into any other language; it is only extant in manuscript form, handwritten in cursive Tibetan (yig nag).\textsuperscript{14} Compared to other Tibetan autobiographies, it is very long, comprising 407 Tibetan folio pages (depending on edition).\textsuperscript{15} The text is titled The Biography of the Central Tibetan Woman Dewé Dorjé: A Reliquary for Fortunate and Faithful Ones [Serving as] a Chariot Leading to Renunciation, henceforth referred to in this study as Sera Khandro’s Autobiography.\textsuperscript{16} Sera Khandro wrote two versions of her autobiography: a condensed 14 folio page version that is included in her revealed Treasures (gter chos), and an expanded version that is the focus of this study.\textsuperscript{17} The most important currently living disciple of Sera Khandro, the ninety-five-year-old Dzokchen Master Chatral Sangyé Dorjé Rinpoché, describes this expanded version as an integrated combination of an outer, inner, and secret autobiography.\textsuperscript{18} The work covers the years of Sera Khandro’s life from birth to the age of 43. She completed it in 1934, after she wrote Drimé Özer’s Biography. Appendix III of this study is a complete English translation and Tibetan transliteration of the colophon of her Autobiography, in which she lists her primary sponsors and clearly documents her authorship of the work.\textsuperscript{19}

Sera Khandro’s Autobiography is rare in the sense that it is owned only by Sera Khandro’s disciples and their circles of disciples and descendants, whose main locations in Tibet are, not surprisingly, the places Sera Khandro lived and taught during her lifetime. These include Padma County in Golok (Mgo log) Autonomous Prefecture, Serta (Gser rta) County and Tralek Monastery (Bkra legs dgon) in Kardzé (Dkar mdzes)
Autonomous Prefecture, and the Riwoché (Ri bo che) area in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Practitioners of Sera Khandro’s teachings also live in Pharping (most notably Chatral Rinpoché), and Boudhanath, Nepal, as well as in India and the West. Although Chatral Rinpoché possesses an original manuscript version of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography, one reason for the ongoing rarity of the Autobiography is the extreme care with which he maintains Sera Khandro’s lineage and manuscripts. Consequently, Sera Khandro’s works have received little attention in Western (or Tibetan) scholarship.

The biography Sera Khandro wrote chronicling the life of her teacher and most important consort, Drimé Özer, is titled The Biography of the Omniscient Lord of Accomplished Ones, the Precious Sovereign of the Ocean of Profound Treasure Pema Drodül Sangngak Lingpa: A Chariot for the Faithful Dispelling the Heart’s Darkness, a Garland of Jewels, a Rosary of Blue Lotuses, henceforth referred to as Drimé Özer’s Biography. Sera Khandro completed writing his Biography in 1925 in her mountain retreat overlooking Sera Monastery in Serta, Golok, shortly after Drimé Özer’s death and about one year before she commenced writing her Autobiography. The text is 248 Tibetan folio pages long and is published as a reproduction of a cursive Tibetan (yig nag) handwritten manuscript housed in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India.

Unlike her Autobiography, which she explicitly states that she authored, Sera Khandro claims that Drime Özer’s Biography is a prophecy bestowed upon her by ḍākinīs. In the colophon of the Biography she writes,

If the tongues of the expansive Buddhas don’t have the power to proclaim this eloquent liberation story, which is a ḍākinī prophecy that dispels the heart’s darkness, how would someone like me? For the sake of leading the chariot of
disciples' faith a bit, this dharma teaching emanated as self-emergent symbols, unpolluted by the stains of the conceptual mind's corrections. Relying on the compassion of the Knowledge Holder Lama [that is like] the cool shade of a white parasol, I deciphered [this text].

Aside from this difference in the way Sera Khandro expresses her authorship of the two texts, the style and tone of both strongly resemble each other. Both texts include roughly half visionary experience and half this-world narrative, written in Golok dialect-influenced Tibetan with an emphasis on dialogic encounters with a wide range of supernatural and mundane interlocutors. The main distinction between the two biographical works is that Sera Khandro wrote Drimé Özer's Biography in the third person until after his death when the narrator's voice switches to that of Sera Khandro in the first person. That his story is a biography and not an autobiography is clear given the laudatory way in which Sera Khandro represents Drimé Özer as opposed to the often insecure and self-denigrating tone with which she represents herself in her Autobiography. Yet beyond differences in literary genre between biography and autobiography, there are other reasons why Drimé Özer's narrative does not contain the level of suffering and alienation that Sera Khandro's does. Perhaps the more positive tone of Drimé Özer's narrative is also a reflection of his circumstances as the son of the well-known Treasure revealer Dujom Lingpa, educated from early childhood and supported by his family and community to pursue a religious career. This stands in stark contrast to Sera Khandro's struggles as an unusual foreign woman in Golok communities that were not always welcoming to her. Although the intricacies of Drimé Özer's life are another story that is beyond the scope of this study, for our purposes, his biography is a resource
that helps to broaden our understanding of the community contexts of revelation and to provide alternative perspectives on events Sera Khandro depicts in her *Autobiography*.26

Sera Khandro was the most prolific female writer in all of Tibetan history. Her biographical writings comprise only a fraction of her literary corpus. Her writings also include more than two thousand Tibetan folio pages of revealed Treasure teachings (*gter chos*) in four volumes. The titles of her two main revelations, each comprising two volumes, are *The Secret Treasury of the Reality Dākinīs* and *The Reality Dākinīs’ Heart Essence*.27 Both of these Treasure texts are comprised of cycles of smaller texts, which are primarily ritual texts including liturgy for accomplishment practice (Skt. *sādhana*, aimed at identifying the practitioner with the particular deity) and Tantric empowerments for each deity. The main deities in Sera Khandro’s Treasure cycles include Vajravārāhī, Yeshé Tsogyal, Vajrakīlaya, Hayagrīva, Tārā, Avalokiteśvara, and the three roots (lama, tutelary deity, and dākinī), among others. Beyond ritual texts, Sera Khandro’s Treasure revelation volumes contain prophetic materials, accounts of her visionary experiences (*nyams snang*), and explanatory materials covering topics related to Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) philosophy, in particular Direct Transcendence (*thod rgal*) practice. Although her Treasure volumes include little in the way of hagiographic material aside from one biography of Padmasambhava and her condensed 14-folio-page *Autobiography*, in actuality there is significant overlap between her revelations and her auto/biographical reflections in that both genres of writing highlight her visionary encounters with Buddhist divinities.28

Sera Khandro also wrote a commentary on Dujom Lingpa’s famous text *Buddhahood Without Meditation* titled *The Main Commentary on Purifying One’s
Perceptions (Snang sbyang dbus 'grel). In the colophon of this text, Sera Khandro explains that Dujom Lingpa had wanted a commentary written for Buddhahood Without Meditation, and Drimé Özer had passed away before he was able to write one. Hence, Sera Khandro records that she acquiesced to disciples’ demands and wrote down Drimé Özer’s explanatory teachings on his father’s teaching, only adding “a bit of clarification” to Drimé’s explanation. Ironically, given the prevalence of male authors representing women’s lives, Sera Khandro is her male partner’s mouthpiece in more than one sense. She is his biographer and the author of his explanatory teachings on his father’s great Dzokchen commentary. However, perhaps as an accident of history, it appears that Drimé Özer’s corpus of Treasure revelations and other writings did not survive the Cultural Revolution. Hence, what we know of him comes essentially through Sera Khandro’s words.
Chapter One: Sera Khandro’s Autobiography

Given the dearth of literary sources documenting the lives of Tibetan women, Sera Khandro’s Autobiography stands as a bright and shining exception to the rule. Her writings offer a richly detailed window into not only her participation in the Treasure revelation tradition, but also her hopes, dreams, and reflections on the most significant personal relationships in her life. Hers is not a sedate tale of sanctity; the story Sera Khandro recounts is intensely dramatic, pervaded with suffering, friendship, betrayal, and love. The rage she felt at times towards her spouse (her life partner, tshe grogs) Gara Gyalsé and his mother comes freshly through the pages of her narrative today, nearly a century later. The primary emotions that thematize her writing include not only her sorrows, but also the profound devotion she felt for the man who was to become her lama and the love of her life, Drimé Özer. Her sufferings pale in comparison to the love they shared, a devotional love that sustained her through the many dark moments in which she recounts yearning to leave this painful world. Darkness and light in the form of worldly sufferings tempered by blissful encounters with the divine characterize Sera Khandro’s powerful story of spiritual liberation. Her Autobiography portrays the particular circumstances of one woman in early twentieth-century Tibet – a girl desperate to flee a forced marriage and a woman struggling to fulfill her calling as a Treasure revealer in a society suspicious of her. Hers is a story about what it means to be homeless and to constantly negotiate between competing demands including Chinese and Tibetan cultural influences, life in Lhasa and Golok, monastic and lay society, and religious aspirations and the limitations of her female gender. But above all, her Autobiography (and Drimé
Özer’s *Biography*) are examples for their disciples of the sacrifice, diligence, suffering, devotion, and love that form integral parts of the Tibetan Buddhist path to spiritual realization.

**Childhood in Lhasa: Religion or Chinese Politics?**

Sera Khandro recounts her birth and childhood in Lhasa with a retrospective gaze emphasizing her innate predilection towards religion amidst the pressures she faced growing up in a wealthy and politically connected “Chinese” family. After the opening prayers (which I describe in greater detail in Chapter Two), Sera Khandro begins her story with the following poetic description of her birth place in an area of Lhasa near the Jokhang Temple:

North of Bodgaya in India, east of the abode of the incarnation of the Supremely Noble Avalokiteśvara [named] Songtsen Gampo in the snow land of Tibet, west of the Temple of the miraculous place of the goats [the Jokhang Temple], there is a place called Lumotil (*Klu mo mthil*) whose land protector is Dorjé Yüdrönma. Near the place with various amazing deities such as the main image of the land, the Jowo Śakyamuni, and so forth, there is a palace surpassing all those neighboring it called Gyarakashar (*Rgya ra ga shar*).\(^{32}\)

She describes her family’s ancestry and her father’s background in the following way:

In the palace called Gyarakashar [lived] Lhasé Jampa Gönpo who was a ruler endowed with the silk banner of power and wealth belonging to a Mongolian royal ancestry known as the pure divine race. Renowned to be the emanation of Rongtsa\(^{33}\), he was empowered in mind Treasures. He displayed signs of accomplishment without difficulty and was a householder.\(^{34}\)

Later she describes her family as being a Chinese leader’s family (*rgya dpon sang*), thus it appears that she equates her father’s Mongol ancestry with the term Chinese (*rgya*).\(^{35}\)

Her mother, Tsering Chödzom (*Tshe ringchos ’dzom*), was of a đākinī race and was a lady of the Nup (*Gnub*) clan.\(^{36}\) Without causing any pain to her mother, Sera Khandro
was born on the first day of the first month of the water dragon year (1892). Miraculous signs accompanied her birth such as Sera Khandro being born in an egg (*gsong skyes*).\(^{37}\) As her father opened the egg with a feathered arrow adorned with five colors of silk, rainbow light poured out, vultures danced above the house, a good smell pervaded the area, and the sound of a conch shell blowing filled the inside of the house. The baby’s body had the letters “*bam ha ri ni sa*” respectively in the five places (crown of the head, throat, heart, navel, genitals) and her hair showed signs of being blessed by *ḍākinīs*.\(^{38}\)

An interesting aspect of her childhood is the cultural tensions that arose between having a “Chinese” father and a Tibetan mother. Sera Khandro describes herself as being between two cultural worlds, pressured to fulfill her father’s demands and her religious inclinations. The first instance of Chinese/Tibetan tension emerges right after her birth when there is a dispute over which year Sera Khandro was born. The Chinese group (*rgya sde*, presumably her father’s family) argues that because there were two thirtieth days of the Chinese month, Sera Khandro was born on the last day of the previous year, the male hare year (1891). The Tibetan group (*bod shog pa*, presumably her mother’s family) argues that because Sera Khandro was born on the first day of the year of the Kingdom of Tibet (*rgyal khams bod*), she should be born in the dragon year (1892).\(^{39}\) Unable to resolve the debate, the two factions go to Taklung Mahāyāna Rinpočé\(^{40}\) to resolve the dispute and to request a name for the baby. After giving Sera Khandro the name Kalzang Drönma (*Skal bzang sgron ma*), Taklung Mahāyāna Rinpočé exhorts the two factions not to fight. Sera Khandro writes that her mother lamented:

> Although before in our family we have had many boys and girls, the two factions [Chinese and Tibetan] have never quareeled before. Now since this girl has agitated the two leaders, I should give her away to someone else.\(^{41}\)
Soon after this, Sera Khandro narrates that tensions diminished between the Chinese and Tibetans and everyone called her by the nickname Kūnga Wangmo (Kun dga’ dbang mo).

Another example of the tensions that arise as a result of Sera Khandro’s location at the interstice between Chinese and Tibetan cultural influences (and parentage) is her education. She recounts that when she was eight years old, her father sought to prepare her to become a political leader (dpon mo) by insisting that she learn literary and spoken Chinese (rgya yig and rgya skad). Meanwhile she, supported by her mother, yearned for a Tibetan education that would prepare her to renounce worldly life and become a nun. Sera Khandro writes:

Then, although mother said, “This girl needs to study literary Tibetan,” father didn’t allow it and said, “First she needs to study literary Chinese.” He sent me to study literary Chinese from a clerk who was an expert in literary and spoken Chinese. I was disappointed but I didn’t dare tell my father.

Sera Khandro recollects that she had a natural talent learning Chinese: “Because I knew the [Chinese] letters better than my friends did, the local people said, “This princess is intelligent and will certainly take on a leadership role.” Despairing at the thought that her Chinese education was only further binding her to a worldly life involved in politics that she felt powerless to escape, Sera Khandro recounts throwing all of her Chinese books into a river. At the same time, she contemplates whether or not to jump into the river herself as a suicidal gesture, but stops beforehand.

Although Sera Khandro emphasizes her father’s wishes for her to be educated in Chinese, her parents must also have exposed her to religion, given its importance in her recollections of her earliest childhood. Sera Khandro notes her father’s political
involvement, but also describes him as a devout Buddhist, a Dzokchen practitioner of the Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) sect who “was empowered in mind Treasures.” In fact, she recounts that when she was nine years old, her father mentions the existence of Dzokchen (Great Perfection) practice to her for the first time. When he explains his “ability to train in seeing that which appears as an illusory dream,” his words instantly cause her to feel great faith in the Dzokchen teachings. Perhaps it is these influences that support her early focus on religion; Sera Khandro portrays her childhood as one of sanctity, continually remembering the suffering of cyclic existence and exhorting her childhood friends to recite the six-syllable prayer and to practice the dharma. Instead of playing games with the other children, she recites mantra and is derided by the other children for being like a grandmother doing prayers instead of playing like a child. She recounts that at the young age of eight, she has her first Treasure revelation experience in which she pulls a ritual dagger (*phur bu*) part-way out of a rock at Drak Yerpa (*Brag yer pa*), a mountainside filled with cave hermitages near Lhasa. Her father is so impressed by this that he sends her back the next day to wander through the caves looking for more Treasures. Although she begs her parents to allow her to renounce lay society, signs indicate that she should not become a nun. When she is eight years old, along with her family Sera Khandro consults the head lama of the group of eighteen Chinese political leaders who was the incarnation of the Great Accomplished One Tangtong Gyalpo (*Grub chen thang stong rgyal po*) named Changtrong Druptop Rinpoché (*Lcang grong grub thob rin po che*). He performs the refuge ceremony for her and tells her family,

This girl is without mistake an emanation of the Lady Sakya Hayagrīva. Hence, neither being a householder nor a nun is appropriate. When it is time, her [*dākini*] heritage will awaken, so until then do whatever you want.
Whether or not her destiny is to become a nun, from her earliest childhood, Sera Khandro writes that she sought to renounce the world into which she was born, a world of Lhasa nobility and political power.

Despite her religious leanings, Sera Khandro writes that at the age of ten she was soon to be forced to take on a political role herself:

Then, a few days later the thirty outer and inner ministers from the group of 18 Chinese leaders and the complete group of Chinese and Tibetan leaders gathered and had a conference and said that I needed to take on my father’s [political] position.

I said, “You don’t need to decide about me – my former karma knows what I will do and what outcome there will be. Give both my older brothers and sisters father’s rank and they will be happy.”

The ministers said, “We have already given your two brothers and your sisters their share of the estate and leadership positions. They are already there taking care of whatever they need to be doing. You, the youngest of all the siblings, the darling child of the male and female leaders, because you have the status of the youngest child, you must act accordingly.” Having said this, they began preparations.

I prayed to both the Great One from Orgyen and Yeshé Tsogyal and I stayed there not giving them any answer.³³

The issue of whether Sera Khandro will assume a political role is temporarily resolved after Sera Khandro prays fervently to Yeshé Tsogyal, who comes to her in a vision. At length, this time the ministers give up trying to convince her to accept the political role.³⁴

**Visionary Experiences and Struggles with Impending Marriage**

This vision of Yeshé Tsogyal is one of many visions and interactions Sera Khandro has with divine figures, most of whom are female.³⁵ Terrifying women and beautiful women accompany her daily life and appear to her in dreams at various times.
For example, just as she is about to drown herself in the river in despair at being forced to study Chinese, a terrifying visionary woman appears before her and stops her from jumping.\textsuperscript{56} During her first Treasure revelation experience pulling a ritual dagger out of a rock at Drak Yerpa, a beautiful woman helps her find Treasures and gives her prophecies about her future.\textsuperscript{57} Also in Yerpa, the mountain deity Nyenchen Tanglha (\textit{Gnyan chen thang lha})\textsuperscript{58} appears to her as a magnificent white man with a ruddy complexion riding a black horse and claims to be her father.\textsuperscript{59} Sera Khandro later confirms with her mother that her true father is in fact the mountain deity Nyenchen Tanglha and this realization gives Sera Khandro the resolve not to follow in her father's footsteps as a political leader in Lhasa because he is not her real father.\textsuperscript{60} After receiving more visions in which \textit{dakinis} teach Sera Khandro essential practice advice, Sera Khandro devotes herself to religious practice.\textsuperscript{61} Her commitment is not without benefits; to her father's amazement, she is spontaneously able to cure people of smallpox by reciting mantras, blowing on them, and giving them blessed water during a smallpox outbreak that occurred in Lhasa when she was eleven years old, approximately 1903.\textsuperscript{62}

Just as Sera Khandro is focusing on practicing the teachings that she has received in her visionary experience, marriage proposals destroy her ability to determine her own future. Also in this context of recollecting her father's machinations in arranging her marriage, her writing demonstrates racial tensions between Chinese and Tibetan suitors. Sera Khandro recounts that when she was only eleven years old, inner Tibetan ministers (\textit{bod kyi nang blon}) such as the Shartra family (\textit{Shar khra sang}), the Doring family (\textit{Rdo ring sang}), the Zurkang family (\textit{Zur khang sang}), and others coveted her as a bride and offered her father gifts. Yet she states that, "Because they were part of the Tibetan group,
he didn’t give [me to them] and he returned all the presents." Instead, Sera Khandro’s father accepts the matrimonial offer of “a Chinese leader named Daloyi (Da lo yi) from the western area called the Happy City (Skyid lung grong chen) whose appearance was Chinese, whose religious sect (chos lugs) was Seminal Heart (snying thig) like ours, and who was wealthy.” She writes that, “All the ministers had a conference and said that, ‘Because they [the Chinese leader’s family] are sovereign over ten thousand households, it is acceptable if they can control both ranks.’ Both sides having agreed to the marriage, they rejoiced. Meanwhile, Sera Khandro recollects, “As for me, I was extremely depressed. Wondering ‘What wouldn’t be okay about being dead?’, I passed my time day and night feeling only suffering.”

Sera Khandro describes growing more and more despondent with the finalization of her marriage. Although her father reconsiders giving his daughter away in marriage when he realizes that she has a strong proclivity towards religion as a Treasure revealer, it is already too late as he has already finalized the agreement with the Chinese leader’s family. When he tries to extricate his daughter from the marriage, the Chinese leader’s family threatens war. All the ministers agree that there is nothing to do but to continue on with the engagement. As a result of this, Sera Khandro decides to kill herself and attempts suicide by drinking a mixture of opium and alcohol. Just at the right moment, her father discovers that she has poisoned herself and saves her life by making her vomit the poison through pouring mustard seed into her mouth through a straw.

As marriage plans are finalized, Sera Khandro experiences multiple visions in which she travels to elaborate Buddhahelds and receives empowerments and meditation instruction from figures including Vajrayogini, Sarahapa, and Taranatha. She also
travels to the land of Yama, the Lord of Death, as one who returns from the dead (‘das log), and comes back to life to tell her amazed parents about her journey.74 As tensions increase between Sera Khandro’s active visionary life and her obligation to marry, two major turning points in Sera Khandro’s young life occur. First, her mother dies and Sera Khandro no longer feels tied to staying at home.75 Second, just as Sera Khandro is beginning to hatch her plans to escape the marriage her father has arranged for her without her consent, she has a vision which changes the course of her life. When Sera Khandro is thirteen years old, Vajrārāhi appears to her in a dream and empowers her in the two Treasure cycles that she will spend the rest of her life revealing and teaching. Sera Khandro recounts,

One day in my dream, in a pleasing land with green pastures and a forest replete with flowers, there were many birds and animals frolicking contentedly. In the middle of this, many different women were gathered. Wondering “Is mother over there in that line of women?,” I went to where the women were.

When I thought that mother wasn’t there and they were all women I didn’t recognize, the nun who had given me advice about death in my previous dream and the girl who had helped me go to the presence of Sarahapa both came to me. They said, “Are you tired? It is greatly amazing that you have come here now.”

Replied “How are you both? It is greatly amazing that we are meeting here,” I prostrated.

They said, “Because we are of the same birth, it is not appropriate to prostrate. Prostrate to the main lady of the mandala – the time has come for you to take your accomplishment wealth.”

I asked again, “How is it that we are of the same family line?”

They said, “This nun is Kūṅga Buma. Both of our lineages are Sukasiddhi and Dipam Taré.” Saying this, they disappeared without [my knowing] where they went.

According to their words, I prostrated to the main lady. The main lady arised from her seat and she cut open her navel with a curved knife without any redness.
Extremely terrified, I couldn’t bear to watch with my eyes and calling out “Mother!” I prepared to come back [home].

At this time, the women said, “Don’t say this. Open your eyes and look – there is no fault. The time has come for you to meet the great self-emergent changeless mandala.”

I opened my eyes and when I slowly looked, all the women had transformed and all had the appearance of dakinis. The main lady also having changed into the appearance of Vajravarahi, she conferred the empowerment of the Assembly of Sense-base Deities of the Body Mandala and gave me an introduction [to them]. She conferred a symbolic empowerment in The Secret Treasury of Reality Dakinis and The Dakinis’ Heart Essence. She bestowed upon me the registry (kha byang) and prophetic registry (lung byang), including the time to teach these two religious teachings, the place to spread them, the great beings who would hold these teachings, the place where the disciples would be, the way auspicious connections would appear, and the method companions (i.e., consorts, thabs grops). She said, “Since the time has come for you to benefit sentient beings with these teachings, keep the meaning of this registry in your mind and don’t forget it. Because you are my messenger, benefit to the teachings and to sentient beings will certainly arise.”

Sera Khandro’s reaction to the immense honor of being given teachings to propagate by Vajravarahi herself is to wonder why Vajravarahi chose her, a mere girl, to be her messenger. This is one of many occasions throughout her narrative when she denigrates herself on the basis of her gender, wondering why one like herself with an inferior body (skye lus dman pa), one with a woman’s body (bu med lus), is empowered to benefit sentient beings through propagating Treasure revelations. In this instance, dakinis encourage her, citing Guru Rinpoche’s words to Yeshé Tsogyal telling her that her that her female body is not low but is extraordinary. Thus Sera Khandro explicitly refers to Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography as she recounts her own. Key passages in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography are very similar to passages in hagiographies of Yeshé Tsogyal, an interconnection that reflects Sera Khandro’s status as Yeshé Tsogyal’s incarnation. Another example of this is a long vision that Sera Khandro recounts experiencing at age
fifteen in which Kukurepa\textsuperscript{79} gives her a detailed teaching on channels and wind practices (\textit{rtsa rlung}) including an instruction on sexual yoga that is nearly identical to a passage from Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography.\textsuperscript{80}

\textbf{The Great Escape}

Meanwhile, Sera Khandro plans her great escape from Lhasa householder life. Although she regrets not being able to please her father, divine visionary prophecies and lamas she speaks with such as Druapten Rinpočhe (\textit{Lcang grong grub thob rin po che}) encourage her to follow her life’s destiny to live a religious life in Eastern Tibet.\textsuperscript{81} After her father remarries, Sera Khandro’s desire to leave her home grows stronger. When she is fifteen years old, she asks her father for permission to stay with her brother for a while instead of living with her father and his new wife. This is a strategic move because her brother’s house is only three stories high, not the four stories of her father’s house and therefore is easier to escape from.\textsuperscript{82} While at her brother’s house, the seminal moment of her great escape occurs: her teacher and future consort Drimé Özer arrives from Kham and requests shelter at her brother’s house while on pilgrimage in Central Tibet with his entourage of disciples. The following passage marks the beginning of the most important chapter of her life:

Then in the tenth month, some people from Kham came to visit Central Tibet. Among those of the central encampment,\textsuperscript{83} there was one who was said to be the incarnation of Dzokchen Palge\textsuperscript{84} from Dzaygal Monastery. Since he asked my older brother to give him lodging, [my brother] gave him lodging and the guests arrived. Watching from the sun-viewing glass window, I looked at the guests. Among them there was one lama with hair on his head. As soon as I saw him, my perception transformed and thinking that he was really the one called Künkyen Longchen Rabjam,\textsuperscript{85} tears flowed from my eyes. On account of the goose bumps on my body, I put my palms together and prayed, “Don’t lessen your compassion — in all my lifetimes may I never separate from you.”\textsuperscript{86}
Sera Khandro is fascinated by this new arrival and sends her servant girls on a secret mission to find out more about who he is. They return, telling her his name. Sera Khandro writes,

Although I was immeasurably happy when I heard that his name was Wish-fulfilling Jewel Incarnate, because of my high status, I couldn’t go to him. From the sun-viewing glass window, when I saw the Wish-fulfilling Jewel himself going out and coming in to his tent, I prayed [to him] with my body, speech, and mind united and having [prayed for] him to be my main physical consort, our minds were mixed.87

All the signs from Sera Khandro’s dreams having come together, she decides the time has come to avoid her impending marriage one month before it is scheduled to happen by escaping Lhasa, never to return or to see her family ever again. One evening when she is fifteen years old, she pours her two servant girls so much beer they become intoxicated and fall asleep. Then, after removing all her head jewelry and fancy clothing, she dons a new servant’s outfit over her clothing. With only a few snacks in her pockets, she breaks the window of her room and slowly climbs down from the third floor. She recounts that although terrifying demons of all sorts blocked her passage on the dark road, she persevered remembering that all phenomena are illusory. Traveling as fast as a wild horse, by sunrise the next morning she reaches Tsurpu (Mtsur pu) in Tölung (Stod lung) and catches up with the people of the central encampment.88

**Difficulties on the Road to Golok**

From the moment Sera Khandro catches up with Drimé Özer and his encampment, difficulties and obstacles pervade Sera Khandro’s experience of life on all levels ranging from extreme physical discomforts to social problems that plague her new
life amidst Golok society. The cultural and linguistic differences are vast between the	noble Lhasa girl Sera Khandro, who had never known physical hardship, and Drimé
Özer’s nomadic religious community from Golok, who were seasoned alms beggars
accustomed to traveling by foot over vast Tibetan terrains. At first, Sera Khandro
recounts,

I couldn’t understand what everybody was saying to me and they couldn’t
understand what I was saying. I thought, “They have the body of humans but they
wear leather clothes and when they speak, they are like savage barbarians. It will
be difficult for the religious teaching called The Great Perfection to spread in their
land.”

Nevertheless, having prayed to Lama Drimé Özer, I will certainly accomplish the
completely pure dharma [in preparation for] death. Otherwise, if I pass from this
life in the view of a precious teacher like him, I certainly will attain the boundless
permanent domain [of Buddhahood].

These words of encouragement Sera Khandro tells herself are her only solace as she
navigates through the endless litany of sufferings that test her resolve to pursue a
religious life. Sera Khandro writes of having no food and begging for her sustenance. She
remembers seeing a nomad’s black yak hair tent for the first time; not knowing what it
was she waited all evening until she saw the nomads returning home with their livestock
before daring to approach to beg for roasted barley flour (rtsam pa). She is so new at the
begging life that she doesn’t have a bag in which to put the tsampa the nomads give her;
when she puts it in her shoe, they all laugh at her and decide she’s crazy. The only one
who doesn’t laugh is an old woman who gives her a bag for her tsampa and tells her,
“Beautiful girl, you have an excellent physique. It is possible to be freed from a dog’s
mouth, [but] it is difficult to be freed from under men.” This comment foreshadows the
difficulties Sera Khandro will have becoming freed from her husband Gyalsé and the
demands of other men in the future. Sera Khandro has no idea how to make herself tea;
she begs for a two-handed clay tea pot from an old woman in Penpo (‘Phan po) who explains to her, “Put the pot on top of three rocks, pour the water in, put the tea in, burn it and the tea will boil.” Even with this instruction, Sera Khandro faces difficulties because she has never experienced the smoke from a cooking fire before. She writes that the smoke from the fire stung her eyes so badly she felt she was going blind. Sera Khandro nears starvation and indeed almost freezes to death. Her sophisticated clothing from Lhasa is no match for the outdoor vagabond life of religious pilgrimage. Her body turns stiff from overexposure and she loses consciousness. When she awakes, bloody sores erupt all over her body from the cold and then itch as they heal.

Although some community members including Drimé Özer himself help her through this rough stage by giving her warm leather-skin clothing, food, and some utensils, for the most part the Golok encampment members treat Sera Khandro as the outsider that she in most ways certainly is. Aside from a few nuns who pour tea for Sera Khandro and lend her some clothing, although there are more than thirty smaller groups of people in the encampment, they say it isn’t suitable for anybody to meet with her and are suspicious of her as if she was a leper. In particular, two men named Tashül Jiksam (Rta shul ’jigs bsam) and Penchen (Pan chen) forbid Sera Khandro from coming close to them and say bad things about her. Even Drimé Özer does not initially accept Sera Khandro’s presence and urges her to return home for fear that her wealthy and powerful family will be very angry at him. Ultimately, Drimé Özer acquiesces to Sera Khandro’s pleas to join his traveling community because Sera Khandro successfully argues that she cannot live a householder life and accomplish the pure dharma at the same time.
From the beginning, Sera Khandro insinuates that one reason why Drimé Özer’s community treated her with such suspicion is that they feared she would become the lama’s consort. Sera Khandro mentions that “Everyone said that if [Drimé Özer] took this girl from central Tibet [as a consort], Akyongza (*skyong bzla*) wouldn’t come. Because of this, I didn’t dare go before [Drimé Özer].” This is the first mention of a problem that would follow her for the rest of her life; the other consorts of the important male Treasure revealers with whom Sera Khandro interacted repeatedly reacted to her presence with jealousy and hostility. As a young and beautiful female newcomer to religious communities involving consort relationships, Sera Khandro threatened the other women around her, and by extension seemed to threaten others as well who were invested in maintaining peace in their communities.

Sera Khandro is thus able to join this group of traveling nomads from Golok, but they don’t fully accept her as a part of their community. She is different from them racially, linguistically, and in terms of social class, and her new religious siblings cannot let her forget her differences. They exclude her from many of the community’s activities and treat her as nothing more than a beggar woman. Despite this, her extraordinary qualities of insight, spontaneously-arisen learning, and ability to express herself eloquently soon become apparent. Sera Khandro continually makes elaborate prayers and sings beautiful songs in verse that amaze her companions. When the group is celebrating the enthronement of Drimé Özer’s younger brother named Namka Jikmé (*Nam mkha’ jigs med*) at Dzagyal Monastery as the incarnation of Patrül Rinpoché, Sera Khandro and her fellow beggar girl Chödrön (*Chos sgron*) are excluded from participating in the abundant celebrations. Sera Khandro urges her friend to join in the celebration, saying,
“Because you are from the same encampment (sgar), of course it will be okay for you to go to their [celebration] line. As for me, since earlier Tapen and Jiksam said I wasn’t allowed to go on the Chinese road, now, how would they allow me to join in an enthronement celebration? I won’t go.”

She said, “You don’t accept happiness and you buy suffering. Not wanting your splendid and blissfully happy homeland, you need to worry about the affirmative or negative expressions of Penchen and Jiksam. You took [this] on yourself. Instead of thinking about whether you will get beggar’s food, you could be a king in your own land. If you had stayed and taken on political leadership, you wouldn’t have needed to have suffering like this.”

Sera Khandro artfully turns Chödrön’s very practical statement back towards religious practice; replying, “I am still one with royal authority,” she sings the following song to her:

Oh listen, Lantern of Dharma (Chödrön)!
As for myself, this girl who has attained victory,
I have attained leadership that is changeless,
Equal to none, and especially exalted.

The all-pervasive foundation is
Self-awareness, free from fabrication from the beginning;
It is the energy of the great spontaneously perfect primordial wisdom.

The palace of the mind of enlightenment, non-dual saṃsāra and nirvāṇa,
Is expansive, all-pervasive, with a high summit.
Its expansive entrance is accomplishment without exertion.
Spontaneously present self-appearing ornaments are beautifully arranged.

The supreme king of the changeless dimension of awareness
Resides on a throne endowed with seven vajras.
The queen is continuous primordial wisdom and
The son and retinue are condensing and expanding appearances.

From the inseparability of the expanse and primordial wisdom,
With regard to the arising of potency that manifests everything,
The group of servants and subjects cycling repeatedly
Is perfected in the expanse of self-luminous great bliss.

From the luster of original purity emanates spontaneous presence.
Arising as the establishment of sensory pleasures of the six realms,
It [spontaneous presence] sports in the manner of self-liberation without attachment.
And becomes sovereign over all that appears in existence.

I have attained royal power like this.
I am not attached to illusory objects.
Father’s palace is like a demonic jail.
It is the cause for the spreading of the afflictions of the eight worldly dharmas.⁹⁹

Father’s power is like the anchor of cyclic existence.
It is the basis for thoughtlessly engaging in the five poisons.
Becoming free from my homeland is like [being freed from] shackles.
Attachment and hatred for oneself and others always spreads.

I will not adhere to a region like that –
Chödrön, keep this in your mind!¹⁰⁰

Sera Khandro eloquently explains to Chödrön that she has traded her access to temporal royal power for access to the eternal royal power of Buddhahood. The verse above is characteristic of the philosophical poetry that pervades Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* and reminds the reader that although Sera Khandro did not have any formal religious education, she certainly had a strong natural ability to write and speak with great prowess. Regardless of how one interprets this ability – as proof that she is a divine incarnate (as her disciples certainly perceive it), as a reflection of the religion she absorbed in her childhood, or as a result of her retrospective gaze thinking back later in life on her sixteen-year-old self – the sophistication of her writing is undeniable.

**Searching for Community and Finding Religion in Golok**

Sera Khandro experiences many painful difficulties adjusting to the religious mendicant life on the road to Golok, but her troubles have only just begun. When the pilgrims from Drimé Özer’s encampment finally arrive home to Dujom Lingpa’s main seat, Dartsang Monastery (*Zlar tshang dgon*), they all return home to their families and friends, leaving Sera Khandro alone and unsure of where to go. Sera Khandro’s outsider
status as a lone woman from Central Tibet in the middle of nomadic Golok coupled with her identity as neither nun nor laywoman lead to problems finding places to live throughout her life; tumultuous social dynamics seem to follow her wherever she goes. She is threatening to other consorts who fear she will usurp their men, and looked down upon by nuns who are judgmental about her lack of monastic vows. When she arrives in Golok, she has few friends and no mone. She writes of being in a desperate situation trying to do anything she can to actualize her dream of pursuing her religious training and being near the object of her hopes, Drimé Özer.

Initially, Sera Khandro is delighted to hear that she can rent a room in Drimé Özer’s household (*bla brang*). However, she is soon forced to leave her new accommodations because of community concerns over the feelings of Drimé Özer’s consort Akyongza. Sera Khandro recounts:

> At that time, the caretaker of [Drimé Özer’s] household named Akyap Trülku said, “The Central Tibetan girl is not allowed to live here. If she lives here, Akyongza certainly won’t come back.” Saying this, he became angry.

> I replied, “Because I am still a good person, Akyongza doesn’t have any reason not to come back. How will my living here be harmful?” Saying this, I didn’t leave. ¹⁰¹

Although Sera Khandro does not explicitly state as much, it is likely that the sparks of her love for Drimé Özer had already been kindled at this early stage in her life. Whether or not they were involved in any sort of sexual relationship at this point, that Drimé Özer favored Sera Khandro is clear from her comments that he secretly gave her barley, butter, and cheese from time to time without letting anybody see him do it. ¹⁰² It is difficult to interpret why those around Drimé Özer disapproved of his interest in Sera Khandro to the degree that they did. Perhaps Akyongza and her friends banded together to influence the
young Sera Khandro’s expulsion, or perhaps Drimé Özer’s family members and close disciples also disapproved of his taking on another consort for practical reasons such as the financial drain to his household, an issue that arises later in their lives. In any case, this is the first but not the last time that Sera Khandro is expelled from a Golok religious community in which she sincerely wanted to live.

Despite Sera Khandro’s initial stubborn insistence on living in Drimé Özer’s household, ultimately she decides that rather than risk the wrath of Akyongza, she had better follow the sage advice of Drimé Özer’s attendant Öbar (‘Od ‘bar) who tells her,

If you want to request Dharma this winter, I have arranged a household for you. Go there and work as a servant and they will give you provisions for when you go to request Dharma. If you do this, it will be good. When the time comes for the Dharma [teachings], I will come get you.\(^{103}\)

Sera Khandro acquiesces to Öbar’s suggestion, grateful for his help in finding a way for her to participate in the winter Dharma teachings. The decision to leave Drimé Özer’s household was prudent, but heart-wrenching. Sera Khandro recollects catching a glimpse of her lama on her way down the rocky path towards her new home:

Seeing [Drimé Özer], my mind was oppressed with suffering and my eyes filled with tears. Unable to see the path, I acted as if I were putting on my shoes and stayed for a moment on the ground.

Abten (A bstan) said, “You go down this path. I need to get a divination from the Trülku.” Saying this, he whipped his horse and was off.

Although my heart’s desire was to go [with him to see the Trülku], I didn’t dare go.\(^{104}\)

With this moment of anguish, Sera Khandro departs for her new life as a servant girl working nearby in the Abten family home. Going from a girlhood in a noble Lhasa
family to teenage life working as a servant girl in a Golok household is no easy transition;

Sera Khandro writes,

Because his was a Golok household, at first I didn’t understand the language and
because I didn’t [know how to] do any of the work accurately, I experienced great
hardship. Then, gradually, I learned [how to do] the work and also came to
understand the language. After I stayed there for over a month, it became time for
the Dharma teachings.105

After hard work and many sufferings as a servant girl, Sera Khandro is finally
rewarded by the gift of receiving religious teachings. Several of Dujom Lingpa’s eight
sons give her teachings and introduce her to the religious practices that she will spend her
life accomplishing. Akyap Trülku, the lama who forbade her from living at Drimé Özer’s
residence, teaches her channel and wind practices (rtsa riung). Drimé Özer teaches
explanations on Purifying Appearances (snang sbyang),106 Direct Transcendence (thod
rgal), and Cutting (gcod). His younger brother named Lhachen Topgyal (Lha chen stobs
rgyal) teaches preliminary practices (sngon ‘gro).107 Sera Khandro eagerly devotes
herself to religious practice:

Otherwise, aside from a bit of sleep, I constantly did prostrations, enduring the
snowfall, the wind-chill, and so forth. In seventeen days, I finished 100,000
prostrations.108

In spite of her diligent commitment to spiritual practice, many members of Drimé
Özer’s community still will not fully accept her. Two men who had earlier caused
problems for Sera Khandro, Tashül and Penchung, as well as other people,
disrespectfully tease her while she is doing her practice:

At that time, since Tashül and Penchung had requested preliminary practices,
when I was prostrating, they said, “The Central Tibetan girl doesn’t know the
difference between heat and cold – she is like a yak! They gathered grass from
inside their shoes109 and rotten grass from the side of the monastery and [said],
“Let’s see if it will stick on her back!”
Some people pressed [the dirty grass] down on the top of my head. Some put it in front of me and said, “Put this in your mouth!” Also some people said that I had [no sense of] clean or dirty like a dog and picking up human and dog excrement with a spoon, they put it in front of me and on my head and so forth.  

The people watching these antics just laugh instead of reprimanding the tricksters, until one day the nun Yeshé Drön observes the situation and threatens to report Penchung and the other culprits to Drimé Özer if they don’t stop harassing her. Even so, Sera Khandro’s exclusion from community events continues. She describes the conclusion of her first winter of religious teachings when she is sixteen years old:

Then all the dharma practice sessions having finished, since everybody gathered in the assembly hall of the lama’s household for a feast gathering, I went to the end of one of the rows. Even though I didn’t know how to read, I stayed there reciting prayers but the disciplinarian came and kicked me out, saying, “You beggar woman get out! Don’t stay here in the assembly hall!”  

Exclusions like this plagued Sera Khandro, but the most difficult of all was the distance her exclusion enforced between herself and Drimé Özer. Although ḍākinī prophecies come to her in the form of visionary experiences that urge her to fulfill her religious calling to be with Drimé Özer as his consort, she laments her inability to accomplish their profound import. She recounts praying to the ḍākinīs to appear before her to aid her in her religious pursuits:

Thinking that I had lost the Wish-fulfilling Jewel to the power of his consort, I said this:

“From the midst of the expanse of the realm of unchanging sky,  
A voice emerges without a body.  
It is difficult for me to accomplish this prophecy.  
Although you are unmistakable in the expanse,  
For the sake of me, this wretched girl,  
If you don’t emanate as a display of an illusory body,  
I, this foolish one who is like an old bull,  
Don’t know how to be skillful, no matter what happens.
I desire to go under the power of the *sapta* demons.\textsuperscript{112} You, assembly of dakinis, be excellent friends.”

I wondered if I would accomplish my purpose according to the dakini prophecies. Not going to the presence of the Lord himself [Drimé Özer], I had let go of my first priority.\textsuperscript{113} The dakini’s prophecies are unanimous: Sera Khandro’s first aim must be to accomplish the Dharma, and in order to do that Drimé Özer is her prophesized consort, companion, and lama. Thus, Sera Khandro’s poetic interactions with the divine female forces that pervade her experience continue to act as friends and sources of encouragement as she faces innumerable worldly obstacles.

Sera Khandro returns again the following winter when she is seventeen years old to the same Golok household to work as a servant in hopes of saving up enough money to buy a leather coat to keep her warm throughout the bitter cold alpine winter, but she feels herself getting too drawn into non-religious activities. Instead of accepting the household’s marriage offer to one of their sons, Sera Khandro goes to live with a nun relative of the household named Tsüldrön, who lives in a religious encampment (*chos sgar*). However, yet again, Sera Khandro still has not found her home; Tsüldrön insists that if Sera Khandro is to live with her, she must shave her hair and become a nun.\textsuperscript{114} Sera Khandro tells Tsüldrön, “I promise that I won’t have a physical relationship with laymen or with lamas without purpose. Otherwise, I won’t become a nun.”\textsuperscript{115} By this reply, Sera Khandro is promising that instead of being celibate, she will engage in sexual relationships only for the religious purpose of engaging in sexual yoga. Tsüldrön is appalled by Sera Khandro’s brazen lack of shame about her sexuality; they bicker about this until Sera Khandro effectively silences Tsüldrön by saying that at least she doesn’t make promises of chastity but then secretly break them.
Thus, Sera Khandro finds herself unwelcome in each community she attempts to join. Although she is not accepted as one of Drimé Özer’s consorts, she doesn’t feel drawn to becoming a nun and she certainly doesn’t desire to marry into the Golok household for which she works. Banished from Drimé Özer’s community by his consort’s presence, unhappy with the worldly distractions servant work brings, and unwelcome in Tsüldrön’s community of female monastics, Sera Khandro’s courageous journey to Golok leads her quite literally into a homeless life of Buddhist renunciation.

**Prophecies and Problems: Life at Banak Monastery**

Sera Khandro’s traumatic difficulties finding a place for herself in Golok religious society are far from over. Just after disputing with Tsüldrön about whether or not she should be a nun, Sera Khandro recounts receiving a letter summoning her to visit a prominent Treasure revealer named Gara Tertön Dündül Wangjuk Lingpa (*Mgar ra gter ston bdud ´dul dbang phyug gling pa*).\(^{116}\) Sera Khandro writes, “Because the manner in which I was his consort in his ḍākinī prophecies matched [what was said in] my own registry, in the eleventh month I prepared to go there.”\(^{117}\) Thus, since the ḍākinīs’ instructions that Sera Khandro received and wrote down as prophecy in her Treasure registry matched the words in Gara Tertön’s letter, Sera Khandro decides she should go to him as his consort even though he is a well established Treasure revealer in his fifties and she is eighteen. For Sera Khandro, Gara Tertön’s letter could not have come at a better time; his invitation to visit his Treasure revelation encampment (*gter sgar*) seems to be an opportunity to further her religious training in a place conducive to Dharma practice.
Sadly, this hope turns out to be for naught. Yet again, Sera Khandro experiences the wrath of other consorts more well-established and older than she. Before she even attempts to go to Banak, Gara Tertön’s wife (yum) Yakshulza (Yag shul bza’, also called Yakza) sends her messages filled with negative words warning her not to come near Gara Tertön.\textsuperscript{118} Sera Khandro interprets this and other occurrences as signs that her auspicious connection (rten ’brel) with Gara Tertön is lost.\textsuperscript{119} Despite this, Gara Tertön writes her another letter foretelling her auspicious connection with Drimé Özer. Sera Khandro recounts that Gara Tertön’s letter said,

Our auspicious connection has fallen away because of other things and there is nothing to be done about it. However, you and the heart-son of the Treasure Revealer [Dujom Lingpa] named Drimé Özer both have a profound connection through [previous] aspirations. Since he is also coming to my place, find a way to quickly come here. It is certain that we all have a great purpose. Because you two are empowered in my final profound Treasures, I need to give you both the teachings to maintain and protect them.\textsuperscript{120}

Sera Khandro again attempts to see Gara Tertön before he passes away, this time actually making the trip to Banak. However, Yakza is so threatened by Sera Khandro that she forbids her from visiting the lama until he is on his deathbed. Despite not making a connection with Gara Tertön while he is alive, Sera Khandro has a visionary experience of Gara Tertön conferring empowerment in his Treasures on her and giving her encouraging advice that her female body is not inferior, as Sera Khandro repeatedly laments it is.\textsuperscript{121} Gara Tertön’s wife Yakza may despise Sera Khandro, but to her chagrin some members of Gara Tertön’s community become quite taken with her, intuiting her close connection with Gara Tertön. Sera Khandro explains that, “From that time forth [when she received the visions of Gara Tertön], everybody near and far forgot my name and called me ‘däkinī.’”\textsuperscript{122} Despite this hint of favorable treatment, trouble continues to
follow her. After Gara Tertön’s funeral ceremony is over, Sera Khandro stays with a monastic lama from Central Tibet named Kitrül (*Skyid lung sprul sku*), who is her platonic friend. Soon, however, Kitrül’s sisters, fearing that their brother would lose his vows, criticize Sera Khandro until she decides to leave.\(^{123}\)

Again, Sera Khandro is left with nowhere to go and without a community to support her religious aspirations. A pivotal moment in Sera Khandro’s life occurs when she attends an empowerment given by a lama named Kangdong Bönpo Gönwang (*Khang gdong dbon po mgon dbang*). After the empowerment, the lama summons her and advises her to enter into a relationship with Gara Tertön and Yakza’s son Gara Gyalse:

> You are a pillar – you are extraordinary. Examining you[r] outer, inner, and secret [qualities], you are certainly of dākinī heritage. In particular, you are unmistakably an emanation of the Tibetan Lady Yeshé Tsogyal. Now, go to Banak and live temporarily with Gara Gyalse. If you do not help take care of the Great Treasure Revealer Longyang’s [Gara Tertön’s] Treasure teachings, the lama’s teachings will completely disappear – the religious texts will get put into clay statue houses, thieves will buy and sell the Treasure substances as talismans, and so forth. When this happens, I will be one who has betrayed all the sentient beings of the three realms [by not being able to protect Gara Tertön’s teachings]. Because of this, it seems as if you must go to [be] beside Gara for just a temporary period of time.\(^{124}\)

Sera Khandro reflects that “Although I didn’t want to go, not finding a way to go against the orders of a lama who had given me an empowerment, I promised to go there and so forth.”\(^{125}\) Sera Khandro and Gara Gyalse are an unlikely pair from the start since Sera Khandro is still in love with Drimé Özer and Gara Gyalse is the son of Yakza, the woman who despised Sera Khandro since before they had even met. Perhaps Sera Khandro pursued a relationship with Gyalse because, while there seemed to be no hope for Sera Khandro to be with Drimé Özer, she perceived living with Gara Tertön’s son Gyalse as an opportunity to fulfill her commitment to maintain and protect Gara Tertön’s Treasure
revelation teachings. She may also have seen the relationship as a way to solve her practical problems of having nowhere to live and no consistent source of financial support.

Initially, Sera Khandro’s hopes for a life conducive to religious practice near Banak Monastery appear bright. When she follows the Kangdong lama’s orders and travels to Gara Gyalsé’s vicinity, all the people say that a ḍākinī has arrived. People in the area of Banak remember Gara Tertön’s high esteem of this young unknown girl from Central Tibet whose presence he requested repeatedly before his death; they come from near and far to ask for prophecies and divinations and everybody brings her butter and cheese. Able to cure people of their sicknesses, Sera Khandro wonders if this is the meaning of the previous prophecies given to her from ḍākinīs and lamas indicating that she will be empowered with the auspicious connections necessary to benefit sentient beings.\(^{126}\)

But even during this moment in which she first begins to receive recognition for her amazing qualities, Sera Khandro has her detractors. The people who don’t like her say that she isn’t a real ḍākinī and that it is a lie that she doesn’t know how to read and write.\(^{127}\) They say that the appearance of her curing patients of their illness is actually a magical illusion stemming from her knowledge of various negative mantras.\(^{128}\) It is no surprise that Sera Khandro is not loved by all in Gyalsé’s community; after all, Gyalsé is Yakza’s son, the woman who has hated Sera Khandro from the very beginning for being a potential threat to her status as Gara Tertön’s main consort.

Life with Gyalsé quickly proves difficult for Sera Khandro. She recounts asking him early on in their relationship for Great Perfection teachings, but he belittles her
understanding, saying that she doesn’t know anything at all about the teachings of the Knowledge Holder Jikmé Lingpa (Rig ’dzin ’jigs med gling pa). Sera Khandro explains that after this, although she stayed with Gyalsé for another eight years, she never dared to request any esoteric precepts (man ngag) from him again. Tensions between Yakza, Gyalsé, and Sera Khandro mount when it comes time for the Gara family to divide the late Gara Tertön’s wealth of Treasure substances between Yakza, her two sons, and other family members. Remembering the prophetic words of the lama from Kangdong named Gönwang, Sera Khandro gives Gyalsé an ultimatum: “If I am allowed to take care of the precious lama’s Treasure teachings and Treasure substances, you can live [with me]. If I am not allowed to care for them, it is not acceptable for you to live with me.” In this way, Sera Khandro manages to convince Gyalsé to stealthily take all of his father’s Treasure substances and texts away from the lama’s household. His mother Yakza and others protest, but by that time Gyalsé and Sera Khandro have already gathered the entire collection. This is not a diplomatic way to begin married life in her spouse Gyalsé’s homeland; a faction of people who support Yakza and oppose Sera Khandro suggest that the community “needs to expel this girl from central Tibet,” and that “it is not acceptable for her to live with Gyalsé.” Sera Khandro writes of her growing antipathy towards those who want to kick her out of the region. Reminiscent of Milarepa’s misdeeds using black magic against those who had harmed his family, she propitiates the Dharma protector in order to cause undesirable things to happen quickly to those who don’t like her. Sera Khandro soon feels great regret for harming other sentient beings. She burns the incantation texts she used and vows at the risk of her life never to harm anyone again.
Immediately after Sera Khandro experiences the above difficulties, she has a
dream in which the ḍākinī Künselma (Mkha’ Ḍgro ma kun gsal ma) appears to her saying:

Alas – although the mandala of the greatly bright sun from the east
Dispels the darkness of the gloom of the realm of beings,
Look at the veil cast by the obscurations of clouds.

You, woman, who is a messenger of the mother ḍākinīs –
Although you have the residual prayers of profound Treasure,
The jewel of the two-fold aim is buried in mud.

Look at the [way] the luster of brass can deceive [one into thinking it’s] gold!
The being who is your share is dressed in saffron.
The one who holds the first name resides nearby.
On his heart manifests the shape of a vajra.

If you secretly meet him as your consort,
Your life’s dharma teachings will certainly spread.
If you stay in one place, your life’s dharma and
Disciples and so forth will be like designs in water.

According to the mother ḍākinīs’ prophecies,
Wander in various lands.
Abandon meeting people with deteriorated commitments.
Not listening to bad friends’ speech,
In a secluded place, practice your Treasures . . .

Kūnselma’s advice comes to Sera Khandro in a dream during a time in which her worldly
community life is full of conflict. This forms a common pattern in Sera Khandro’s
narrative: ḍākinīs appear to her just when her worldly life is falling apart. The next
morning after she wakes up from the dream, Sera Khandro thinks,

No matter whether I look at earlier or later prophecies, it is certain that I don’t
want to be with the Gara family. Nevertheless, because I have a relationship with
Gyalsé from the power of karma, now, no matter what happens, I won’t do
anything to displease him.

Yet, the feeling that she is settling for a life with someone who will not allow her to
accomplish her goal of leading a religious life persists. She has chosen brass over gold,
her goal of benefiting herself and others as a Treasure revealer is obscured like a jewel
sunk into mud. The one dressed in saffron, an allusion to Drimé Özer, the man whom she should take on as her secret consort, is the missing ingredient that she needs in order to spread her teachings.

Hints, signs, ďākinī dreams, and troubles with Gyalsé all continue to indicate to Sera Khandro that she has strayed from her life’s greater religious purpose by settling down with Gyalsé. Not only does Gyalsé find Sera Khandro an unfit vessel for the esoteric precepts of the Great Perfection teachings, he also rejects Sera Khandro’s claim that she is a Treasure revealer. At one point Sera Khandro recounts taking out a Treasure vessel and offering it to Gyalsé upon her return home. Responding to Gyalsé’s question “What is this?,” Sera Khandro replies with a mixture of truthful and false words since “if I told the truth, I wondered whether he would slap me angrily like Marpa.” Gyalsé doubts Sera Khandro, stating:

Before, during the time when there were one hundred great Treasure revealers, two of them actually manifested as female Treasure revealers. These days in this Degenerate Age, [we] don’t see the existence of female Treasure revealers. Her authenticity doubted on the grounds of her gender, Sera Khandro wasn’t sure whether he would be pleased if she admitted that the vessel was her Treasure. Thus, she notes, “From that time forward, I wrote my Treasures down secretly.”

In accordance with prophecies, when Sera Khandro is twenty-two years old, she becomes pregnant with Gyalsé’s child, whom she suspects is an incarnation of his father Gara Tertön. Although she tells Gyalsé that she has received a prophecy in her dream that she needs to go to another place to give birth in order to avoid obstacles, Gyalsé pays no heed to her warning and insists that she stay at home like all other expectant mothers do. Sera Khandro writes:
That year in the first month of fall when it became time to see the face of my child, I went to collect firewood near a man named Chö lhūn who Gara Terchen previously [said was] one who adhered to demonic scriptures. Because he called out in a fierce voice and performed curses and so forth, the protection of my child was reversed and he became a girl. At that time Gyalsé felt great regret. Saying, “If this girl dies I’ll be happy,” he treated her really badly. Although I wasn’t pleased with this, I didn’t say anything.\textsuperscript{140}

The opinion of Sera Khandro’s milieu regarding having a female child is clear, given that Sera Khandro attributes the birth of a daughter to demonic intervention. After the child’s inauspicious transformation from boy to girl, there is no more discussion of the child being Gara Tertön’s incarnation. Despite this, Sera Khandro still feels that her daughter is extraordinary. She takes the baby to a lama who, saying she has great merit, names her Yangchen Drönma.\textsuperscript{141} After Sera Khandro gives birth to her daughter, a Machik Labdrön Accomplishment Practice (\textit{Lab sgron gyi sgrub pa}) comes to her as a new Treasure, but because she secretly teaches it to some monks, Gyalsé scolds her. Extremely sad, she writes that she supplicated the heroes and dākinīs of the three realms with the following prayer:

\begin{quote}
In the unmanifest land of the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain,\textsuperscript{142}
Omniscient Mother Yeshé Tsogyal and
Heroes and heroines, consider this!

I, this messenger sent by the mother dākinīs,
Was born in an impure body as a woman.
My impure karma is that I have befriended cyclic existence.
My impure land is the demonic land of Golok.
My impure action is that I continually have a negative community.
From what causes and conditions did this karma originate? \ldots\textsuperscript{143}
\end{quote}

In response to her song of lamentation, Sera Khandro hears a voice with no physical form coming from the sky saying,

\begin{quote}
Alas, alas yoginī —
Is the great self-emergent primordial wisdom
Free from exertion?
\end{quote}
Is the unborn self-emergent spontaneous presence
The ground of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa?

Are the appearances of good and bad, happiness and sorrow
The play of reality itself?

Is the poisonous water-lily which is the eight worldly dharmas
Something to be abandoned quickly?

Your wealth of the ḍākini’s heart essence –
Will you take it out in due time?

Will benefit for both the teachings and sentient beings
Come from the south?

You don’t need to be displeased and weary
On account of the illusory emanations of this world.
The Lotus [One’s] testament is changeless;
It is certain that in time the aspiration prayers will come together.\textsuperscript{144}

In this way divine voices weave their words of encouragement through Sera Khandro’s narrative, providing support and consolation just when her mundane circumstances seem to overwhelm her with obstacles and difficulties.

Despite ḍākinīs’ reassuring voices, tensions remain high between Sera Khandro and Gyalsé. On one occasion when she is out collecting firewood, because a visionary experience arises in her mind, she returns home late. Consequently, Gyalsé slaps her and throws her out of the house. After the ensuing fight between Gyalsé and Sera Khandro, the people of Gyalsé’s region hear their dispute. Calling her a demon-girl, they are horrified that she would talk back to their revered lama Gyalsé.\textsuperscript{145} On another occasion when she is twenty-three, although Sera Khandro perceives that she has a Treasure to take out from a place called Solung Drakar,\textsuperscript{146} she suddenly turns back and decides to return home. She tells her companions, “Let’s not go now. If we take a long time, Gyalsé will scold me. Moreover, I entrusted Yangchen Drönma [her infant daughter] to Tupzang
and if she cries, Gyalsé will certainly scold me." Thus, Sera Khandro’s life in early twentieth-century Golok as a mother and as a wife of a man like Gyalsé, who was hostile to her religious aspirations, proves to be extremely difficult. Nurturing her family and nurturing her Treasure revelation career seem to be at loggerheads, despite her efforts to “take a low place and write down the profound Treasures that came to me extremely secretly.”

The turbulent community dynamics of Gara Gyalsé’s Treasure revelation encampment (*pter sgar*) continue to cause Sera Khandro misfortune. She explains that on account of troubles escalating between what had become two different factions of the community who were fighting over land rights as well as influenced by Gyalsé and Sera Khandro’s marital problems, Gyalsé expels Sera Khandro and her associates from his encampment. Sera Khandro writes that when she was twenty-seven years old, as a result of this community trauma, she miscarried her unborn child who was an incarnation of Gyarong Ternyön (*Rgya rong gter smyon*). She recounts that while she felt uncomfortable, the child spoke to her and told her that he was leaving for Guru Rinpoché’s Buddhasfield, the Glorious Mountain. On the morning of the twenty-fifth of that month:

Then, at the same time as the sun rose, not coming outside from my navel, the boy passed from this life. I thought, if I don’t rely on the power of wind, he [Gyalse] won’t do healing rituals. Thinking that even if he did those things, I won’t be able to get the boy’s corpse out of my navel, I exerted myself only in wind yoga (*rlung gi rnal ‘byor*). Sometimes because of the intensity of the pain, I was on the verge of losing consciousness. Sometimes I generated wind and the boy’s corpse moved about up, down, right, and left as if it was being driven by wind and there was nothing I could do. Having put the cauterization needles of view and meditation on the pain, I composed unwavering wind-awareness.
After Sera Khandro prays to Guru Rinpoché to liberate her from her agony, she gives birth to her stillborn child, a beautiful boy who almost looks alive. When Gyalṣé comes to know about the stillbirth, he feels great regret and along with some of his disciples, he performs purifying rituals. Even after the tragedy of losing her child, Sera Khandro’s detractors cannot resist the opportunity to criticizing her. She writes that aside from three members of Gyalṣé’s family who liked her, the rest of his family and others were happy and said,

The Central Tibetan girl’s merit is exhausted and her son died. Still what misery doesn’t she give to the Golok Lady\textsuperscript{152} and Gyalṣé? All that she says about her son dying in her stomach and giving birth to the corpse with its head and feet unreversed is certainly lies. Whenever a calf dies in a female yak’s stomach [everyone] can see that both mother and baby die. Her son was not a corpse in his mother’s stomach; he didn’t die [in the womb]. Because she didn’t die, there is absolutely no way she could have gotten the baby’s corpse out.\textsuperscript{153}

Sera Khandro’s mother-in-law Yakza and her cohorts essentially accuse Sera Khandro of murdering her son because they cannot believe she could have given birth to a stillborn child without dying herself.\textsuperscript{154} Sera Khandro’s account of this and all of her many other painful experiences living in the Treasure encampment at Banak Monastery brims with the resentment and sadness she felt for being so mistreated. Indeed, Sera Khandro and Gyalṣé’s arguments, in addition to the wider land disputes dividing the community, prove to be too tense for reconciliation. Once again, Sera Khandro is forced to leave her home. She and the faction of Gara Gyalṣé’s household with whom she is aligned move to the Yeru religious encampment (Gyas ru chos sgar) that was near Pelyül Tartang (Dpal yul dar thang) Monastery.
Shifting Winds: Gotrül Rinpoché and Drimé Özer

Sera Khandro’s life of difficulties and obstacles begins to change when the lama from Pelyül Tartang Monastery named Jiktre Chöki Lodrō (Jigs bral chos kyi blo gros), whom she calls Gotrül Rinpoché (Sgo sprul rin po che), summons her and asks for one of her Treasure revelations. Although Sera Khandro realizes that he is one of the four main disciples (called pillars) who will maintain her Treasure teachings, she hesitates to go before him, thinking, “Because of my inferior [female] body, others will have wrong views about the Incarnate.” Via a monk sent as a messenger, Sera Khandro offers the lama a text from the ēkāñī’s symbolic registry (brda byang) and consequently the obstacles to the lama’s life are cured. Finally, a monk convinces Sera Khandro to visit Gotrül Rinpoché when she is twenty-four years old. Gotrül Rinpoché then announces to everyone in the room, “I think this ēkāñī is certainly the speech incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal. Abandon your wrong views [about her] and have faith. This is not deception – it is real.” Gotrül Rinpoché becomes one of Sera Khandro’s first and strongest supporters, contradicting Gyalse’s criticism, encouraging Sera Khandro to write down the Treasures that come to her, and publicizing her legitimacy as a Treasure revealer.

Throughout her time living with Gyalse in the vicinity of Banak Monastery, Sera Khandro never stops feeling that she has chosen brass instead of gold. She pines for opportunities to meet with Drimé Özer, admitting that “I wanted to see him like a person suffering from thirst wants water.” One excellent opportunity arises when a lama named Hor Öchung (Hor ‘od chung) invites both Gyalse and Drimé Özer along with their entourages to come consecrate a new prayer wheel. When everyone gathers for the ceremony, Sera Khandro recounts that a beautiful bejeweled woman saying she is Dorjé
Yudrönma appeared before her and gave her a prophecy and a white crystal Treasure vessel. Fearing that others will see the crystal vessel in her hands, Sera Khandro tries to hide it. Before she can do so, Drimé Özer sees the vessel and insists that Sera Khandro give it to him. Sera Khandro writes, "It wasn’t fitting to lie, and so I offered him the Treasure vessel, some of my hair, and a stainless offering scarf. He was greatly pleased and auspicious connections were nurtured."^{58}

Gara Gyalse and Drimé Özer finally have a chance to speak with each other during Hor Öchung’s prayer wheel consecration ceremony. At this time when Sera Khandro is twenty-four years old and has a two-year-old daughter by Gyalse, Gyalse and Drimé Özer reach an agreement without ever consulting her that Sera Khandro will become Drimé Özer’s consort.^{59} Gotrül Rinpoché also supports this exchange, telling Sera Khandro that Drimé Özer is her prophesized consort as a result of the influence of former prayers and that she needs to develop a connection to him for the purpose of her Treasure revelations.^{60} Sera Khandro records that although she wanted to be with Drimé Özer, she also felt uncomfortable about being cast out of her home with Gyalse even though he was already living with his second spouse, Saldrön. After Drimé Özer and Gyalse exchange letters and finalize their agreement, Gyalse makes preparations to give Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer. However, the process is a slow one and Sera Khandro continues to live with Gyalse for several more years before actually going to live permanently with Drimé Özer. When she leaves, she is several months pregnant, expecting a boy whom Gotrül Rinpoché claims is his incarnation.^{61} Sera Khandro writes that she told her friends at Gyalse’s encampment,

"I think [I should] go secretly without everybody seeing me prepare to go. Since I also need to think about [what I will do] from now onwards, from whatever
perspective, I think [we should] not publicize that I have been given to the Treasure revealer lama’s [Drimé Özer’s] household.”

They answered, “Although we think this way, it seems that we don’t know whether Gyalsé will talk [about it] or not.”

Sera Khandro’s discomfort with being given away and Gyalsé’s disregard for her feelings emerge in such comments. While staying at Lochö’s (Blo chos sang) home in Kargab Garkor, Sera Khandro tells Lochö, Gyalsé’s brother, and her disciple Tupzang the story of her troubles living with Gyalsé. She recounts,

I told them everything [including] the story of how [Gyalsé] gave me away to the Treasure revealer during the male hare year [1915, when she was 24], the story of how on account of my not having father’s name to back me up, he married Saldron and she gave me misery, and how having separated out his wealth, Gyalsé forbade me and my child to use any of his possessions.”

Thus, despite her strong connection to Drimé Özer, Sera Khandro describes her distress at being expelled from the religious community at Banak Monastery that she had tried so hard to serve with humility. Yet when Gyalsé, Sera Khandro, and their group of disciples arrive before Drimé Özer, the connection she makes with him proves very useful to her purpose of revealing Treasures. Sera Khandro describes a visit with Drimé Özer before she moves in with him permanently:

In particular, having established me in ripening and liberation, he gave me a name. Then, not being able to resist the Lord’s [Drimé Özer’s] command, I offered him the registry of The Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs. By doing this, many amazing auspicious connections were nurtured. The Lord knew the meaning of a dākinī’s symbolic expression that was difficult to discriminate and his clarification is elucidated in my Treasure scripture. He gave me a [long] life empowerment, a summoning longevity [empowerment] and so forth. Having each relied on the other, the obstacles to our lives were pacified.

Then, the Lord himself offered Gyalsé a very expensive thing, a rug adorned with designs of auspicious substances, and an offering scarf. He [Gyalsé] was extremely pleased and they resided there in mutual accord. [Drimé Özer] took care of me with great love as if I were his main consort. In particular, he promised that he wouldn’t be upset by circumstantial conditions and [that he would find]
ways to protect his life. I also said that no matter what, I wouldn't go to unknown places. By means of mixing our minds together as if one, we made aspiration prayers that method and wisdom would be inseparable. Then we [Gyalsé and entourage] returned home.  

Thus Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro exchange teachings. By means of their mutually beneficial relationship, obstacles to their life are pacified and Sera Khandro is able to decode difficult points of the dākinīs' symbolic expressions. That Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro's relationship involves consort practices is explicit in the passage above, as is Gyalsé's acceptance of the arrangement.

Just after their visit with Drimé Özer, Sera Khandro gives birth to her third (and second living) child amidst extraordinary signs, a son Drimé Özer later names Rikzin Gyurmé Dorjé (Rig 'dzin 'gyur med rdo rje). Soon after the child's birth, Sera Khandro recounts that because of the continuing disputes going on in Gara Gyalsé's community, the child became ill. This is one of many examples of the causal relationship Sera Khandro's writings emphasize between social upheaval and physical illness. As in other instances of physical illness, Sera Khandro's infant son's health can only be restored through ritual intervention. In particular, he can only be cured by rituals performed by Drimé Özer in accordance with a prophecy Gotrül Rinpoché gave before his death (in approximately 1919).  

Sera Khandro's child is not the only one who suffers from illness. Increasingly, Sera Khandro's legs are bothered with worsening arthritis ('bam), causing her to have greater and greater difficulty walking. Turbulence pervades her physical and social world in 1921 when she is thirty years old. The "northern Chinese" (byang rgya) are creating havoc ('ur 'ur zing zing byed), causing Gara Gyalsé and his community to move away from their home of Banak Monastery. The same is happening to Drimé Özer and his
community in Serta County. Sera Khandro writes that on another visit she made to see Drimé Özer, "on account of the agitation [caused by] the northern Chinese, the inner circle of Drimé Özer’s encampment held a conference and decided to move Drimé Özer’s seat to Yusé Chawa.\textsuperscript{172}

Amidst this turmoil, Sera Khandro’s greatest respite is her increasingly intimate relationship with Drimé Özer. As Gyalsé and Drimé Özer’s encampments move about the pasture lands of Golok, Sera Khandro, her children, her closest monk disciple Tupzang, and others travel to and from encampments, stopping along the way at famous holy sites in the Golok landscape such as Drungri, the abode of the most important mountain deity of Serta, where Sera Khandro finds Treasure substances and has visions of the place as Guru Rinpoché’s Buddhafield.\textsuperscript{173} Sera Khandro’s visits to Drimé Özer do not only involve exchanging teachings with the lama and making the auspicious connections she needs to reveal her Treasures; she expresses her relationship with him in terms that emphasize her love for him as well as her religious devotion. Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings read as a beautiful and suspenseful love story as much as a story about divine revelation and spiritual realization. When she meets Drimé Özer again after visiting Drungri, she “rejoices as if meeting someone raised from the dead.”\textsuperscript{174} After the two “nurture auspicious connections” and speak in detail about worldly and religious matters, Sera Khandro grows sorrowful, wondering if she will ever have a chance to see Drimé Özer again, saying:

\begin{quote}
Your looking after me with a greatly loving heart
Sets me free from the rank of people
And establishes me in the rank of gods.
You are the pillar who holds on to my life force,
My secret consort traveling on the quick path,
The hero who increases the disciples of Profound Treasure,
\end{quote}
The holy origin of all worldly and religious actions.
Before I never found someone like you;
Later [I can] forget about finding [someone like you]! . . . 175

Drimé Özer is the medicine she needs to cure her arthritis; he performs rituals and they exchange religious teachings.

After this, Sera Khandro returns yet again with her companions to Gyalsé’s encampment. Upon her return, negative prophecies and omens abound and her arthritis worsens until she can scarcely walk at all. Sera Khandro tries very hard to continue doing her housework including milking the livestock and churning butter despite her near inability to walk. She explains that Gyalsé thought that she was faking illness, so he neglected to call a doctor or to perform any healing rituals. As she feels she is nearing death, she vows that if she survives, she will certainly leave Gyalsé and go to live with Drimé Özer. 176 While Sera Khandro is on the verge of death surrounded by Gyalsé’s contentious community, Drimé Özer’s health is also compromised and prophecies indicate that he too is in danger of dying. Thus, Sera Khandro’s writings imply that the destined method and wisdom counterparts, Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro, are in danger of dying from their separation; they literally cannot go on living without each other.

The Union of Method and Wisdom

Just as Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer are both on the verge of death, Sera Khandro’s companions take her to live with Drimé Özer. Finally the moment arrives that Sera Khandro has been waiting and longing for since she was a young girl watching Drimé Özer from the window of her brother’s home. At the age of thirty, she is united with Drimé Özer and is forever freed from the negative circumstances of her life with
Gyalsé. The scene I quote below is the climax of the Autobiography; it is the moment of the lovers’ reunion or, put in religious terminology, it is the union of method and wisdom resulting in the realization of Buddhahood.

When the bedraggled Sera Khandro finally arrives at Drimé Özer’s encampment, he nurtures her back to health by performing healing rituals and insisting that she interrupt her vegetarian diet to eat specially blessed meat to restore her depleted channels and winds. After completing a one hundred day retreat in compliance with Drimé Özer’s command, Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer practice together, cultivating wondrous signs of accomplishment. Sera Khandro writes,

...Then, for three months, male and female partners together practiced the end of the esoteric instructions on Drinking Vajra Water that [I had] spoken earlier to the Lord himself. At that time, the signs in the outer environment were that day and night the mountains spoke, the earth quaked, a sound roared, the sound of a flute and cymbals came forth, a fragrant smell spread, and so forth. All the group of fortunate disciples actually saw this.

The inner signs of the domains of the channels, winds, and seminal essence becoming purified were that the knots of the head and throat became liberated. Not needing to train in and traverse the path, I understood all the Dharma vehicles completely. The essential meaning of the symbols of all the teachings in accordance with the disposition and devotion of beings from the hidden vessel of the intention of the profound Treasures became self-liberated. The ten winds became pliant and our bodies had youthful flesh and were light like cotton-wool. When I spoke spontaneously uttered hymns of vajra words, the seeds of the first concentration were planted in the mind-streams of those who heard them. By many small deeds such as this, benefit for sentient beings arose.

In particular, the inexpressible understanding of awareness and emptiness that is the primordial wisdom of great bliss and emptiness, without elaboration and endowed with the three liberations, manifested [in me]. The two, method and wisdom, manifestly merged as one taste.

From here on Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer are together and are able to cure each other’s sickness and decode each other’s Treasures due to the auspicious connections fostered by their union. Sera Khandro writes,
In particular, it became extremely quick for both of us to decode our Treasures. Also, for me, by the power of the abundant auspicious connections, I elucidated and propagated the *Anu Yoga Esoteric Precept The Door to the Quick Path of Vajravārāhī’s Essential Drops* and the *Profound Explanation of the Meaning of the Great Bliss of the Upper Doors and Enjoying the Three Realms of the Lower Doors* that were teachings in the *Secret Treasury of Reality Ḍākinīs*.¹⁸⁰

For Drimé Özer as well, this is a time of vast auspiciousness. The obstacles to his life are all pacified and “like stars gathering together” his retinue of disciples increases. He writes down and propagates both his own profound Treasure and that of his father Dujom Lingpa.¹⁸¹ Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s love flourishes, as does their ever-increasing community of disciples for whose benefit they reveal and propagate Treasures.

Sera Khandro has received such acclaim as an accomplished consort that at the age of thirty-two (ca. 1923), Adzom Rinpoché (*A dzom rin po che, ‘Gro ‘dul dpa’ bo rdo rje*, 1842-1924) sends Drimé Özer a letter requesting Sera Khandro’s presence at his encampment in order to dispel the obstacles he has to his life and teachings. Despite Sera Khandro’s pleas to stay with Drimé Özer, he insists that she go to Adzom because both Adzom and Sera Khandro need to ignite auspicious connections.¹⁸² Despite her reluctance to act as a consort for an eighty-two-year-old lama that she has never met, she obeys Drimé Özer’s command and goes to Adzom. They exchange many teachings and nurture auspicious connections that cure both of them of illness and allow them to propagate many Treasure teachings. Sera Khandro recounts that when she departed from Adzom’s encampment, Adzom’s wife, children, and community all treated her lovingly and escorted her on her path.¹⁸³ Upon her return to Drimé Özer’s encampment, the whole community is amazed to see that Sera Khandro’s limp caused by years of arthritis is cured. That she can walk normally again demonstrates to all the power of uniting the auspicious connections of method and wisdom.¹⁸⁴ After he teaches Sera Khandro and
their disciples profound teachings on manipulating channels and winds, Drimé Özer states that Sera Khandro must protect and maintain his teachings:

Then the Lord told me, “You must protect and maintain the two profound Treasures [that of Drimé Özer and his father Dujom Lingpa]. I am old and because there is a big group of disciples, it is difficult for me to fulfill everyone’s desires.”

I didn’t have the power or the knowledge to be able to look after the retinue of disciples. Despite this, together with sincere prayers, I promised to maintain the teachings of the two profound Treasures as well as I could just in order not to go against the lama’s command. The Lord was extremely pleased.¹⁸⁵

Drimé Özer’s comment about his old age (he was forty-four!) and his interest in passing on responsibility for his teachings to Sera Khandro foreshadow the upcoming reminders of impermanence that are soon to jolt Sera Khandro’s world.

Impermanence Strikes Home

During even the glory days of Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s life together, subtle messages indicate that obstacles lie ahead. Sera Khandro worries about the fate of her six-year-old¹⁸⁶ son Gyurmé Dorjé because she has received a prophecy that his health is in danger.¹⁸⁷ While Drimé Özer decides that they need to publish his father Dujom Lingpa’s teachings, prophecies indicate that illness and demonic influence will arise if Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer continue to live in Drimé Özer’s encampment and do not depart for another place. Meanwhile, Drimé Özer’s consort Akyongza, Sera Khandro’s nemesis from youth, reacts badly to something Sera Khandro says. She declares, “It is unfeasible for this Central Tibetan woman and her two children to maintain a position in the Treasure revealer’s household. [You] don’t need to live together with the Lord – you are not even allowed to contaminate [us] with just these words.”¹⁸⁸ There is no safe place
for Sera Khandro and those she loves; her ex-partner Gyalsé and jealous, competing consorts make each community in which she lives contentious.

In accordance with negative prophecies, all of a sudden a great plague strikes the area. Sera Khandro writes that in 1925, everyone in her community was on the verge of death. Sadly, Sera Khandro’s young son Rikzin Gyurmé Dorjé succumbs to disease and dies, causing everyone to be oppressed with misery.\(^{189}\) As if that weren’t enough suffering for Sera Khandro to bear, on the tenth day of the fourth month of that year, the gravely ill Drimé Özer “put his hands on my head, stared into space, and having prayed to arise as Vajradhara in the [form of] the nondual union of method and wisdom, his form body departed for the expanse of reality.”\(^{190}\) After Drimé Özer’s death, Sera Khandro recounts that “I was without a protector or guardian, left behind like a blind person in the middle of a plain, but I could do nothing about it.”\(^{191}\)

Adding misery upon misery, Drimé Özer’s household, in particular Akyongza, want nothing to do with Sera Khandro. They promptly expel her from the community for the second time, the first being when she had just arrived in Golok as a teen. Akyongza’s grudge against Sera Khandro probably stemmed not only from her jealousy of the woman who had commanded so much of Drimé Özer’s attention, but from the fact that Sera Khandro and her daughter’s presence only increased competition for their limited household resources. Not only do members of the community tell Sera Khandro that she must leave right away, but immediately there is a problem of succession regarding whether or not Sera Khandro has the right to pass on Drimé Özer’s lineage. While Drimé Özer’s disciples desire a particular type of “self-empowerment” (bdag dbang) for a teaching called Accomplishing the Mind of the Guru attainable by receiving
empowerment from one’s lama’s reliquary, Sera Khandro feels uncomfortable because she knows that Drimé Özer empowered her to transmit that teaching. While she, who is a holder of his lineage, is still there, she thinks that the disciples should request the teaching from her instead of hankering after a “self empowerment.” However, Sera Khandro writes that, “Because this Treasure was extremely profound, the auspicious circumstances [to propagate it] went away,”\textsuperscript{192} thus indicating that Sera Khandro did not or was not asked to give the teaching.

\textit{Sera Monastery Life and Teaching}

No sooner have the memorial services for Drimé Özer ended does Sera Khandro depart in acquiescence of the community’s wishes. The monk Sotrül Rinpočhe (\textit{Bsod sprul sna tshogs rang grol}), Drimé Özer’s closest disciple, invites Sera Khandro to his monastery, Sera Monastery,\textsuperscript{193} in compliance with Drimé Özer’s deathbed wishes that he look after her. After moving to Sera Monastery, at the age of thirty-four, Sera Khandro has a vision during Tibetan New Year celebrations in which Ḟākinīs bestow upon her the symbolic texts of Drimé Özer’s \textit{Biography}.\textsuperscript{194} Drimé Özer himself comes to her during this period in her life in several visions in which he urges her not to give up on her promise to maintain and propagate the two Treasures, those of Drimé Özer and Dujom Lingpa. Despite these visionary interactions that she is able to have with him, Sera Khandro is devastated by Drimé Özer’s death. Waves of depression wash over her in which she desperately misses him for the rest of her life.

Although Sera Khandro recounts some social problems in her new home, due to Sotrül Rinpočhe’s efforts, Sera Monastery is a reasonably supportive environment for
her. Trouble begins when local people become suspicious of her intentions living in a monastery in close proximity to monks, and especially to Sotrul Rinpoche. Sera Khandro remarks that,

At that time, I offended the perceptions of the local people. Some said, “The Central Tibetan woman is Sotrul’s consort.” Some said, “Because Sotrul is getting older, it seems as if she won’t live here.” Some said, “Since she is a contentious woman, she will harm all of us.”195

Sotrul Rinpoche is saddened by the negative talk swirling around his monastery. He makes Sera Khandro promise that she will stay at Sera Monastery and not wander about unknown places because she is the “one who maintains the teachings of the kind incarnate.”196

While she is based at Sera Monastery being looked after by Sotrul Rinpoche, Sera Khandro begins at the age of thirty-four to teach the dharma that she has practiced over her lifetime. Although she had previously given her close disciples teachings from her Treasure revelations, her teaching career begins in earnest during this period. She recounts teaching the Four Seminal Heart [Volumes] (Snying thig ya bzhi) at a branch of Tsangchen Monastery (Tsang chen dgon pa) named Sanglung Monastery (Gsang lung dgyen197 pa). She also mentions teaching “the outer purification and explanation on the quintessence of the Great Perfection of Buddhahood Without Meditation, which came as a Treasure to the father and son [Dujom Lingpa and Drimé Özer].”198 She recounts creating a dharma connection by conferring empowerments on over one thousand laywomen and having them accomplish seventy million ma ni prayers.199 Sera Khandro repeatedly confers empowerment, reading transmission (lung), and explanations of the two profound Treasures of Dujom Lingpa and Drimé Özer to monks, lamas, and members of religious encampments (sgar).200 On another occasion she gives the ripening
empowerments, liberating explanations, and supporting reading transmissions for the eighteen volumes of Drimé Özer’s complete Treasure volumes. Additionally, she gives empowerments, explanations, and reading transmissions from her own two cycles of Treasure texts, the Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinis and The Dākinis’ Heart Essence. Sera Khandro also encourages her disciples whether they be lamas, monastics, laywomen, or old people to exert themselves in ma ni prayers, saving the lives of animals (tshe thar), and fasting rituals (bsnyung gnas). She teaches to not only those in her own Nyingma lineage, but also to adherents of other Tibetan Buddhist lineages, including Jonang and Kagyü. Later in life at the age of forty-one, Sera Khandro teaches a regional king, the king of Lingkar (Gling dkar rgyal po), and his entourage, conferring empowerment and reading transmission in the Profound Accomplishment of Vajravārahī (Phag mo’i zab sgrub) from her own Treasure as well as a longevity empowerment. Additionally, she performs the death-bed transferal of consciousness ritual for the regional leader of Dzongda (Rdzong mda’). Sera Khandro recounts giving these religious teachings in various religious communities in the Golok and northern Gandzé vicinity while lengthy and elaborate visions were simultaneously arising in her perception, including going to Buddhafields and interacting with Guru Rinpoché and Yeshé Tsogyal, Drimé Özer, and many dākinīs.

By the time Sera Khandro is thirty-eight years old, her prowess at writing and editing as well as teaching religious scriptures is clear from her comment that, “In front of the Lord Protector Sotrül Rinpoché, I promised that I would write down the great Treasure [reveler] Dujom Dorjé’s entire profound Treasure.” This is not an easy task because the texts are scattered in different places and first Sera Khandro must gather
them together before beginning to edit. This is difficult not only because of the number of volumes of text involved, but in addition it is socially complicated for Sera Khandro because, as she notes, there is only one correct edition of the text and it is at “the Treasure revealer’s household,” meaning Drimé Özer’s household from which she has been expelled twice, the latter time only four years earlier. Not heeding the warnings of the local people at Sera Monastery who fear she is entering a hornet’s nest of contention by going back to Drimé Özer’s encampment, Sera Khandro reflects that,

Out of my former intentions regarding serving the teachings of the father and son Treasure revealers, because [this task] was remaining, I thought that if it is in accordance with the dharma, no matter what happy or sad worldly actions come up, there is no way I can’t handle it.\textsuperscript{208}

When Sera Khandro, her daughter, her trusted disciple Tupzang, and her faithful scribe Tsültrim Dorjé arrive at a retreat center called Karlung (Dkar lung) at Drimé Özer’s Treasure encampment, “all of Drimé Özer’s disciples rejoiced as if seeing someone risen from the dead.”\textsuperscript{209} Thus, Sera Khandro’s decision to privilege their religious purpose of editing scriptures over worrying about old disputes ends up being a good choice. After Sera Khandro explains her reasons for wanting to borrow the texts from Drimé Özer’s brother Trülku Dorjé Drendül (Sprul sku rdo rje dgra ‘dul), he is pleased and allows her to use whatever texts she needs. Sera Khandro writes, “For over a month, we stayed there editing and correcting\textsuperscript{210} and so forth in great detail.”\textsuperscript{211} After they finish the editing process, Sera Khandro mentions that she offered Drimé Özer’s community whatever instructional explanations they desired including Drimé Özer’s Biography and other teachings.\textsuperscript{212} Sera Khandro later describes the scope of their editing process: Dujom Lingpa and Drimé Özer’s Treasure volumes together totaled forty volumes and with the addition of Sera Khandro’s visionary cycles (nyams ris skor), she says that she and her
companions had written forty-four volumes.\textsuperscript{213} These comments about Sera Khandro and her companions writing, copying, editing, and correcting large volumes of text demonstrate Sera Khandro's significant role in textual production in her communities as well as the advanced level of literacy she was able to attain despite not receiving any formal Tibetan language education. Additionally, mentions of textual production demonstrate that the culture of woodblock printing had limited relevance in these early twentieth century nomadic religious encampments.\textsuperscript{214} Copying large amounts of text is an act of devotion; Sera Khandro notes that on another occasion an entourage of monks and incarnates from Riwoché request empowerment from her in Dujom Lingpa and Drimé Özer's Treasure cycles. Out of a sudden upsurge of devotion, they promise to copy their complete works. Sera Khandro supports their efforts by offering them whatever resources they need including writing paper, ink, and so forth.\textsuperscript{215}

After Sera Khandro and her companions complete their project editing and correcting Dujom Lingpa's Treasure volumes, Sera Khandro sings a song that is characteristic of the tone of her narrative towards the end of her story after Drimé Özer's death. After the climax of her four years of living with Drimé Özer, her later life is pervaded with sorrowful reflections on impermanence mixed with poetic expressions of spiritual realization. She sings this song of grief when she recollects the happy moments of her short experience living with her lama and her lover Drimé Özer:

\begin{quote}
Alas! How sad the situation of  
Impermanent phenomena in cyclic existence!

Before I was a woman of a good lineage —  
Now everyone sees me as something to throw away.  
The silk knots of former words  
Now are [like] a beautiful form in the sky.\textsuperscript{216}
\end{quote}
The former manifestations of my sensory pleasures
Now are what oppress me with suffering.

When I separate from the holy spiritual siblings that I mixed with previously
Without any power [not to], they become the cause of suffering.

My previous home, neighbors, and entourage
Are now like the two sides of a drum.217

When I see this reality of change [via]
All of the actions and deeds like these,
Who would be able to bear suffering like
Me, this girl who is an object of pity?

Alas, oh the three jewels!
I have no hope in this and the next [life].
I am without a companion, alone and destitute –
Thrown out like a dog to distant lands with no home.

Without a husband, everybody despises me.
Although I acted kindly in accordance with the dharma,
[Everyone] hated me because of the negative influence of anti-religious factors.

My greatly kind protector lama departed for the Buddhasfields.
The wrathful Lord of Death led my only son away.
Pathetic mother and child were expelled to distant lands.

Those with merit gathered together
Like blissful and happy worldly gods.
This is the foundation for all the suffering of my situation.

These situations that had gathered together before
Manifest today as teachers of impermanence.

The rear mountain is impermanent – all the vegetation is dry.
The valley is impermanent – it is the abode of rodents.
The people’s homes are impermanent – the walls are destroyed.
Disciples are impermanent – they wander in other lands.
Couples are impermanent – they go their separate ways.

When manifestations like this appear,
The depth of my mind is oppressed with suffering.

Alas, oh – no matter what impermanent phenomena
You ponder, it is without essence.
Whatever you think about is an illusory emanation.
Having abandoned the never-ending pattern\(^{218}\) of ungraspable actions, 
These handcuffs of the eight worldly concerns\(^{219}\) of cyclic existence, 
If I am able to accomplish the holy divine dharma, 
I will find the purpose of this life and 
Repay the kindness of my lama.

I will fulfill the yearnings of my entourage of disciples. 
By this I will accomplish the two purposes of self and other. 
For the sake of this, I exert my body, speech, and mind in dharma [practice].

Although I am without worldly ways, my mind is carefree. 
Although I am expelled from the row of people, I accomplish my purpose. 
Although everyone criticizes me, I am victorious over all. 
Although I am thrown out to a distant land, my mind is resolved.

I have seen the original face of the changeless innate nature. 
I have realized self-awareness inseparable from the lama. 
No prejudice is possible in [my] compassion. 
The vase of my body, speech, and mind contains blessings. 
Perhaps I will go soon 
To the victorious place of the all-good Truth Body (\textit{Dharmakāya})\(^{220}\).

Sorrow and a realization of impermanence cast a dark shadow over her perceptions after 
the death of Drimé Özer and her young son, despite the expansive perspective that her 
spiritual realization affords her. Her poetry after Drimé Özer’s death is retrospective, 
mourning the loss of her teacher and lover’s earthly body. Yet it is also charged with 
anticipation, awaiting their final reunion in the Buddhafields.

In addition to recounting the many religious teachings she is invited to give, the 
latter stages of her life based at Sera Monastery from the age of thirty-four to the 
conclusion of her \textit{Autobiography} when she is forty-three emphasize her active visionary 
life.\(^{221}\) During this period, divinities repeatedly appear before her speaking pithy missives 
in which they direct her towards the many scriptural revelations she then teaches to her 
faithful group of disciples. Even though her heart remains inseparably tied to the late
Drimé Özer, dākinīs remind her that she still must cultivate auspicious connections by engaging with the proper consorts in order to fulfill their divine prophecies and to reveal Treasures. In one particularly poignant passage, Sera Khandro recounts that when she was thirty-eight years old, she had an extremely sharp pain in her “lotus.” A visionary old woman appears before her and tells her in poetic language that she needs the medicine of a male consort’s “ambrosia” to cure her of the illness that has affected her internal channels and winds. Sera Khandro recounts that she reacted negatively to the old woman’s words, retorting, “At the end of my life that is like a setting sun, aside from wondering if I can accomplish the completely pure Dharma, I don’t think about needing to take on a consort!”

Thus Sera Khandro’s mind turns more and more away from the troublesome world of early-twentieth century Golok and towards the moment when she will once again be reunited with Drimé Özer in the permanent domain of the Buddhasfields.

**The Final Years**

Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* ends when she is forty-three years old, six years before her death. However, there are two sources that summarize the final years of her life. The earlier source is a twelve folio page manuscript handwritten by her scribe Tsültrim Dorjé in 1948 titled *Posthumous Biography of Khandro Rinpoche Dewé Dorjé Who Arose as a Manifestation of the Mother of the Buddhas Yeshé Tsogyal*. Chatral Sangyé Dorjé Rinpoche used Tsültrim Dorjé’s text as a base upon which to expand in a twenty folio page text he wrote in 1976 titled *A Turquoise Border: A Short Supplement to the End of the Great Biography of the Central Tibetan Dākinī Dewé Dorjé*. When Sera
Khandro was forty-four years old in 1935, she was at Sera Monastery giving teachings from both Dujom Lingpa and Drimé Özer’s Treasure volumes. During this year, sadly, her disciple and staunch supporter Sotrül Rinpoché died. Although she too experienced many visions in which her perceptions of this world faded and she saw only pure Buddhafields, an incarnate lama from Katok Monastery named Chaktrül Rinpoché Pema Trinlé Gyamtso offered her sacred substances and was able to dispel the obstacles to her life that year.\(^{225}\) Also that year when she was forty-four, she went to [Drimé Özer’s] Treasure encampment and received empowerments and reading transmissions from Lerab Lingpa’s Treasure revelations from a lama named Lama Tsechok, which restored previously damaged auspicious connections.\(^{226}\) While she was there, Drimé Özer’s younger brother Dorjé Drendül (Rdo rje dgra ‘dul) summoned her. Tsültrim Dorjé explains that, 

In particular, by the auspicious connections of relying on the quick path of method and wisdom, [Sera Khandro] was able to decode the symbolic meaning of profound Treasures including the Heart Essence of Tsogyal Mind Accomplishment [Practice] and so forth that she took out of the Jewel Ocean [near] Vairocana’s Cave.\(^{22}\)

“Relying on the quick path of method and wisdom” refers to Dorjé Drendül’s acting as Sera Khandro’s consort, thus enabling her to decode her Treasures. This is another indication that Sera Khandro continued to have consorts after Drimé Özer’s death.

In 1936 when Sera Khandro was forty-five, her disciple Sherab Özer invited her to Dzakok (Rdza khog) to a Vai[rocana] cave called Khandro Yangdzong. There she gave teachings to the disciples gathered there and revealed Treasures. Because of the war with the Chinese, Sera Khandro had to move her encampment around several times to places including Dzatö (Rdza stod), Nito (Snyi stod), and Tsechu (Tse chu). Despite the fighting
going on in the area, Chatral Rinpoché explains that, “Having relied only on the power of
the Venerable Lady’s compassion, not even a bit of harm came to all the people and
livestock.” When she moved her camp to Dzatö, she taught the disciples gathered there
preliminary practices (sngon ‘gro), Breakthrough (khregs chod), and Direct
Transcendence (thod rgal) and stayed in retreat there for one hundred days.

In 1937 when she was forty-six years old, the monastic students of Lama Gelek
Gyamtso from the Tsang encampment (Rtsang sgar) invited Sera Khandro to move her
encampment there and give them teachings. She also went to Dralek Monastery (Bkra
legs dgon) to enjoy the Guru Rinpoché ceremony there on the tenth day of the sixth
month. Tsültrim Dorjé recounts that, “After that in the Da area (Zla yul) when [she] went
to beg for alms, she gave disciples a Dharma connection in accordance with each of their
needs and established their ripening and liberation.” This is one of the many instances
in which he recounts that Sera Khandro went to beg for alms and gave teachings on the
way. Upon returning to Tsang Monastery, she gave the students gathered there
explanations on preliminary practices, Purifying Appearances, and Direct Transcendence
practices from her own earth Treasure (sa gter). After they all did a one hundred day
retreat, they had a great thanksgiving feast. A greatly faithful disciple named Lama
Tshültrim Norbu from Nyakrong (Nyag rong) heard of the great dākinī and came to meet
her. After he received empowerment in her full teachings, he became one of the people
who maintained, protected, and transmitted (‘dzin skyong spel) her teachings. Out of
great faith, he wrote a copy of all of her teachings including six volumes of her works.

In 1938 at the age of forty-seven, Sera Khandro gave further teachings in the three
Treasure cycles: that of Dujom Lingpa, Drimé Özer, and her own. At Tsang encampment,
she also taught Drimé Özer’s Biography. During the winter, all her disciples did another one hundred day retreat. In 1939 when she was forty-eight years old, messengers from Kham Riwoché arrived to invite her to visit the Riwoché political leader (Zhabs drung) Tsewang Drakpa (Tshe dbang grags pa). On the way to Riwoché, the king of Lingtsang (Gling tshang) and his queens requested several teachings from Sera Khandro’s Treasure cycles. When she arrived in Riwoché, she received a warm welcome and stayed in the leader’s household (Zhabs drung bla brang).232

As she was preparing to give the complete empowerments to Dujom Lingpa, Drimé Özer, and her own Treasure teachings, the first sign of her upcoming death arose. Tsültrim Dorjé recounts,

During the preliminary empowerment, Khandro Rinpoché said to Lama Sherab and I both who were on the outside of a curtain, “The [time] between this life and the next is not distant. Aside from just the outside and the inside of this curtain in-between us, there is no [distance].”

At another time she said, “We have protected and maintained the father and son Lama’s teachings well. Now, I don’t know how much life I have left.”

It seemed that she would not live long.233

When Sera Khandro turned forty-nine in 1940, she secretly went off with some of her disciples, including Tsültrim Dorjé, to visit several holy places in which she revealed Treasures including the meditation cave called Orgyen Dzong in Pom (Spom), a rock cave called Maratika, and others. Sera Khandro also traveled to Amdo Tashikhyil (A mdo bkra shis ’khyil) where she gave empowerments and explanations in the three Treasure teachings. People there said that, “At that time, from between her eyebrows, a bright light radiating the assembly of peaceful and wrathful deities gradually appeared and then went away.”234
In the beginning of the fourth month of 1940, Sera Khandro became sick again with arthritis. Despite the rituals and prayers her disciples performed, her condition did not improve. In the beginning of the fifth month, Sera Khandro asked to be taken to Riwoché where she stayed at the political leader (Zhabs drung)’s palace. Tsültrim Dorjé writes,

On the twentieth of the fifth month around noon, [Sera Khandro] fiercely cried out the sound “Hrik” and on account of this, she went to the Buddhafields. As soon as she passed away, although we heard the sound of a voice, we didn’t understand the meaning.\textsuperscript{235}

He also records that,

Rainbow clouds gathered and a sound roared and so forth. After a few days of making offerings to the body, on the twenty fifth day, in a very nice place in the region behind Riwoché, we offered the body to the fire. When it was burning, many amazing signs arose on the body such as one eye flying into the southern direction of the sky and so forth.\textsuperscript{236}

Chatral Rinpoché adds that when they brought her body out to the cremation site, “Her body had dissolved into light and all that remained was about the size of an eight year old child.”\textsuperscript{237} He describes the reliquary that Sera Khandro’s daughter and Tsültrim Dorjé made for Sera Khandro’s relics – it was about the size of an arrow’s length, made of silver with gold and various jewels inlaid in patterns. Inside they put the ďākinī’s bone relics, her hair, her rosary, her Treasure volumes, an amazing Šakyamuni statue, and blessed things including stone (Treasure) vessels and yellow pages. Chatral Rinpoché notes that the reliquary is still there in Amdo in the Treasure encampment (\textit{Mdo smad gter sgar}).\textsuperscript{238}
Conclusion

Sera Khandro’s rich autobiographical reflections depict a life full of extraordinary and miraculous visionary experiences revealing Treasures interspersed with plebeian accounts of interpersonal difficulties. Her life story is dramatic in cinematic proportions, inviting readers to imagine the empty nomadic plains and stark alpine vastness in which her tale of sacrifice, diligence, suffering, love, and realization unfolds. Her world is both distant and near, charged with supernatural forces and grounded by mundane human emotions. It paints a picture of a woman who was extraordinary, experiencing phantasmagoric visions of divine revelation, and very human, distraught by tensions with her mother-in-law, struggling to pursue her religious ambitions and raise her family, and devastated by the loss of her lama and her son.

Sera Khandro’s Autobiography is an example for those who come after her of what it means to fully embark upon the homeless life of Buddhist renunciation. Her courageous choice to step out of her conventionally comfortable life in Lhasa into the wild unknown land of Golok never to return or see her family again is a powerful portrayal of her commitment to the Tibetan Buddhist path. Hers is a nomadic story in more ways than one; a life riding horses and pitching tents on the pastures of nomadic Golok led to a life in which she never truly found a home within the often turbulent religious communities in which she lived. As a woman from Central Tibet, she was always an outsider, an exception to the rule of male religious hierarchy and hereditary Golok religious succession. Without a worldly place to call her own, the refrain of her Autobiography returns to her only true home, her love for Drimé Özer and its fruition as spiritual liberation.
Chapter Two: The Process of Revealing Treasures in Sera Khandro’s Golok

The mythic history and multilayered process of revealing Treasures lie at the heart of Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical works. Half of both Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* and Drimé Özer’s *Biography* consists of their visionary experiences, all of which relate to divine revelation. Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* includes more than twenty-five accounts of revealing Treasures, and Drimé Özer’s *Biography* describes at least thirty-one of his (and their) revelation experiences. These accounts include visions inspiring literary productions, called mind Treasures (*dgongs gter*), and discoveries of sacred material including rocks, ritual objects, statues, and yellow scrolls from the Tibetan earth, called earth Treasures (*sa gter*). The process of revealing Treasures involves multiple stages and relies heavily on divine prophecy and the gathering together of fleeting auspicious connections (*rten ’brel*) including finding the right time, place, consort (*thabs grogs*) and doctrine holder (*chos bdag*). The unifying theme of this chapter is an exploration of Treasure revelation as a process in which Treasure revealers such as Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer interact with different realms of beings including: 1) Buddhist divinities such as Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyal, and hosts of dākinīs, 2) land deities and Treasure protectors who personify the natural environment, and 3) human communities in Golok society including religious encampments (*chos sgar, gter sgar*), monasteries (*dgon*), and lay nomadic tribes (*tsho ba*). Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings are pervaded with dialogic encounters with this wide range of figures, as we will continue to explore in the following chapter.
After introducing aspects of both academic and traditional Tibetan understandings of the history of the Treasure tradition, this chapter will investigate: 1) How does Sera Khandro represent her relationship to the divine progenitors of Treasure teachings, Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal?, 2) How does she describe the process of revealing Treasures?, 3) In what type of religious communities did Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer live and what relationship did Treasure revealers and their products have to broader Golok society? Through exploring these questions, this chapter seeks to read Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings as a resource for understanding more about the role of Treasure revelation in Sera Khandro’s early twentieth-century Golok.

*What are Treasures and where do they come from?*

Treasure (*gtér ma*) revelation is the discovery of new material, textual, or visionary spiritual artifacts and scriptures affiliated with Nyingma (old school) Tibetan Buddhism and Bön. The religious phenomenon of Treasure revelation originates partly from the ancient and modern practice of hiding sacred religious items in the earth during periods of civil and military unrest. Tibetan history has experienced a need for this hiding of sacred items more than once in its long recorded history dating back to the seventh-century formulation of the Tibetan empire, most notably during the Dark Period in the mid-ninth century when the Tibetan Royal Empire disintegrated and government-sponsored institutional Buddhism declined in Tibet. Beginning in the late tenth century, as Tibetans rebuilt their fragmented religious institutions, they may have discovered some artifacts that had been hidden during the waning years of the Tibetan empire.\(^{239}\) The Treasure tradition began during this period of revival as early as the eleventh century.
with the Treasure revealing activities of Sangýé Lama (*Sangs rgyas bla ma*), but did not become widespread as a distinctive form of scriptural transmission until the thirteenth century.\(^{240}\) Interestingly, in recent Tibetan history, during the Chinese invasion and subsequent destruction of massive numbers of monasteries, religious objects, and scriptures, the history of Tibetans concealing religious objects as Treasures in the earth of Tibet recurred. In fact, during my fieldwork (2004-2005) in Serta, Golok, a contemporary religious figure in Golok named Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok (*Nam sprul 'jigs med phun tshogs*), who is locally accepted as the reincarnation of Sera Khandro’s teacher and companion Drimé Özer, asked me for a new copy of Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* because the corners of his manuscript had been damaged by water when his community hid the text under the earth during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).\(^{241}\)

However, the Treasure tradition as a form of scriptural transmission of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism entails far more than finding lost treasures in the earth. Eventually, the early diversity gave way to a codified paradigm in which Treasures came to be thought of as hidden predominantly by the eighth century Indian Tantric master who is credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet, Padmasambhava, along with the aid of his Tibetan consort Yeshé Tsogyal. These Treasures could then be discovered only by his specially appointed emissaries. Treasures can be either material earth Treasures (*sa gter*) in the form of scripture pages, statues, precious pills, vessels containing scripture, etc. that are discovered in places such as rocks, mountains, lakes, trees, temples, and space or mind Treasures (*dgongs gter*), which have been hidden directly in the minds of their prophesized revealers to be discovered at the appropriate time.\(^{242}\) Treasure revelation is one way to keep the Tibetan scriptural canon open, to continue to add new
scriptures to the already closed and codified Tibetan canon of authentic, Buddha-voiced scriptures.

Precedents for the Tibetan Treasure tradition stem from both Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. Despite skeptical critiques of the tradition, most often voiced by its opponents in the new (gsar ma) schools of Tibetan Buddhism, Treasure revelation does have direct Indian antecedents, which is the main criterion for authenticity in Tibetan Buddhism. Robert Mayer draws our attention to the *The Samādhī of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present* (*Pratyutpanna-buddha-samābhavasthita-samādhi-sūtra*), a Mahāyāna Sūtra datable to before 179 C.E. as well as the Indian *nidhi* (Treasure) tradition. He argues that both of these presage the Tibetan Treasure tradition in direct ways including the concealing of Buddha-voiced scriptures in caskets under the earth protected by *deva* and *nāga* spirits to be revealed by prophesied lay *bodhisattvas* in the future. More generally, scholars have pointed out that the concept of receiving a newly packaged scripture relevant to contemporary concerns can be seen as a natural outgrowth of the general Indian Mahāyāna understanding that realized Buddhist disciples can produce new scripture based on their realization rather than having to prove always that the new scripture literally came from the historical Buddha’s speech. Thus there was Indian precedent for the understanding that Buddha-voiced scripture could mean discourse inspired by the realization of enlightenment that did not literally emanate from the speech of the historical Buddha. These factors lead Mayer to conclude that contemporary Tibetan Treasure revelation is “a unique survival, or at least a close replica, of the workings of the revealers of the famous Buddhist Sanskrit scriptures of the last two millennia.”
Despite these Indian reflections, there are also distinctly Tibetan reasons for the development and ongoing importance of the Tibetan Treasure tradition. David Germano has argued extensively that the discovery of new Nyingma Treasure scriptures was in part a reaction to the onslaught of newly translated Indian Tantric scriptures that new schools of Tibetan Buddhism were importing into Tibet during the later dissemination (phyi dar) of Buddhism that followed the Dark Period (850-950 C.E.) of political, religious, and social fragmentation in Tibet. Germano argues that during the Renaissance Period (950-1300 C.E.), the Treasure tradition allowed the Nyingma School to appropriate and transform the new post-tenth century Indian materials under the guise of discovering teachings hidden from Tibet’s glory days of its Imperial past (600-850 C.E.). This move enabled Tibetans to forge an autochthonous Buddhist tradition without falling prey to the criticism of outright authorship of new scripture. The Treasure tradition thus emphasizes Tibet’s own sacred Imperial history rather than the prevalent valorization of India as the source of Buddhism. With the divine couple Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal as its sacred progenitors, the Treasure tradition also validated non-monastic forms of religious community and the increasingly important role of the Tantric consort. In addition, Germano highlights the strongly Tibetan nationalist element of the Treasure tradition’s gaze backwards into Tibet’s own Imperial past for its Treasures instead of reaching for the more familiar stamp of Indian authenticity. He points out the uniquely Tibetan insights that the Treasure tradition allowed its proponents to introduce into Tibetan Buddhism such as the development of the Nyingma Seminal Heart (snying thig) system of Great Perfection (rdzogs chen) teachings, a lineage to which Sera Khandro belonged in its later nineteenth and twentieth-century manifestations. As Janet Gyatso phrases it,
"In the end, the person of the Treasure discoverer is aggrandized both by the cachet of the foreign, borrowed from the civilization of Indian Buddhism, and the power of the indigenous, with all of its ancient memories and allegiances." Just as its genealogical roots stem from an Indian saint, Padmasambhava, and a Tibetan princess, Yeshé Tsogyal, Treasure revelation has verifiable Indian antecedents, yet its rise and development in Tibet is uniquely Tibetan, born out of political, social, and religious circumstances specific to Tibetan cultural history.

**Treasure Revelation in Nyingma Scriptural Transmission**

There are three main types of scriptural transmission in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism: the canonical teachings (*bka' ma*), Treasure teachings (*gter ma*), and Pure Vision teachings (*dag snang*). The canonical teachings of the Nyingma school are part of the *Nyingma Gyübum (Rnying ma rgyud 'bum)*, a thirty-three-volume collection consisting primarily of the inner Tantras of the Nyingma School. The canonical teachings are described as being a "long lineage," or a lineage of transmission from teacher to student dating back directly with no breaks to the historical Buddha, though in fact many of them are clearly Treasures excavated prior to the fourteenth century. The potential problem with the long lineage according to Sera Khandro’s contemporary, the Third Dodrupchen Rinpoché, is that:

The power of those teachings may have declined by their falling into the hands of improper people and transgressors. The teachings may have been adulterated by individually imposed and unauthorized writings; and also in the long transmissions there tend to be obstructions. In that long period of transmission there may have been some among the lineage holders who did not practice much and did not attain any accomplishment [so the power of the transmission becomes decayed].
Not falling prey to these potential downfalls, the “short lineage” consists of both Treasure teachings and Pure Vision teachings and is “short” because it is a direct lineage from the timeless Buddhas to human recipients, thus cutting out the “middle men” of the millennia of Buddhist lineage history that can potentially dilute the true Buddha’s teachings. Pure Vision teachings are teachings that highly realized beings receive spontaneously in their waking or dreaming visionary experience from Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities, and sages. Not all Pure Vision teachings are Treasure teachings, however, because there is an additional stage in the transmission of Treasure teachings that is not found with Pure Vision teachings; Treasure teachings and Pure Vision teachings both stem from the timeless wisdom of the Buddhas, but Treasure teachings also have a temporal origin in the Treasure hiding activities of key figures in Imperial Tibetan history, most often Padmasambhava.  

Treasure revelation texts consist of many different genres of literature including ritual texts describing meditative techniques for visualizing deities, historical texts recounting the glorified events of Imperial Tibetan history, hagiographies of Tibet’s famous personalities, most often Padmasambhava, explanations of philosophical and doctrinal points, and instructions for the creation of religious art, dance, and architecture. One of the largest compendia of Nyingma Treasure texts is the Rinchen Terdzöd (Rin chen gter mdzod) compiled by Kongtrül Yönten Gyatso (Kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho, 1813-1899), but many cycles of Treasure (gter skor) are not included in this compendium.  

Sera Khandro’s four volumes of revealed Treasures include primarily ritual texts (sādhanas and empowerments), prophecies (lung bstan) foretelling the key disciples and consorts of her teachings, accounts of her visionary experiences
(nyams snang), and explanatory materials (khrid yig) on Dzokchen philosophy. Her Treasure revelation accounts primarily consist of taking out textual Treasures in the form of scriptures which come to her through visions. However, these scriptures are not only mind Treasures, but also are earth Treasures in the sense that she often describes finding her Treasure texts in vessels (sgrom bu) made from substances of all varieties including crystal, stone, rhinoceros hide, and so forth. Less commonly she describes revealing statues and ritual implements.

There are six types or stages of transmission in Nyingma Tantra, three of which are unique to the Treasure tradition, which chart the transmittal of Buddhist teachings from Buddhas to their disciples. The first is Mind Transmission (dgongs brgyud), which is a spontaneous transmission between Buddhas in which nothing is expressed, but which represents the transmission of the Truth Body (Dharmakāya, chos sku) Buddhas to the Enjoyment Body (Sāmbhogakāya, longs sku) Buddhas. The second is the Symbolic Transmission (brda brgyud) from the Enjoyment Body Buddhas using verbal and physical symbols to Emanation Body (Nirmāṇakāya, sprul sku) Buddhas including figures such as Padmasambhava, Prahevajra, and other Knowledge Holders (vidhyādhara, rig ‘dzin). The third is the Hearing Transmission (snyan brgyud), transmitted by Emanation Bodies such as Padmasambhava to ordinary human disciples via verbal communication. The forth transmission type begins those which are unique to the Treasure tradition; the Prophetic Authorization (bka' babs lung bstan) in which Padmasambhava gives a prophecy to the future Treasure revealer (gter ston) indicating the specific time and place that the Treasure revealer will disclose Padmasambhava’s teaching. Thus prophecy is an integral part of the transmission of Treasure texts, a theme
that recurs throughout Sera Khandro’s biographical writings. The fifth stage is the Aspirational Empowerment (*smon lam dbang bskur*) in which Padmasambhava conceals the Treasure teaching in the Treasure revealer’s mind through the power of his aspirations. Also called the Mind-mandate Transmission (*gtad rgya*), this transmission of the Treasure teaching is possible because of the concentration of his enlightened mind and the realization of the disciple’s mind. The sixth and last transmission stage is the Entrustment to the Dākinīs (*mkha’ gro gtad rgya*). It is the stage following Padmasambhava’s concealment of the Treasures in rock, lake, sky, or other locales in which Padmasambhava entrusts the dākinīs and Treasure protector spirits with the task of guarding the Teaching until the prophesized Treasure revealer arrives at the appropriate time and place. Here the integral involvement of Padmasambhava’s consort Yeshé Tsogyal comes into play. Tūlk Thondup explains,

Second, after the transmission of the esoteric teachings to his disciples, his consort Ye shey Tsho gyal compiled the teachings through the power of her unforggetting memory. Then according to the wishes and blessings of Guru Padmasambhava, with the help of other realized calligraphers she wrote the teachings in symbolic scripts on yellow scrolls of paper, put them in caskets and concealed them in different places, so they would be discovered by the Tertons and used as keys to awaken the recollection of the words, meanings and realization of the Terma from their awakened state of mind. They also concealed the prophetic guides for the Tertons. This process is the Entrustment to Dākinīs or Terma protectors.252

The role of Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava acting as a Treasure concealing pair is the topic to which we now turn.
Although there are several key eighth-century hagiographic figures who hide Treasures such as King Songtsen Gampo, Vimalamitra, and Vairocana to name just a few, by the fourteenth-century Padmasambhava emerged as the dominant figure for the Buddhist Treasure tradition. It is he who conceals Treasures along with his Tibetan partner Yeshé Tsogyal, who acts as his consort and as the one who remembers, encodes, and conceals his Treasure teachings. In Sera Khandro’s biographical works, Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal are a dynamic divine couple from whom she perceives her male consort Drimé Özer and herself to have emanated and to whom her manifold devotional prayers are directed. Inspired by its central importance in Sera Khandro’s biographical writings, in this section and also in Chapters Four and Five I will explore the ways in which Sera Khandro represents herself through reference to the Treasure tradition’s central origination discourse of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. As Judith Perkins reminds us in the context of her study on the role of the discourse of suffering selves in early Christianity, “In every society, persons come to understand themselves, their roles and their world through their culture’s discursive practices and the ‘reality’ these practices bring into cultural consciousness.”\textsuperscript{253} Perkins calls for

An investigation of how various discourses in a historical period work to produce particular subjectivities, i.e., particular forms of self-understandings and particular social worlds that generate certain kinds of social power. The dominant power in a society is recognized as being sustained through the domination of a particular social discourse.\textsuperscript{254}

Applying this insight to the context of the Treasure tradition, this section will explore the following questions: What is the significance for communities involved in Treasure
revelation that the tradition’s “second Buddha,” the paradigmatic figure of Padmasambhava, is a lay Tantric master surrounded by divine đākinī consorts and in particular partnered with Yeshé Tsogyal for the dissemination of Buddhist Treasure teachings? How does the dominant Treasure revelation origination discourse of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal as a divine couple act as a model for Sera Khandro? How has this discourse of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal as divine progenitors of the Treasure tradition shifted over time?

The Rising Importance of Yeshé Tsogyal

In his tome on the history of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Dujom Rinpoché (1904-1988), the reincarnation of Drimé Özer’s father Dujom Lingpa, represents the central origination discourse of the Treasure tradition in the following way:

In this country of Tibet, the one who instructed numberless persons in need of training by enlightened activities associated with the nucleus of the teaching, the vehicle of indestructible reality in general, and the profound treasures in particular, was the Second Buddha, Padmasambhava.

It was his particularly great enlightened activity to conceal uncountable treasure troves containing doctrines, wealth, medicines, astrological calculations, images, sacramental substances and so forth in the lands of India, Nepal, and Tibet, with the intention of providing a harvest for future disciples and for the teaching. Above all, skillfully teaching each according to his needs here in Tibet, Guru Rinpoche taught approaches to the doctrine in general, and, in particular, an infinite mass of Tantras, transmissions, esoteric instructions and rites associated with the three classes of yoga [Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga]. All of those transmitted precepts were compiled by the mistress of secrets, the queen of the expanse, Yeshe Tshogyel, who retained them in her infallible memory. She arranged them on five kinds of yellow scroll [symbolizing the five families] in the symbolic script of the đākinīs and, inserting them in various treasure chests, sealed them to be indestructible. Guru Padmasambhava and his consort, alone or in the company of the king and his subjects, concealed them in different locations and entrusted them to their respective treasure protectors. Yeshe Tshogyel, in particular, lived for more than a hundred years after the guru’s departure for
Camaradvipa and concealed an inconceivable number of treasure troves in upper, middle and lower Tibet. In this way she fulfilled her service to the treasures.\textsuperscript{255}

Trülku Thondup mirrors this version of the Treasure revelation origination discourse, explaining that,

The source of Dharma Treasure, the person who established the Terma system of the Nyingma, is Guru Padmasambhava, assisted by his consort Ye shey Tshogyal. There are also teachings that were concealed or reconcealed by his disciples, such as Vairocana, and their reincarnations, and also by Vimalamitra, a great Indian scholar and sage of the ninth century.\textsuperscript{256}

The more ancient sources for twentieth-century accounts such as the ones above include Nyangrel Nyima Özer's (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer) thirteenth-century Zanglingma (Zangs gling ma) and Orgyen Lingpa's ('O rgyan gling pa) fourteenth-century revelations Padma Katang (Padma bka' yi thang yig) and the Tangyik Dengä (Thang yig sde lnga).\textsuperscript{257} Interestingly, both the Zanglingma and the Padma Katang hardly mention Yeshé Tsogyal as a divine partner to Padmasambhava who helped him to conceal and disseminate the Treasure teachings. The Zanglingma contains two chapters devoted to the history of Padmasambhava's revealing Treasures, chapter twenty-one and twenty-two, both of which never once mention Yeshé Tsogyal. The Zanglingma recounts:

Master Padma consecrated these secluded locations to be sacred places for sādhana. He personally visited everywhere in the land of Tibet and concealed innumerable terma treasures for the sake of worthy people in future generations. He also buried separate location lists, guide texts, and key texts. For the sake of each destined recipient he made these aspirations, "May this meet with a person possessing the karmic destiny! May it be practiced by destined people!" He also gave these three gradual seals, "Seal of treasure, seal of entrustment, seal of concealment." As well, he gave these decrees, "Entrusted, fully entrusted! Concealed, concealed as treasure! Profound, hold it sacred!"\textsuperscript{258}

Nowhere in this narrative of Treasure-concealing activities is there any trace of Yeshé Tsogyal except for Nyangrel Nyima Özer's grand allusion to her as the text's author. Thus, although clearly she reigned essential to Padmasambhava's teachings as the one
"who had attained perfect recall" in order to write down and conceal the Zanglingma in the ninth century as a Treasure text, her role as his partner in Treasure-concealing activities appears to be quite understated.\textsuperscript{259} The same is true of Orgyen Lingpa's Padma Katang; cantos ninety-one through ninety-four describe Padmasambhava's Treasure-hiding places, times, and prophesized revealers without mentioning Yeshé Tsogyal at all, aside from the general reference to her as the author of the entire volume who "having the ability to remember everything, for the sake of future generations has preserved in writing and hidden like a treasure of jewels this Life of Padma . . ."\textsuperscript{260}

I include these earlier accounts of Padmasambhava as a revealer of Treasure in order to suggest that perhaps the discourse of Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava as a Treasure-concealing pair who together "concealed them [Treasures] in different locations and entrusted them to their respective treasure protectors," as Dujom Rinpoché portrays them, developed and shifted over time to include a more central role of Yeshé Tsogyal and of the importance of sexual yoga to the production of Treasure.\textsuperscript{261} This rise in the importance of the Tantric consort within texts relating to Treasure revelation reflects the non-celibate social structure of communities in which the Treasure tradition flourished.

**Yeshé Tsogyal's Hagiography as Sera Khandro's Model**

The main influence on Sera Khandro's auto/biographical works is Yeshé Tsogyal's hagiography. Although she gives her readers no indication of which edition(s) of Tsogyal's famous biography she read, there are distinct resemblances between Sera Khandro's writing and the biography of Yeshé Tsogyal revealed by Taksham Samten Lingpa in the mid-seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{262} In Yeshé Tsogyal's hagiography, she has a
more prominent role as Padmasambhava’s scribe and divine consort than in the earlier materials I mentioned above. In the following analysis, I will show how Sera Khandro’s writings explicitly draw on the version of sacred history found in Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography to portray herself and Drimé Özer as a divinely prophesized Treasure revelation couple. Indeed, the overlap between these two Treasure revelation couples is more than conceptual, for Sera Khandro also portrays herself and Drimé Özer to be emanations of this divine couple, charged with the mandate of maintaining the Treasure teachings they hid. Thus, Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer can act as mediators between the eternal sacred reality of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal and the temporal context of early twentieth-century Golok because ultimately, they are not separate.

In the biography of Yeshé Tsogyal revealed by Taksham Samten Lingpa in the mid-seventeenth century, Yeshé Tsogyal is Padmasambhava’s scribe and his most important consort. After filling her with all of the instructions of the Secret Mantra, holding nothing back “like a brimming vessel poured into another,” Padmasambhava said that before he departed, “first I must place inexhaustible teachings, vast and profound. You [Yeshé Tsogyal] must take these Treasures into your charge.” After offering Padmasambhava a consort named Siddhi with whom he united for the purpose of propagating the teachings of the Secret Mantra, Yeshé Tsogyal then recounts,

“It was then that all the instructions the Precious Master had given, and which were to be concealed as Treasures, were committed to writing. This was done by Namkhai Nyingpo, who was adept in the art of writing with miraculous speed; by Atsara Pelyang, most exact and careful; by Demma Tsemang, excellent in orthography, speed and accuracy; by Kawa Peltsek, adept in orthography; by Chokro Gyaltsen, a master penman; by Yudra Nyingpo, skilled in grammar and logic; by Vairotsana, accomplished in all these arts; and by myself, Yeshé Tsogyal, who had attained unfailing memory.”
In the above quote, Yeshé Tsogyal may be one of several important disciples to commit Padmasambhava’s Treasures to writing, but they are clearly a divine pair above and beyond Padmasambhava’s other twenty-four famous disciples:

It was thus that the Guru and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, at one in the wisdom of their Minds, brought about the benefit of beings through their skillful means and wisdom. At one in the enlightened motions of their Speech, they unfolded naturally the teachings of the Sūtra and the Tantra. At one in their miraculous powers of Body, they had the world’s appearances beneath their sway. At one in their enlightened Qualities of Knowledge, they contrived the benefit of beings. At one in their Enlightened Action, they had mastery of the four activities. In the absolute sphere, their name is Künzang Pema Yab-yum-the All-Good Guru-Consort Lotus-Born. Their Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities and Activities are present everywhere, wherever space pervades.265

Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava formulate a divine couple, albeit one which operates on a paradigm in which both engage with other consorts in service of their spiritual attainment, but ultimately are one whole in male and female aspects. This paradigm fits into a Tantric and also Mahāyānic understanding of Buddhahood as the combination of method, gendered male, and wisdom, gendered female; a Buddha is one who transcends gender difference, who embodies all genders and thus is represented as being of a neutral (most often read male) gender. Yet in the case of the Treasure tradition, more specific gendered attributes are at stake. Yeshé Tsogyal is Padmasambhava’s mnemonic device and his special aide in concealing the Treasures. Both have other consorts, yet looking at them through the lens of Sera Khandro’s biographical writings, they are the exemplary couple from whom the Treasure teachings emanate and to whom Sera Khandro fervently prays.

The centrality of the origination discourse of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal for Sera Khandro’s perception of her own subjectivity is evident by the fact that Sera Khandro begins her Autobiography with an origination story of this divine couple’s
enlightened activity. Sera Khandro’s self-narrative begins not with her own birth or even with prophecies about her Treasure revealing activities (as does Drimé Özer’s Biography), but with the following story of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal:

The essence of all the Buddhas of the three times, the Great Knowledge Holder Pema Thötrengtsal (Padmasambhava) was born enclosed by a lotus free from the faults of the stains of the womb. His deeds and beneficial actions exceeded that of the Lord of two footed beings, Gyalwa Tupé Wangpo (Śakyamuni Buddha). In his mind, which contained the beneficial deeds of all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future in one, he thought, “Now relying on [good] methods, because I need to spread the difficult to spread teachings of the Secret Mantra Vajrayāna here in Tibet, the time has come for the expression of the emanations of the Expanse Woman Vajravārāhit.”

He departed from the Unsurpassed Land and then wandering in one hundred Buddhasfields of emanations, he stayed [in them] for seven years. Having gathered together all the primordial wisdom ākāśāniś of the three Bodies such as Vajrayoginī and so forth, the sky traveling ākāśāniś of the three abodes (gnas gsum) such as Venerable Tārā and so forth, and the four classes of ākāśāniś of the land (gnas yul) such as the Goddess Sarasvati and so forth [they all] enjoyed the taste of stainless bliss and resided in the mental state of the great primordial wisdom of bliss and emptiness.

He aroused Vajravārāhit’s intentions and for the sake of taming the red-faced people of Tibet, she manifested six emanations including body, speech, mind, virtuous qualities, beneficial deeds, and suchness and acted as the Guru’s consort.

The Goddess Sarasvati who is the collection of all of [the six emanations] into one arose in the middle of the mandala and spoke to the ākāśāniś: “The time has come to tame the demonic Tibetan people who are difficult to tame in the realm of the world and those who harm the Buddhist teachings such as the [beings in] the Southwestern Demonic Land, the Bön heretics, and so forth, to spread and maintain for a long time the difficult to spread Secret Mantra Vajrayāna teachings, to be the Guru’s consort, and to collect the teachings.”

She emanated as none other than herself emanations such as Kalasiddhi in Nepal, Tashi Chidren in Mön, Shelkar Dorjé Tso in Central Tibet, and so forth. She also arose in the form of the Great Bliss Yeshé Tsogyal. [Yeshé Tsogyal] acted as the collector of the Secret Mantra teachings and her beneficial deeds were equal to those of the Guru himself; her actions and beneficial deeds were unrivalled in the three realms [above, on, below the earth].266
This origination story has a tripartite form: the Dharmakāya Padmasambhava incites the display of Śambhogakāya Vajravārāhī who then manifests into Nirmāṇakāya emanation bodies whose job is to spread the teachings of the Secret Mantra and thus to tame sentient beings. Yet this version of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal’s origination story is striking for a number of reasons: Padmasambhava tames the red-faced people of Tibet through: 1) pleasing a host of dākinīs with the taste of stainless bliss, and 2) inspiring Vajravārāhī to manifest emanations by uniting with her, and then his job is finished! From here on, Vajravārāhī’s emanations gathered together into one as Sarasvatī, who becomes the agent and manifests emanations into the world such as Kalasiddhi, Tashi Chidren, Dorjé Tso, and most importantly Yeshé Tsogyal. Significantly, Sera Khandro states that Yeshé Tsogyal’s enlightened activity and beneficial deeds are equal to those of Padmasambhava himself, a very grandiose claim given that she has just explained that Padmasambhava’s enlightened activity exceeded that of Śākyamuni Buddha. Thus, in her formulation of the divine origins of the Treasure tradition and her role within it, Sera Khandro puts forth a model of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal that emphasizes their status as equal partners. This then serves as a divine precedent for her understanding of her own relationship with Drimé Özer.

In formulating this origination story, Sera Khandro was clearly drawing from hagiographies of Yeshé Tsogyal, most likely in literary form, because she appears to be quoting Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography when she describes her final scenes on earth just after the origination story above. As Yeshé Tsogyal begins her ascent into the Southwestern Buddhafield, the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain of Padmasambhava,
Sera Khandro describes the advice Yeshé Tsogyal gave to her emanations Kalasiddhi and Tashi Chidren. After this, she recounts that

As soon as she said this, Tashi Chidren transformed into an eight petalled blue lotus flower with a “Hung” in the middle and eight “Phel” [letters] on the surrounding petals and disappeared into the right side of Yeshé Tsogyal’s heart center. Kalasiddhi, having transformed into a red lotus with a “Hri” in the middle of its sixteen petals that were ornamented by sixteen “A li” [vowels], dissolved into the left side of Yeshé Tsogyal’s heart center.267

This description should sound familiar, given that it is a paraphrase of a line found in Taksham Samten Lingpa’s seventeenth century version of Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography:

Then, with her right hand, Tsogyal touched Trashi Chidren, the girl from Mön. She was transformed into a blue utpala lotus with eight petals marked with the syllables Hung and Phat, and dissolved into the right side of the Lady’s heart. Then with her left hand, Tsogyal touched Kalasiddhi of Nepal, who changed into a red lotus of sixteen petals marked with the sixteen vowels and Hri and dissolved into the left side of her heart.268

Despite its clear literary precedents, is this story of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal something we would expect to read at the beginning of a female Treasure revealer’s autobiography? It is in the sense that Sera Khandro is offering her readers a genealogical history of her own origins; she is tying herself to the mythic history of the origins of the Treasure texts by demonstrating that she is none other than an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyal who has manifested in the world to fulfill Padmasambhava’s intentions. Sera Khandro specifies that she is actually an emanation of the lady from Central Tibet, Shiwa Dorjé Tso, who is herself an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyal. This is not surprising because Sera Khandro was referred to throughout her life in Golok as the “Central Tibetan Princess Đäkini” (Dbus bza’ mkha’ ‘gro) and is still remembered by that name today in the regions of Golok in which she once lived. The centrality of her identity as a woman from Central Tibet is also evident given that the term “Central Tibetan Lady”
(dbus mo) is the first word in the title of her Autobiography. Beyond the fact that the Golok people referred (and still refer) to her as the Central Tibetan Lady, perhaps one reason that she emphasized this regional identity in the first word of her Autobiography is because it formed yet another tie between herself and Yeshé Tsogyal, who was also from Central Tibet.

After Sera Khandro describes the parting supplication prayers that Shiwa Dorjé Tso offered the soon-to-be departing Yeshé Tsogyal, she recounts that Yeshé Tsogyal gave Shiwa Dorjé Tso a prophecy that she would be a steward of a Treasure. Then, Sera Khandro gives a detailed outline of Shiwa Dorjé Tso’s subsequent incarnations, the last of which is Sakya Tamdrin Drupé Wangmo, a woman who the Lhasa lama Changtrong Druptop Rinpoché recognized as Sera Khandro’s former incarnation. Immediately after this, she recounts several prophecies foretelling her life and purpose as a Treasure revealer including prophecies from Padma Lingpa, Dúdül, Jomo Menmo, Dodrup Rinpoché, Lerab Dorjé, Padma Ledreltsel, and one from her own Treasure revelations. In these ways, she clearly links herself with the divine genealogy of the Treasure tradition.

The importance of the Treasure tradition’s central origination discourse focusing on Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal is not only as a divine genealogical origin point in Sera Khandro’s narrative; Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal are ever-present in Sera Khandro’s writings as a timeless reality that she can access through the manifold visionary experiences (nyams snang) she frequently recounts in which she traveled through elaborate Buddhafields. Sera Khandro is not unique in her presentation of mythic history as eternally present, but rather is characteristic of a Treasure revealer’s
unmediated access to the divine.\textsuperscript{271} Trülku Thondup explains this phenomenon in the following way:

The Termas of Guru Padmasambhava were not all concealed in the ninth century while he was visiting Tibet. If there is an important reason, he conceals or provides Termas today to be discovered for the benefit of beings. The transmission continues because of his enlightened power and not because of any limited cause and conditions.\textsuperscript{272}

Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal are just as present and accessible today to those with faith and good fortune as they were in their ninth-century human physical forms. Thus the Imperial Period history of Padmasambhava empowering his twenty-five important disciples including Yeshé Tsogyal in Treasures to be discovered in future degenerate times is not only an origination story, but a transcendent reality accessible to those such as Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer who have active visionary experiences in which they travel to Buddhafields and interact with Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyal, and their entourage. A large portion of Sera Khandro's biographical writings are comprised of such visionary encounters, which serve not only to demonstrate Sera Khandro's ability to have unmediated access to the divine, but also to help represent Sera Khandro as a legitimate and authorative Treasure revealer to those in her community and to her future disciples.\textsuperscript{273} I include one visionary experience below in which Sera Khandro travels to Padmasambhava's Buddhafield called The Glorious Copper-colored Mountain in her dream and receives a Treasure text, empowerment, and mind-mandate transmission directly from Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal:

Then, all [the divinities] gathered there performed a vast feast offering. In particular, having opened the \textit{mandala} of the \textit{Ocean of Dharma of the Collected Teachings}, [Padmasambhava] gave ripening and liberation [instructions] to each of the [twenty-five] main disciples. Having done this, he collected the teachings and sealed all of the treasuries of books in a magical basket. He gave the disciples the essence [of the teachings] and performed aspiration prayers and so forth.
In particular, the Wish-fulfilling Jewel [i.e., Drimé Özer] acted as my hero for the group of Accomplishment Practices and established me in ripening and liberation. Yeshé Tsogyal looked after me with great love and having given me the golden pages of the fifty-eight sectioned Extremely Secret Đākinī’s Heart Essence Dharma Cycle in the manner of Oral Transmission, she conferred a symbolic empowerment [upon me]. She gave me a secret name Khandro Gyepé Dorjé and performed the mind-mandate aspiration prayers.²⁷⁴

Sera Khandro’s biographical writings thus operate on two temporal schemas: one grounded firmly in the temporal reality of early twentieth-century Eastern Tibet, and the other representing Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s access to timeless primordial wisdom. As a Treasure revealer, Sera Khandro thus acts as a mediator between the specificity of her own temporally-situated religious community and the primordial state of awakening from which Treasure teachings and objects arise for her to reveal for the benefit of her disciples. This at once transcendental and historically (and environmentally) grounded nature of temporality in the Treasure tradition is reminiscent of Eliade’s myth of the eternal return in which “the past is but a prefiguration of the future.”²⁷⁵ In the Treasure tradition, future events are foreshadowed by the emissaries of the atemporal and primordial Buddhas while the past continually becomes present through divine visions such as the one quoted above.²⁷⁶ Sera Khandro’s purpose as a Treasure revealer is to fulfill the ancient yet ever-present aspirations of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal, and thus her life and that of her partner Drimé Özer, as their emanations, are modeled after their divine examples on multiple levels.

The Divine Treasure Revelation Couple

Sera Khandro’s self-understanding as a part of a divine couple is clearly derived from the paradigm of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal, a Buddhist model that
presents consort relationships as essential components of religious revelation. The emphasis within the Treasure tradition of the importance of consorts for successful revelation draws on the Mahāyāna gendered concepts of male method and female wisdom as essential components of Buddhahood, but adds to it a literal necessity of sexual yoga in order to produce Treasure texts and objects. Sera Khandro’s interpretation of the mythic paradigm of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal is one in which she had more than one male consort but only one partnership crucial for her activities related to Treasure revelation. Hers is a vision of lifelong and eternal partnership in which neither partner was exclusively monogamous but both perceived each other as more important than all other consorts. That Sera Khandro portrays herself and Drimé Özer as a divinely prophesized couple is clear in the following passage in Drimé Özer’s Biography in which he asserts their exclusively equal relationship as mutually beneficial partners. This concept of a sacred partnership of equals harkens back to Sera Khandro’s opening divine origination story in which she explains that Yeshé Tsogyal’s “beneficial deeds were equal to those of the Guru himself.” Sera Khandro recounts the following interaction when Drimé Özer was forty and Sera Khandro was twenty-nine:

Then, Dewé Dorjé handed a symbolic prophecy from the ḍākinīs to the Lord and when she asked him, “Do you understand the meaning of this?,” he looked at it and replied, “I have taken out a Treasure that belongs to you.”

Dewé Dorjé said, “Why is that?”

The Lord answered, “Our Treasures are principal and subsidiary. In particular, I have a prophecy that I will have four Treasure retinues and three consorts that will benefit the Treasures. Out of those, it is clear in the prophecy that there will be one extraordinary [consort] who will benefit the Treasures who is equal to me – this is you. Hence, because of this, we can act as consorts for each other.”
Although Dewé Dorjé thought, “It is certain that an inferior one like me is not equal to Trülku Rinpoché,” for the purposes of auspicious connections, she didn’t say anything [like this] and said, “Okay.”

The two male and female partners had detailed discussions and [gave each other] advice and so forth and then Dewé Dorjé returned home.²⁷⁷

Sera Khandro’s writing includes both a powerful claim to equality between herself and Drimé Özer as partners prophesized to aid each other in mutually beneficial ways in their revelation processes, a comment she writes as Drimé Özer’s speech, and a self-humbling negation of this claim to equality in her own voice. This is one of the many examples of this type of dialogue in which Sera Khandro writes lauding things about herself in other’s voices and negates them in her own, a topic that we will explore further in the following chapter. Despite her quick move to diffuse this radical claim of parity between herself and Drimé Özer, the existence of a claim to equal status in his *Biography* is significant. She is the only one who has this status despite his other retinues and consorts, just as Yeshé Tsogyal was Padmasambhava’s main consort with regard to concealing and propagating the Treasure teachings. Sera Khandro thus emphasizes a vision of herself and Drimé Özer as a divine couple who not only engaged in sexual yoga together, but who revealed Treasures together, taught each other, and lived together. Throughout this study, particularly in this chapter in the “Consorts” section and in Chapter Five, we will explore further passages from Sera Khandro’s writings that express more about their powerful and multivalent love relationship.
The Process of Revealing Treasure

Prophecy

Despite the strong relationship Sera Khandro’s writing emphasizes between herself and her divine genesis, the ability to reveal Treasures is not simply a matter of preordained fate; a number of different factors must come together for successful Treasure revelation. The bulk of Sera Khandro’s biographical writings narrate the uncertainty and difficulty she experienced attempting to fulfill her life purpose of revealing Treasure. Hers is a life in a land imbued with spirits, both benevolent and malevolent. Powerful negative forces including a host of demonic autochthonous Tibetan spirits who inhabit the earth, possess people, and wreak havoc through causing natural disaster and physical illness threaten to thwart Sera Khandro’s mission to reveal Treasures. Supernatural forces shape and interact with the human realm in confusing and inexplicable ways via prophecies and visionary encounters in a world where the threat of demonic influence is always imminent and auspicious connections are fleeting and unstable. Elusive and ephemeral divine prophecies continually appear to Sera Khandro warning her of the dangers constantly lurking around her, their only antidote being proper ritual obeisance and adherence to the divine aspirations of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. I include an example of one of the many prophecies that Sera Khandro recounts in her Autobiography:

Wam wam- I am a miraculous golden bird coming
From the Supreme Glorious Mountain –
Your one companion Ledreltsel
Has a lantern of clear speech for you.

Is the city of blissful, blissful dākinīs,
Adorned by the self-emergent expanse,
Without error?

Are the supreme method heroes who are appearances
And the wisdom queens who are the expanse of emptiness
Inseparable?

Do not throw away the awakening of remaining karma from former aspirations
To the sapta\textsuperscript{279} [demons]!

Female bodhisattva (sems ma) who is the origin of great bliss –
If you exert yourself quickly in
Enacting the iron hook which grasps the heart,
It is certain that we will meet in the direction of directionlessness.

By the power of this, it is certain that the teachings of the two Treasures\textsuperscript{280}
Will spread in the East and South.

In the male hare year when the great son Ratnapasham
Arrives near your area,
It is possible that the two benefits\textsuperscript{281} will naturally arise.

If you pray single-pointedly
To both the Lotus Born One (Padmasambhava) and Tsogyal,
Your wish will become true
And later it is certain that you will be established in the Glorious Mountain\textsuperscript{282}.

When you become interested in relying on
Deceptive patterns [like] rainbows,
The face of one hundred sounds\textsuperscript{283} will bring on
The poison flower of the eight worldly Dharmas.

Having angered the deities and protectresses,
The door to undesirable powers will become clear
And it is not certain what will happen.

When you incite the actions of symbols and meanings
Of the one named Künzang from the West,
Don’t weaken the arrow of knowledge –
It is important to be careful regarding the key point of auspicious connections\textsuperscript{284}.

Prophecies such as the one above foretell of positive outcomes as well as caution Sera Khandro that danger is lurking around every corner; focusing on the illusory rainbow-like patterns of worldly temptations will anger the deities and protectresses. Elliptical
prophetic advice regarding figures she will meet in the future foreshadow upcoming events, but leave Sera Khandro wondering how to avoid falling to the power of the _sapta_ demons. Thus, the agility with which Sera Khandro is able to move between primordial Buddhahfi elds and her own worldly, temporal context is clouded by uncertainty. The success of her purpose of revealing Treasures is far from guaranteed despite its divine mandate.

The main prophetic vision in Sera Khandro’s _Autobiography_ occurs when she is thirteen years old when she dreams that she appears before VajraVārahī. VajraVārahī gives Sera Khandro a registry (kha byang, lung byang) foretelling the specifics about her two main Treasure cycles. This registry is a prophetic document characteristic of Treasure revelation that corresponds to the fourth Prophetic Authorization Transmission stage (bka’ babs lung bstan), foretelling details about the auspicious connections that need to come together in order for the full Treasure to be revealed. Like an abstract to a dissertation, the registry highlights the main points of the future Treasure to be discovered, yet it does so in a pithy and elusive format meant for the Treasure revealer to decipher. Chapter One includes a complete translation of this significant visionary sequence. In summary:

I opened my eyes and when I slowly looked, all the women had transformed and all had the appearance of dākinīs. The main lady also having changed into the appearance of VajraVārahī, she conferred the empowerment of the Assembly of Sense-base Deities of the Body Mandala and gave me an introduction [to them]. She conferred a symbolic empowerment in _The Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs_ and _The Dākinīs’ Heart Essence_. She bestowed upon me the registry (kha byang) and prophetic registry (lung byang) including the time to teach these two religious teachings, the place to spread them, the great beings who would hold these teachings, the place where the disciples would be, the way auspicious connections would appear, and the consorts. She said, “Since the time has come for you to benefit sentient beings with these teachings, keep the meaning of this
registry in your mind and don’t forget it. Because you are my messenger, benefit to the teachings and to sentient beings will certainly arise.  

According to Sera Khandro’s description above, the key elements that must gather together properly for successful Treasure revelation include: 1) the proper time, 2) the proper place to spread the teachings, 3) the proper disciples (usually referred to as the proper doctrine holders, chos bdag), 4) the place where disciples will be, 5) auspicious connections (rten ‘brel), and 6) the proper prophesized consorts. This list is a variation adapted to the Treasure revelation process of a more standard Buddhist orienting structure for establishing the positive qualities of a Buddhist scripture called the five excellences (phun sum tshogs pa lnga) including an excellent teacher, retinue, place, teaching, and time. Without the synthesis of all these elements that Sera Khandro lists above, successful Treasure revelation is impossible, hence the uncertainty and insecure tone of many of the ḍākinī prophecies in Sera Khandro’s writings. While the first several requirements including the need for the proper time, place, and doctrine holder are relatively self-explanatory, the final requirements of gathering the proper auspicious connections and finding the proper consort present the most intriguing and unusual elements of the Treasure revelation process.

Auspicious Connections

The Tibetan term “tendrel” (rten ‘brel), which I translate as auspicious connections, is a translation of the Sanskrit Buddhist term pratītya-samutpāda, a technical term meaning “dependent arising.” Dependent arising describes the way people and phenomena in the world exist according to Buddhist philosophy: as dependent on causes and conditions. The Samyutta-nikāya (II, 28) includes a passage that describes this
concept concisely: “That being, this comes to be; from the arising of that, this arises. That being absent, this is not; from the cessation of that, this ceases.” In colloquial Tibetan, the term can mean something like good connection, or favorable condition. In the context of the Treasure tradition, *tendrel* refers to the circumstances, good signs, omens, and connections that must come together for successful revelation.

Sera Khandro repeatedly laments that because the proper auspicious connections didn’t come together, she wasn’t able to reveal Treasure. In one instance, she explains that:

At that time, I let go of the auspicious connections for many Treasures. In particular, I let go of the profound Treasures from Drakar Drelzhong that were Dharma cycles on *The Condensed Intentions of the Dakinis*. At that time the Treasure protector actually came and although all the people gathered there actually saw that the auspicious connections that had gone away due to other things, because of my inferior merit with regard to place and time, it was as if I was helpless to stop the auspicious connections from falling away.

The prevalence of Sera Khandro’s comments about not finding the right auspicious connections to reveal her Treasures is another reminder of the uncertain and shifting winds of chance that characterize Treasure revelation. On another occasion, the circumstances around Sera Khandro suddenly obstructed her intention to reveal a Treasure to the surprise and confusion of her nun friend. Sera Khandro recounts,

... Because I also went to collect firewood, Chötreng said, “I already gathered your share of wood.”

Again I replied, “If I don’t have to go collect wood, should we two go to Solung Drakar?”

She answered, “It’s okay if we go. I heard that that place used to be a Treasure site of Gara Lama [Gara Tertön].”

When we both were on the road going there, a layman went into the monastery and we met him when he came out. He had a cleft lip and was named Dönam. Because the two factors that I hadn’t taken a consort and that the man didn’t have
an upper lip came together, I thought this: in this life no matter what work I exert myself in, it will be difficult for me to offer the service of maintaining Gara Terchen’s profound Treasure. Although in that place there was a rhinocerous hide vessel containing the profound pages of a Detailed Teaching on the Profound Path of Primordial Wisdom from the Dharma section The Profound Path Dakinis’ Secret Treasury together with religious medicine, the auspicious connections went away due to other forces.

I said, “I need to go back quickly.”

She answered, “Aren’t we going to Drakar? Its not far – let’s go there.”

Again I answered, “Let’s not go now. If it takes a long time now, Gyalsé will punish me. If he doesn’t do this, because I gave Yangchen Drönma [Sera Khandro’s infant daughter] to Tupzang, if she cries, Gyalsé will certainly scold me.” After I said this, we carried the wood and returned home.291

The sign of seeing a layman with a cleft lip seems to be a metaphor for Sera Khandro’s singular status without a consort and serves as an ill omen that she will not be able to fulfill her purpose of maintaining Gara Tertön’s Treasure teachings.292 In the selection above, the specifics of Sera Khandro’s circumstances as a female Treasure revealer and as a young mother stand out. Not only did Sera Khandro have to contend with the uncertainties of the paradigmatic auspicious connections necessary for successful Treasure revelation such as finding the proper consort, but she was concerned with some other very conventional auspicious circumstances such as securing childcare and avoiding the criticism of a husband who disapproved of her acting as a Treasure revealer.

Consorts

The Third Dodrupchen Rinpoche explains the necessity of having the auspicious connection of a consort in the following way:

Furthermore, in order to arouse the accomplishment from their depths, the teachings which have been concealed in the natural sphere of the luminous state (A’od gSal Gyi Khams) [of their minds], it is also necessary to have the
spontaneously arisen bliss (*Lhan sKyes Kyi dGa' Ba*) which can be produced by a special consort who has made the appropriate aspirations in the past, and who is to become the key to accomplishment. That is one of the reasons why all Tertons happen to have consorts.\textsuperscript{293}

Treasure revelation is founded upon a Tantric understanding of the body in which mental realizations are generated from manipulating the channels, winds, and seminal nuclei of the subtle body (*rtsa*, *rlung*, *thig le*). Unique to the Treasure tradition is the link between the generation of textual and material Treasures and biologically generative act of sexuality.\textsuperscript{294} Specifically, the role of the female consort is linked to Yeshé Tsogyal’s mnemonic and encoding powers; female consorts aid Treasure revealers in their process of decoding the Treasure’s symbolic scripts. The Third Dodrupchen Rinpoché clarifies this point:

The Discoverer must reach the identification of the true text, one word and one meaning, by achieving fully perfected power in decoding the symbolic script. This is accomplished through favorable conditions such as meeting with the Doctrine-holder of those Termas; being in the right place or being present at an important occasion; and most important, by encountering the miraculous skill of a Vajradātu [consort] whose mind has been purified by empowerments and precepts, who has practiced the path of two stages (*Rim gNyis*), who has been blessed by Guru Rinpoche himself in order to take the birth of an appropriate sacred support [consort] for the Terton in future to discover the Termas of the sphere of primordial wisdom (*Ye Shes dByings*) by means of the hook (*IChags Kyu*) of spontaneously arisen bliss, and who himself or herself has made the appropriate aspirations [in the past]. Because of those conditions the Terton will become certain about the real words and meanings of the texts, and other appearances will disappear.\textsuperscript{295}

The consort is thus an integral part of the auspicious connections necessary to successfully reveal Treasure. If the consort cannot be physically present for the Treasure discovery, a gift from the prophesized consort or even a visualized encounter with the consort can be a substitute. Narrative and prescriptive sources describing the process of Treasure revelation, such as the quotation above, do so almost exclusively from the
perspective of a male Treasure revealer engaging with multiple female consorts in order to reveal Treasure. But does the reverse take place? What happens to the paradigm of the consort “breaking the code” of the Treasure when the Treasure revealer is female and the consorts are male? Do male consorts have the same decoding capabilities attributed to female consorts? What, in fact, do consorts do? Since these questions will be the topic of Chapter Four, I will not elaborate here, but only provide a few relevant examples from Sera Khandro’s biographical writings.

In Sera Khandro’s writings, she represents herself as a female Treasure revealer in need of male consorts in order to reveal Treasure. She recounts numerous visions such as the following in which Yeshé Tsogyal advises Sera Khandro to be careful regarding gathering together the necessary auspicious connections:

Practice according to the ḍākinī prophecies and we will assist you. In particular, because a Treasure revealer’s beneficial activity depends on consorts and doctrine holders [disciples], it is important that you behave in accordance with not letting auspicious connections go.

In the many passages such as this one, Sera Khandro makes it clear that having consorts is a divinely prophesized auspicious connection that she must have in order to fulfill her religious purpose. Below is a good example from her Autobiography of the way in which Sera Khandro describes finding Treasures and the role of a consort in this process:

Then, when the encampment was staying beside Tachok, because we exhorted a symbolic registry from the seven Sovereign Guardian Ladies of Magyal [protectors of the Amnye Machen Mountain range], when evening came, together with the nun Chötreng, Kachö Drön, Dechen Drönma, my daughter Chöying Drönma, and the monk Jikmé Könchok who was the commitment upholding son of Gara Ter[tön] Rinpoché, we went to the residence of the Seven Sovereign Ladies near the snow mountain. When we were going there, the entire sky was filled with banks of rainbow clouds in shapes standing upright and in spokes, curves, semicircles, lotuses, and so forth.
They said, “This is extremely amazing! It seems as if we will receive an accomplishment (dngos grub, siddhi)!”

I didn’t say anything. Then, when we reached the Treasure entrance, on top of the rainbow clouds from before there were many beings who had a form like offering goddesses who seemed to be holding offering substances in their hands gathered to the right and left just a bit below the Treasure site. They [my companions] were amazed and offered prostrations, prayers, and so forth to [the offering goddesses].

At that time because the road was far and there was no sun, from between the clouds something like sunlight illuminated our vicinity and in particular the Treasure entrance. I said to them, “You all go and circumambulate this cliff. Because my daughter is young and my leg is bad, it seems that I can’t circumambulate so I will stay here and wait for you all.”

After they went to do the circumambulation, as soon as the secret consort of the Treasure entrance Bimarasmī portrayed the wrapped vajra symbol with his top-knot, the Treasure entrance that was like a moon disk opened and I took out a vajra-sealed Treasure chest that was a Profound Accomplishment of Vajravārāhī. Inside there was one precious rhinoceros hide vessel, a marble statue of Sarasvatī about the size of the measure of a dākinī’s thumb to index finger, a secret explanation of the Four Volumes (of Longchenpa’s Seminal Heart teachings) [written on] a Treasure page about the size of the thumb to index finger [made from] the skin of Rudra’s heart, a turquoise vessel, an agate vessel, three woven vessels, other dharma medicine, and saffron pills which liberate through taste. Then, I offered a Treasure substitute. Because I didn’t have an actual consort or doctrine holder, I left behind the auspicious connections of the mind-support and beneficial action vessels. At that time, in the valley the aroma of a good smell permeated, miraculous water sprung forth from the Treasure site, the earth quaked, a sound came forth, and so forth.

When all this happened, they wondered what it was and came back quickly, saying, “It is certain that you have taken out a Treasure. You need to show it to us.”

I replied, “This is my daughter that I have taken out as a Treasure – I wonder if I can take out a son?”

When I said this, Chötreng said, “Your daughter has already seen the Treasure. We need to see this Treasure [from which] a good smell pervades!,” and she repeated this again and again.

Thinking of my commitments to the dākinīs, I didn’t dare to tell an outright lie. I said, “After you prostrate to the goddesses amidst the clouds, offer prostrations to me and to this site and as I have extracted miraculous water in the manner of a Treasure, everyone taste it – it is the accomplishment [sign] of this place.”
They said, “It is greatly amazing that you suddenly extracted a self-emergent spring from a dry rock like this!” When everybody tasted the ambrosia, they said it had unusual power and a delicious aroma . . . .

Many characteristic elements of Sera Khandro’s Treasure revelation experiences emerge in this passage: the impetus for the Treasure revelation is the group of land deities who protect the Treasure, the subject to which we shall soon turn, and it is by uniting with a consort that the entrance to the Treasure opens. Sera Khandro’s visualized consort provides enough auspicious connection for her to reveal many parts of the Treasure, but because she visualizes the experience and is not literally there with her consort, she is unable to extract the full Treasure. Sera Khandro is characteristically modest in sending her disciples off to circumambulate the mountain so she can secretly take out her Treasures, and when her disciples come back she never actually shows them the full wealth of Treasure she has just extracted. Her comment about extracting a daughter and perhaps also a son as Treasure is, I would suggest, a joke or a light-hearted quip that Sera Khandro makes in order to deny that she has any special capacities as a Treasure revealer.

This joke is interesting because it draws a link between the production of children and the production of Treasure substances, two creative and generative processes, one mundane and the other extraordinary, that both require sexuality. Yet this joke is a joke that only makes sense if spoken by a woman; it is an analogy based on a woman’s reproductive physiology. If there are “female perspectives” on Treasure revelation that move beyond the common descriptions of female consorts as aides to male Treasure revealers, this self-humbling comment sheds light on what types of metaphors these perspectives might employ.
In Sera Khandro’s writings, having a consort may be a technical necessity to completely reveal Treasures, but her relationship with her main consort Drimé Özer is far more than that. Chapter Five will explore the multiple spiritual and worldly registers of Sera Khandro’s descriptions of love for Drimé Özer that she records in both her Autobiography and his Biography. Unlike other Treasure revealers who represent themselves as individual actors using consorts as aides in their revelation process, Sera Khandro describes herself as one part of a divinely prophesized Treasure revelation couple in which both she and Drimé Özer are necessary for each other to reveal their Treasures. As I have introduced above, Sera Khandro explicitly draws on the divine paradigm of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal found in texts such as Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography to formulate this model of the necessity of male and female partnership for Treasure revelation. Thus, according to Sera Khandro’s portrayal of revelation, it is a heterosexual couple who is the basic unit who reveals Treasures, not individual revealers who use consorts, although this occurs as well in her works.299

The theme of male and female partnership in the Treasure revelation process is clear in the following passage in which Sera Khandro describes going out to reveal Treasures with her partner Drimé Özer. In Drimé Özer’s Biography, Sera Khandro records that during the time they were living together when he was forty-four and she was thirty-three shortly before his death:

At that time, a ḍākini’s symbolic prophecy came to Dewé Dorjé [saying] that the time had come to extract a Treasure from on top of the ḍākinis’ assembly hall that was a Condensed Intention of the ḍākini’s Dharma Cycle.

When she [Sera Khandro] offered the symbolic prophecy to the Lord, he was extremely happy and said, “We need to abide by the time of the auspicious connection – let’s both go get it.”
The Dākinī said, “Okay,” and for a few days the time arose to take out the Treasure.

Male and female partners both secretly went. They went slowly on account of the dākinī’s bad leg. The Lord having said he was going to look for the Treasure entrance, he went ahead. A little while later he came back.

When the Dākinī asked, “Why did you go?,” the Lord thought that it was unacceptable to mix up the auspicious connections so he said, “I took out my Treasure and came to get you.” Together, they went to a cave.

Then, the Lord said, “Why are so many fish and frogs gathered at the Treasure site?”

Dewé Dorjé said, “Perhaps since the outer Treasure protector is a nāga spirit, they are its illusory emanations.”

Then, when they were nearing the Treasure entrance, a good smell pervaded and in the sky vultures swirled and sang melodiously. When the two male and female partners arrived at the Treasure entrance, the Lord sat and recited the seven line prayer. Dewé Dorjé opened the Treasure entrance and took out three Treasure vessels.

When she gave them to the Lord, he said, “Amazing.” He received empowerment [from the three vessels]. Feeling extremely joyous, he put in a Treasure substitute and bound the Treasure entrance.

Then, Dewé Dorjé said, “Because my Treasure is a secret Treasure, it is not acceptable to tell anybody about [my] taking it out.”

The Lord replied, “Since everyone knows that you are a Treasure revealer, even if I don’t say anything it is certain that they will come to know.”

Then Dewé Dorjé said again and again, “Now it is time for you to take out a profound Treasure.”

One day, male and female partners went to Dangyen. The Lord said, “Since now I need to take out a Treasure, I need to examine a playful auspicious circumstance.” The Lord asked Dewé Dorjé’s five-year-old son, “Will you be a Treasure revealer?”

The son replied, “I will be a Treasure revealer like you.”
The Lord said, "Of course it will be like this." Then, from the [mountain] side of that place, the Lord having taken out a big Treasure vessel [filled with] the five families of Sarasvatī made out of Akyong [a type of medicine], many amazing auspicious circumstances arose.301

In passages like this, Sera Khandro describes the ways in which Treasure revelation was a process in which both partners participated together. In this case, the partners function as aides to each other on multiple levels including helping to find the proper prophesized Treasure locations, maintaining auspicious conditions for revelation, interpreting the significance of phenomena in the environment, and making prayers.

Sera Khandro portrays her partnership with Drimé Özer as being so close that they could even reveal each other's Treasures. During her third visit to see Drimé Özer before she moved in with him, Sera Khandro explains that Drimé Özer was able to reveal a Treasure that was hers. She writes, "The male partner was empowered in the female partner’s Treasure and the female partner was empowered in the male partner’s Treasure and their intentions became one."302 Even death cannot stop Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer's partnership revealing Treasures. In her Autobiography, she describes the following visionary experience that she had when she was thirty-six, three years after Drimé's death:

That year on the celebration of the twenty-fifth day [Ḍākinī day] of the tenth month, having relied on the compassion of the illusory primordial wisdom body of the Lord Protector Omniscient Drodül Sanggak Lingpa,303 I took out a secret Treasure from Kangri Tökar that was profound pages [titled] Secret Hidden Drops of Heart Nectar of the Ḍākinīs, thirteen groups of symbols written in gold by Vairocana on skin [paper], vessels made of rhinoceros hide sealed with hooked knives... and auspicious connections abundantly arose.304

Just as her relationship with Drimé Özer symbolizes and inspires the realization of the deathless state of awareness, likewise, Treasure revelation as a divinely prophesized
couple is a bond that transcends death. While Chapter Five continues this exploration of the divine couple from whom and to whom Treasures are revealed, this chapter returns to this earth, grounding Sera Khandro’s portrayal of Treasure revelation in the spiritually inhabited land of Golok.

**Revelation and Community in the Spiritually Inhabited Land of Golok**

Treasure revelation is more than a negotiation between the primordial wisdom of the Buddhas and the imperfect human temporal realm of suffering and confusion. Treasure revealers are bridges between timeless wisdom and human suffering, but they are also figures who interact with the host of autochthonous spirits who inhabit local areas of Tibetan land. In Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s case, the high mountain peaks and the green valleys of Golok are not just the locations of their Treasures, but are personified spiritual realms endowed with an agency and power of their own. Hence, land deities and Treasure protectors must be treated properly for human society to operate smoothly without illness or calamity. That earth Treasures come from the Tibetan land is thus not coincidental to the revelation process; the earth and the society that surround the phenomena of Treasure revelation have vital roles in the process. Revelations including ritual liturgies propitiating to deities of all ilks help to maintain the equilibrium between social order, health in human society, and environmental conditions such as good weather favorable for livestock and grass. Thus, in their roles as mediators between these powerful forces, Treasure revealers had a close relationship to the political leaders of their local areas since their ritual interventions were powerful in achieving worldly aims as well as spiritual liberation. The following sections will introduce the land deities and
Treasure protectors who control the land from which Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer reveal their earth Treasures. Additionally, these sections will begin to explore the relationship Treasure revealers had to the Golok societies in which they lived.

**Treasure Protectors, Land Deities, and Revelation**

One more important link in the uncertain process of revealing Treasures deserves our attention: Treasures are not simply bestowed upon their revealers directly by Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal, they are entrusted to deities who have been pressed into service by Padmasambhava as Treasure protectors in a process that is the last stage of Treasure Transmission, the Entrustment to the Dākinīs. These deities are very often Tibetan indigenous land deities (*gnas bdag, gzhi bdag, yul lha*) whose divinity far predates the spread of Buddhism in Tibet. Tibetan land deities are inextricably tied to Tibetan regional understandings of place, local politics, and social identity. The discourse of Padmasambhava subjugating these “worldly” deities through ritual control demonstrates the fact that the Tibetan land itself is a spiritually inhabited, living, embodied domain teeming with deities and demons who must be bound into the service of Buddhism. Land deities have an ambiguous role as members of a worldly class of deities that can be either helpful to people (*dkar phyogs*) or harmful (*nag phyogs*); they are not enlightened Buddhist divinities and they must take their orders from Tantric masters such as Padmasambhava and others up to the present day who continue to press them into service. In one instance, Sera Khandro’s account depicts this blurry status that land deities have, situated between this world and Buddhist divinity:

Then, that month on the tenth day my attendant Shila Bazra [i.e., Tsültrim Dorjé], my daughter Chöying Drönma, and I went together with two people [who came
to] invite us to Dzirong Sanglung Monastery. When we were staying there, a white man on a white horse saying he was the land protector (yul skyong) Lharik Nyentse came and said the following: “You should make offerings to us and we will do whatever beneficial actions you desire.” Having said this, he disappeared.

I thought that from the time I was ten years old until now I had set my mind on the three jewels. Aside from praying to them, it seemed that I had no custom of taking refuge and making offerings and so forth to land protectors and land deities (gzhi bdag) and so forth. Despite this, because he was my Treasure protector, thinking of the commitments of being a guest [in this] land, I visualized him and when I made a bit of offerings to him, I got whatever provisions I needed.

Despite her reticence to propitiate to a class of deities that she perceives to be worldly and not a part of the three jewels of Buddhism, Sera Khandro decides that as her Treasure protector, Nyenpo Yutsé is worthy of her devotion. Nyenpo Yutsé comes to Sera Khandro’s aid again in an interesting passage of her Autobiography that portrays the relationship of auspicious connections, Treasure revelation, demonic spirits, and Treasure protectors:

At that time, because I had some Treasures to take out near the seat of the Treasure revealer from before named Sangngak Lingpa, I went there with my group. An old woman said, "I heard that you, the Central Tibetan woman, passed away last year. You didn’t die?"

All the monks became fiercely angry. Although I told her, "I didn’t die and hence I came here," she didn’t believe me and said this again and again. Because of this, I thought that it was certain that now I was going to let my Treasure go. Despite this, since I had a prophecy about what I was to do regarding the final [parts] of Akyé Sangngak Lingpa’s Treasures, I wondered if I would have a way to do it. When I was doing preparations, because the auspicious connections went away, the Treasure protectors got angry and suddenly undesirable things happened to us.

I invoked the beneficial deeds of the land protector Lharek Nyentse and bound the rock demon (brag btsan) with an oath. I gave everyone gathered there, high and low, whatever advice they desired. Having taught detailed esoteric precepts that were explanatory teachings, [everyone’s] faith and devotion was nurtured.

In this case, it is the benevolence of the land deity that Sera Khandro employs to control the woman who acted as an ill omen in Sera Khandro’s delicate stage of preparing to
reveal a Treasure, a woman whom she interprets to be a type of rock demon. Sera Khandro not only propitiated land deities; she herself is the daughter of an important mountain deity; as a woman well known for her Central Tibetan origins, Sera Khandro claims to be the daughter of Nyenchen Tanglha, the deity of a mountain range north of Lhasa in Central Tibet. In a milieu such as Treasure revelation communities in which pedigree is everything, being the daughter of a mountain deity bound under oath to be a Buddhist guardian had a strong cachet.

The strict power that Treasure protectors hold beyond the inclinations of Treasure revealers comes through the following passage from Drimé Özer’s Biography in which a Treasure protector refuses to allow him to take out a Treasure for which he is not the prophesied revealor:

He [Drimé Özer] arrived at a place with the traces of being the seat of the monk Trotung [Kho thung, a figure from the Gesar epic]. There was a sword given to Trotung by the deity the red Hayagriva that had repelled one trillion armies and could not be hit. Although the Lord knew that it wasn’t his share of Treasure, he gradually remembered how during the time of [Gesar of] Ling, the powerful people had harmed the less powerful people. Because this came to his mind, he grabbed the sword that was made of meteorite and a compound metal\textsuperscript{311} and no matter what rocky mountain he thrust [the sword into], a sound "shik shik yol yol" came out involuntarily and [the rock] shook. Since its size was about two fathoms [two measures of outstretched arms], the Lord thought that it would be difficult to keep it secret.

Wondering if the two monks [he was with] would be afraid and [say] negative things, he put [the sword] down. Then, because it was a Treasure substance, [he thought] there would be no fault. He thought that as a little joke he needed to show the two monks, so he grabbed it.

When he was going, because the rock face path was narrow, the Lord walked slowly. On that road, a being with a human body covered with eyes who was black with a blue luster came up and looked [at him].

The Lord said, “Go away, I need to go.”
He replied, “If you have wings then fly. If you have claws, climb up the earth. If you are an Accomplished One, go without hindrance. Because this is my place, I won’t go.”

Again, the Lord stayed there wondering for a moment, “What is this? Is it the Treasure protector? Is it a demon?” and then realized that it was the Treasure protector. Again the Lord told him to go but he wouldn’t.

He said, “You are going with my wealth – if you give it [to me] I will go and if you don’t I won’t.”

Again the Lord asked, “Who is the owner of your wealth?” He said, “Dzokchen Pönlop, but I don’t know if he has a way to take it out.”

[The Lord] asked, “Why would he not have a way [to take it out]?”

[The protector] said, “He says he is a monk. If one can’t quickly tame one’s mind, saying [one is] ‘tamed’ means little.”

The Lord said, “Now I will give you your wealth,” and he put [the sword] in his hands.

He [the Treasure protector] transformed into a snake and holding the sword in his mouth, he carried it away. When the Lord looked, the sword got smaller and the snake got larger and went into the Treasure entrance. As soon as that happened, the rock grew flat and the Treasure entrance disappeared.312

There is a playful quality about Drimé Özer’s arrogant brandishing of a sword that he knows very well is not his to hold. He hesitates for a while, wanting to take the powerful sword that does not belong to him to show his monk friends. But, eventually, he complies with the proper cosmic order and returns the sword to its rightful protector. The Treasure protector makes an interesting comment that Dzokchen Pönlop may not be able to extract his Treasure because he has become a monk. In a comment not without Freudian significance, the Treasure protector insinuates that as a monk, he may not have the power needed to brandish his sword. His comment thus highlights the importance of consorts in the process of revealing Treasures. This Treasure is a sword coming from the time of Gesar’s heroic battles against oppressors, again linking Drimé Özer’s early twentieth-
century Treasure revelations with the sacred mythology of Tibetan and specifically Golok history.313

These few examples of the role Treasure protectors and land deities play in the revelation process call attention to the living quality of the environment and the land from which revelations come. There is a strong rhetoric of control and subjugation involved in these interactions with subterranean and ethereal spirits. But yet, a playfulness emerges in this process as well. Small signs mean everything, whether it is a man with a cleft lip, a pattern in the clouds, or Sera Khandro’s five-year-old son’s response to a perplexing question. There is no lack of creativity here – a bluish-black being covered in eyes bars Drimé Özer’s path and then morphs into a snake, lending a psychedelic quality to the visionary apparitions of Treasure revelation that Sera Khandro depicts. Yet these fantastic visionary revelations are more than imaginative journeys; they have serious and practical consequences in the communities in which Sera Khandro lives.

**Balancing Environmental, Social, and Physical Conditions Through Revelation**

In the nomadic pasture lands of Golok where Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer lived their days, each valley and every village and tribal group had and still has their own local land deities who must be propitiated through ritual offerings and annual obeisance in order to prevent massive livestock casualties, weather disruptions, and sickness. It is precisely these land deities who appear often to Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer as protectors of their Treasures, including some of the most famous land deities of Golok such as Drongri Mukpo ('Brong ri smug po) of Drongri ('Brong ri), the most important mountain deity of Serta who is its anthropomorphic “head,” Machen Pomra (Rma chen
sbom ra) of the Amnye Machen mountain range in Amdo, and Nyenpo Yutsé (Gnyan po g.yu rtse) of the Nyenpo Yutsé mountain range in Golok (the deity Sera Khandro propitiated to in two passages quoted above). Hence, Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s Treasures have not only been concealed by Padmasambhava to be disclosed at the appropriate time, but they are literally grounded in the Golok landscape, thus tying their revealers to the local deities and regional leaders of the land.

The importance of these sites and deities as loci of regional identity and political organization cannot be overstated. The people of Golok understand themselves to be the descendants of these mountain deities, in particular Nyenpo Yutsé. It was the traditional role of their tribal and village leaders to lead in annual mountain deity propitiation rites to pray for the ongoing health and well-being of their people. Similarly, as ritual specialists who had (and today still have) special abilities to interact directly with these powerful land spirits, Treasure revealers held important positions in their communities because they could mediate between powerful malevolent and benevolent deities and the local communities in which they lived, benefiting beings by improving social harmony and health as much as spiritual liberation. For example,

At that time a woman saying she was Sengcham Trukmo [Gesar’s wife] came from out of a cloud and gave [Drimé Özer] a yellow scroll. The mind-mandate having awakened, he wrote down the outer accomplishment practice of Gesar, the Jewel who Tames Enemies and the inner accomplishment practice The Dharma Cycle on the Wealth Deities of Orgyen. In the lama’s household, the “hurt” sickness [a disease affecting livestock] came and the livestock deteriorated. He recited these prosperity accomplishment practices from Gesar and [the livestock] flourished.

Thus, in Sera Khandro’s biographical writings, there is a direct correspondence between proper obeisance to Treasure protectors and other deities, including dakinis, and the social, environmental, and biological well-being of communities in which Sera Khandro
and Drimé Özer lived. For example, in Drimé Özer’s Biography Sera Khandro explains that:

When [Drimé Özer] was giving the empowerment, reading transmission, explanation, and so forth, for the new parts of his profound Treasure, an expanse dākinī became agitated. Hence, the Lord suddenly became sick. When the Lord wondered what it was, although he knew that it was because two of the vajra siblings were fighting, he pretended he didn’t know and didn’t say anything and gave expansive empowerments and explanations. The Lord’s physical condition got worse and knowing that various undesirable things were nearing, he scolded and hit the disciples in the empowerment line [who had been fighting] and displayed many fierce behaviors. After that, the dākinī’s agitation pacified itself and the vajra sibling’s dispute got better on its own. The Lord did expansive rituals, feast offerings, and thanksgiving feasts and so forth.317

Dākinīs’ agitation, Drimé Özer’s physical illness, and a dispute in the religious community are all bound up in a relational world view in which Treasure revealers are never individual actors in a neutral scene; they are intermediaries between a host of beings. As such, they strive to maintain equilibrium between deities and demons, environmental conditions, human health, and social well-being.

As I have already introduced, land deities who are Treasure guardians are not simply submissive beings controlled by Treasure revealers; they have their own agency. The Tibetan land personified as land deities may rise up to hand Treasure revealers their hidden Treasures, but they do so with their own expectations. Consequences for failing to satisfy the deities inhabiting the Tibetan land are natural disasters, sickness, and social upheaval. For example, Sera Khandro recounts:

Then, during that year on the twenty-fifth of the eighth month, when my group was on the road coming back home, I received a bit of a prophecy foretelling the coming of Treasures of the three Treasure protector siblings of Dungra Drakar. Because I ignored it, fierce hail fell on us and it was difficult to bear the terrors of thunder and lightning. Having prayed to my Lama and abided without separating from the dimension of equanimity, [we] didn’t experience great harm. Despite this, that night a girl gave perversive advice [to me] in the form of a prophecy . . . 318
Again, when Sera Khandro cannot reveal a Treasure, she angers the Treasure protectors, whose wrath affects the physical health of those around her:

At that time although there was a bit of Treasure, I let it go and because of this, the Dharma protector got angry and my disciple Rikzang suddenly got sick.\textsuperscript{319}

Displeased Treasure protectors can cause all sorts of undesirable occurrences within human society as well, such as inciting bandits to attack Drimé Özer when he is traveling on the road with his encampment (sgar) members. In his Biography, Sera Khandro records:

Then, gradually when some days had passed, although the mother dakinis had given him Treasure symbols, on account of other things he had let them go. The Treasure protectors got jealous and bandits and other undesirable things occurred to both the encampment bases of the Treasure revealer [Drimé Özer] and the doctrine holder [Sotrit Rinpoche]. According to the dakini prophecy from before, having incited the actions of the protectresses of profound Treasure, the signs of their manifest activity occurred and all the harm was pacified.\textsuperscript{320}

Through ritual action, Drimé Özer is able to appease the jealous Treasure protectors and get rid of negative circumstances such as banditry, which was a common problem along the travel routes of Golok. Thus, Treasure protectors/land deities are not simply subdued deities controlled by the will of the Treasure revealers. Here again, the ongoing need for Buddhist subjugation and the uncertainty of gathering auspicious connections necessary for successful revelation remind us that the Treasure revealer is not the singular agent of revelation, but rather must participate in a balance of relationships between spirits and humans of all varieties.

**Treasure Revelation Encampments (gter sgar)**

As I have shown above, Treasure revealers’ ritual interventions balanced the competing forces of the Tibetan land, Buddhist divinities, and human interests. But how
do Treasure revealers’ ritual interactions with these hosts of deities relate to the social communities in which they lived? What is a Treasure revelation encampment\textsuperscript{321} and how is it different from a monastery? How did Treasure revelation encampments relate to the wider lay Golok society? Did Treasure revealers such as Drimé Özer have a political as well as a religious role in Golok society?

Before I embark upon a discussion of the question of the relationship between Treasure revelation encampments, monasteries, and lay society in Golok, some general background on Golok social structure is useful. Golok is a high alpine nomadic area that now straddles the border between Amdo and Kham, or the Chinese provinces Qinghai and Sichuan, but in Sera Khandro’s day the land of Golok was a completely unincorporated territory. Neither the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the Dalai Lama’s government in Lhasa, nor the Republic of China (1912-1949) ever held any sovereignty over the Golok region of Serta where Sera Khandro made her new home.\textsuperscript{322} Indeed it is hard to imagine the difficulties Sera Khandro faced adjusting at the age of sixteen to nomadic life in one of the highest and coldest regions of Eastern Tibet where the altitude ranged between 12,000 to more than 16,000 feet, leaving most regions too high for agriculture, where frosts and hail were year-round phenomena, and where Sera Khandro initially had no friends, family, or source of income. Golok is not only well known for its inhospitable climate, it is well known for being a rough place infamous for banditry and lawlessness, as Sera Khandro’s description of banditry in Drimé Özer’s \textit{Biography} mentioned above corroborates. Joseph Rock, who himself lived in a nomadic region of Qinghai not far from Golok in the early twentieth century, recounts that:

... the Golog attack anyone approaching the region west of the Yellow River. They acknowledge no one’s authority except that of their chiefs, and as the Shing
bZah incarnation told us their word could not be trusted. They enjoy attacking anyone, especially foreigners who penetrate their mountain fastness... Their life is spent on horseback, always ready for battle and even among themselves they squabble to the point of combat .... They bring terror to the hearts of all their neighbors and travelers... They even ask the blessing of lamas before going on robbing expeditions.\textsuperscript{323}

If even Drimé Özer, as a respected Golok lama, faced problems with bandits, no doubt a strange foreigner like Joseph Rock experienced great danger in Golok. Yet the lawlessness of the vast and open grasslands of Golok is remembered differently by some local residents. As one mid-ranking Tibetan government official in Serta told me reminiscing about the nomadic life of his childhood in the mid-twentieth century:

Before, when there were no Chinese, the lives of Tibetans were happy. The reason they were happy was because there were no Chinese in Serta. When there were no Chinese there were no laws.\textsuperscript{324}

Some fifty years earlier, Joseph Rock also cites an early-twentieth-century Golok man appreciating the lack of laws in Golok society in much the same way:

You cannot compare us Go-log with other people. You obey the laws of strangers, the laws of the Dalai Lama, of China, and of any of your petty chiefs ... We Golok, on the other hand, have from time immemorial obeyed none but our own laws, none but our own convictions ... \textsuperscript{325}

Serta was, in fact, lawless in the sense that there was no state – there was no police force, no specially designated courts, and no particular civil agencies formally responsible for resolving disputes.\textsuperscript{326} Serta society operated without these governing attributes of the state because it was divided into forty-eight “wider camp groups” (tsho ba) who each had leaders that formed a union that handled disputes over grazing rights, could mobilize a military force to defend the Serta people’s land when necessary, and that organized annual religious festivals.\textsuperscript{327} The scope of these forty-eight wider camp groups before 1960 included 5,340 households and 21,900 people dispersed over an area of about
11,500 square kilometers. Within one wider camp group there were smaller extended family subgroups called ru skor, made up of up to five tents who herded their livestock together. Each wider camp group had rights to a certain territory for livestock grazing and had their own leader who would join in the forty-eight member union. In the words of the son of the last leader of the union of the wider camp groups which together were named the Washül Serta,

In the old society my role would have been to resolve disputes among the public. They [the Serta people] would have listened and obeyed my word. Whereas the Chinese leaders now put people in prison when they do bad things I would have had [the people’s] respect and they would have done what I said.

In fact, Sera Khandro mentions the Washül Serta leader who would have been my informant’s grandfather doing just exactly this: “At that time the Washül [Serta] leader settled a land dispute and so forth and everybody having reached an agreement, the animosity was pacified.” Thus, the famed lawlessness of the Golok tribes is more than nostalgic lore; it includes reminiscences of an old society in which tribal leaders successfully negotiated between competing interests to maintain social order. Below I will describe the ways in which religious figures such as Treasure revealers aided political leaders such as the Washül Serta leader in their governance by securing the vital support of earthly and celestial divinities.

Still the question remains: how did religious communities, including monasteries and religious encampments, fit into this larger nomadic social organization of wider camp groups (tsho ba)? Gelek mentions that each tribe of Serta had its own monastery:

The Washu Serthar herdsman believed that a tribe without a monastery was incomplete. There were 24 monasteries and more than 3,300 monks among the 48 groups. These monasteries served as centres of culture, education and religion and also operated as market centres. People gathered there on religious holidays, and old people no longer able to travel with the herds lived in the precincts of the
monasteries. At times, they were also used as courts by the herdsmen, to settle outstanding lawsuits. Then they would make a vow to explain their cases truthfully in front of the lamas and the gods, and the case would be settled.\footnote{331}

But this raises yet another question: what was the relationship between a religious encampment (\textit{sgar}) and a monastery (\textit{dgon})? In fact, Sera Khandro’s usage of the terms encampment (\textit{sgar}) and monastery (\textit{dgon pa}) seem to overlap in many instances. For example, Sotrül Rinpoche’s residence was Sera Monastery, whereas Sera Khandro always refers to Drimé Özer’s community as a Treasure encampment (\textit{gter sgar}) with a lama’s household (\textit{bla brang}) despite the fact that they often lived in the vicinity of his father Dujom Lingpa’s monastery, Dartsang Monastery. In Padma County, Golok, Sera Khandro lived within Gara Tertön’s Treasure encampment, which she often refers to as the \textit{gter ston sgar}, although the encampment also included a monastery, Banak Monastery (\textit{Pan nag dgon}). Based on Sera Khandro’s writings, two general distinctions can be made between a monastery (\textit{dgon}) and a religious encampment (\textit{sgar}): a monastery is an immovable structure in which inhabitants maintained monastic vows of celibacy, such as the monk Sotrül Rinpoche in Sera Monastery, whereas a religious encampment is a potentially mobile community comprised (at least partially) of non-monastic religious specialists who often traveled from place to place in tents.\footnote{332}

In terms of their mobility, religious encampments in Sera Khandro’s early twentieth century context were not necessarily very different than the lay encampments (\textit{ru skor}) of nomadic pastoralists that made up the larger camp groups (\textit{tsho ba}). As Levine notes, the camping sites and grazing grounds of the various encampments (\textit{ru skor}) could be changed from one section of the larger camp group’s terrain to another with flexibility.\footnote{333} Even though both encampment types, religious and nomadic
pastoralist, were “lay” in the sense of not maintaining celibacy vows and consequently having families, it is not appropriate to call Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro “lay” Buddhist practitioners because their role as religious specialists was very different than that of the pastoralists, who sponsored their ritual activities. Both religious encampments and monasteries relied on donations and goods in exchange for ritual service and did not depend exclusively on maintaining livestock. According to Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical accounts, the constant moves that Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro’s religious encampments made were focused on performing religious pilgrimage, taking out (and putting in) Treasures from sacred landscapes in Golok, and giving religious teachings in exchange for necessary provisions. In contrast, their lay counterparts moved according to the seasonal grazing needs of their livestock and did not have ritual expertise.\(^{334}\) Moving from place to place was thus a part of life on the high pasture lands of Golok, unique neither to pastoralists nor to the religious specialists who catered to their spiritual needs. Indeed, the only stable residence possible in Golok in the early twentieth century could be found at the monasteries, living alongside those who had “renounced” householder life. In fact, as late as in early 1980s, the county seat of Serta did not include a single permanent house, but was rather comprised of white and black nomad’s tents surrounding the large newly-rebuilt post-Cultural Revolution version of the Gogentang Stupa.\(^{335}\) For Sera Khandro coming from her father’s four-story Lhasa mansion, life in Golok must have been full of hardship; her life and that of Drimé Özer were spent traveling on horseback, avoiding bandits, flattening new ground, pitching tents, begging for alms, going on pilgrimage, and performing ritual service for their
communities. All this they did when they were not practicing their Treasure revelations during the one hundred day retreats they repeatedly undertook.\textsuperscript{336}

Sera Khandro’s writings, in particular her comments in Drimé Özer’s \textit{Biography} about his roles in Golok society, give us hints about what type of relationship Treasure revealers had to lay communities and their leaders. The following passage from Drimé Özer’s \textit{Biography} is particularly informative in portraying the activities of religious figures and the interactions that Treasure revealers such as Drimé Özer had with their region’s leaders:

Having relied on the symbolic and prophetic registries of a \textit{ḍākiṇī} saying she was Künkyap Wangmo that had come to him that night in his dream, [Drimé Özer] wrote down the profound Treasure \textit{Elements Jumping in to Space [like] a Lion} from the Guru Hayagrīva and Vajravārāhī Dharma cycle. At that time, using the earlier prophecy from Drongri as a foundation, he put Treasure vases in Drongri to fulfill the desires of the Washül [Serta] leader. Having spoken the \textit{Accomplishment of the Great Deity}, he performed it expansively and took out some Treasures.

At that time, there was a retreatant lama who was known as “the leader of the head of the land in Drongdün.”\textsuperscript{337} He told [Drimé Özer], “It is certain that you are an emanation of Künzang\textsuperscript{338} because I had a good dream about this,” and so forth. Having requested prayers to make a Dharma connection from the Lord, he offered material goods for the auspicious connection.

Then, [Drimé Özer] gradually went to his seat [in Dartsang]. As the Lord’s [Drimé Özer’s] representative, Sotrül Rinpočhe\textsuperscript{339} had gone out to tame disciples.\textsuperscript{340} When he came back he gave all the gathered offerings to the lama’s household.

At that time the Washül [Serta] leader settled a land dispute and everybody having reached an agreement, the animosity was pacified.

At that time [Drimé Özer] saw the face of the Precious Lama [i.e., his father Dujom Lingpa] and he spoke many prophecies, though I have elucidated them in the Treasure scriptures [rather than here].\textsuperscript{341}

This passage above touches upon several different aspects of the spiritual, political, and economic relationships between religious specialists such as Drimé Özer and Sotrül
Rinpoché and the political leader of their area, the Washül Serta leader I mentioned previously. Sera Khandro records that Drimé Özer fulfilled the leader of Serta’s wishes by burying and discovering Treasures at the mountain that is the abode of the main mountain deity of Serta, Drongri Mukpo, who is one and the same as Avalokiteśvara. In this way, Drimé Özer acts as an intermediary between the sacred mountain, whose Treasures are his to bury and discover, and the region’s political leader, whose power to maintain social order is linked to proper propitiations to his region’s mountain deity.

A characteristic element of the Treasure tradition that I have already introduced comes through clearly in the long passage quoted above: the importance of prophecy. Prophecy leads Drimé Özer to make the offering of burying Treasure vases filled with ritual substances that ensure the environmental and social well-being of the land. A dream convinces the leader of Drongdün that Drimé Özer is a special incarnation, thus inspiring him to make material offerings. Dujom Lingpa comes to Drimé Özer in a vision and gives him many prophecies. Prophecy is thus not just one element of the technical aspects of revealing Treasures; it is a significant factor in determining the course of people’s lives. Dreams, hints, and subtle signs are of concrete importance in Sera Khandro’s world, just as fleeting auspicious connections determine whether or not a Treasure can be revealed.

The interactions between Drimé Özer and the retreatant lama who has faith in him as well as the mention of Sotrül Rinpoché going out to “taming disciples” provide us with information about the economic exchanges that kept Treasure revealers such as Drimé Özer solvent. From the passage above we can see that Drimé Özer was revered and supported materially for his ritual efficacy by both members of the lay community and (at
times at least) other religious specialists. Sera Khandro writes, “As the Lord’s representative, Sotrül Rinpočhe had gone out to tame disciples. When he came back he gave all the gathered offerings to the lama’s household and so forth.” Taming beings” in Sera Khandro’s writing is a euphemism for going out to perform rituals and give empowerments in order to gather resources for the lama’s household (bla brang). On another occasion when Drimé Özer returned from a long pilgrimage to Central Tibet, Sera Khandro recounts that because his religious seat had very little wealth remaining, everybody in the community said that Drimé Özer needed to go “tame disciples” in order to gather wealth. Sera Khandro explains that after Drimé Özer supplicated the proper wealth-giving deity (lha gnod sbyin), his mission was easily accomplished. In several instances, Sera Khandro mentions that Sotrül Rinpoché would do this resource-gathering work in Drimé Özer’s stead as an act of service to his teacher. She does not clearly describe what “taming beings” actually consisted of; it seems to be obvious to those for whom she wrote her auto/biographical works. However, based on the other rituals she repeatedly describes, perhaps “taming disciples” involved giving the laity “Dharma connections” (chos ’brel) by giving empowerments, reading transmissions, and explanations for parts of Dujom Lingpa or Drimé Özer’s Treasure cycles. Sera Khandro does not mention going out by herself specifically to “tame disciples,” presumably because she did not have her own household to maintain, but rather lived in other male Treasure revealer’s households or monasteries (such as Sera Monastery).

As I have described above, Sera Khandro briefly mentions that the Washül Serta leader solved a land dispute after Drimé Özer’s ritual interventions on his behalf, a role not dissimilar to the description his descendant gave me of the Serta leader’s role in the
old Tibetan society. In fact, land disputes were the central source of tension between the nomadic pastoralist peoples of Serta. When one wider encampment group (*tsho ba*) encroached upon another’s territory or stole herds, fighting to the point of death was not uncommon. In these cases, the leaders (*dpon po*) of the wider encampment groups would gather, sometimes with mediators, to settle the dispute and to offer a price for any loss of life in order to stop blood feuds.\(^\text{345}\) Not only the wider encampment leaders but also religious leaders such as Drimé Özer and his disciple Sotrül Rinpoché were called upon to resolve land disputes because they could garner widespread consensus between different encampments. At one point, Sera Khandro recounts that when Drimé Özer returned from a journey, Sotrül Rinpoché could not be there to welcome him home because he had gone to resolve a land dispute in his local area.\(^\text{346}\) Land disputes did not only occur between the lay nomads, but also affected religious communities. Sera Khandro mentions land disputes that divided both Gyalsé and Drimé Özer’s religious communities at times, forcing factions of their communities to relocate.

During the 1920s, there was another reason why the religious communities in which Sera Khandro lived needed to move: skirmishes with the Chinese repeatedly wreaked havoc, causing everyone to flee. In Drimé Özer’s *Biography*, Sera Khandro records that when Drimé Özer was forty-one in approximately 1921, people warned him of the impending danger of Chinese attack:

> At that time, Akyong said, ‘The terror of the Chinese has arrived and they are fighting. [We] need to move the encampment foundation to another area.’ Although the local people, his close entourage, the lama’s household inhabitants and so forth repeatedly said this, the Lord himself [Drimé Özer] let it go.\(^\text{347}\)
That same year again, when they were in Drongdün in Serta near the sacred mountain
Drongri, Drimé Özer’s community worried about the agitation caused by the Chinese
attacks, yet Drimé Özer himself seemed unperturbed by the commotion:

Then when everybody said that there was fighting and that he needed to move the
encampment foundation, the Lord said, “Although I think there is no problem, it
is okay if we move the encampment according to their thought.”

They went together with the encampment base to a hidden land prophesized by
the ḍākinīs under the power of the western gatekeeper named Nyenchen Yusé of
Ser Drongri.348 There the male and female partners both had new Treasures come
to them and they performed empowerments and reading transmissions and so
forth.349

Perhaps one reason Drimé Özer was not overly worried about the problem of the Chinese
is that one purpose of Treasure revelation is to repel foreign invasion and disease. In the
words of Drimé Özer’s brother the Third Dodrupchen:

Also, until the end of the age comes, because of ceaseless efforts of those such as
the Tertons, Termas, both of teachings and materials, detailed and appropriate
prophecies will appear in time to protect Tibet from foreign invasions, internal
fighting, disease, famine, and so on.350

In fact, Sera Khandro includes some very specific prophecies foretelling the oncoming
Chinese; she recounts a prophecy given by Dujom Lingpa to Drimé Özer when he was
nineteen:

The Lama said, “On account of the great wrong views and weak merit of sentient
beings of this time, on account of the many wars, contagious diseases, famines,
and so forth of this time period, and in particular because after the old lady and I
die it is certain that the terror of the Chinese Mongols will come near, it is not
clear what will happen. At that time people’s consciousness will be blessed by
demons and oneself and others will meet up with disaster. The power of the
barbaric border people will spread. Much of the life, deeds, and beneficial actions
of good men who adhere to the [Buddhist] teachings will go away to [negative]
conditions. It will be difficult to do anything about this. Because of this, since you
are a good man who nurtures the teachings and sentient beings, you need to be
careful regarding the demonic power that is changing this time and place. When I
am here, you will not be harmed by negative forces. Later I will help. If you do
everything, good and bad, according to the ḍākinīs’ prophecy, great benefit for yourself and others will arise.\textsuperscript{351}

Thus Treasure revealers such as Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer incorporated the growing problem of Chinese agitation into their Buddhist understanding of the contemporary age being an age of degeneration (snyigs dus) that involved increasing warfare, disease, and natural disaster. Put into this apocalyptic perspective, the threat of the Chinese was something to repel through adherence to the divine ḍākinī prophecies that constantly interpenetrated their lives as represented in Sera Khandro’s biographical writings. For example, the ḍākinīs Künsel and Shiwa Dorjé Tso come to Drimé Özer and give him the following prophecy:

Earlier in Samyé in the presence of the Lotus Guru  
We gathered together as an auspicious connection.  
Because of my vast aspirations and prayers,  
Up until now I have arisen as your friend.

Completely dispel the troubles between China and Tibet.  
Accomplish the aspirations of the Lotus Born One and Tsogyal!

The illusory emanation of the mother of the expanse Tsogyal,  
The woman who is a light ray from my heart,  
Will arise as the companion for the entrance to the three Treasures.

By the profound power of the beneficial actions of the mother ḍākinīs,  
If you inseparably unite method and wisdom  
You will repel the expansion of the demonic barbarians for one hundred years . . . \textsuperscript{352}

Thus proper adherence to the ḍākinī prophecies and specifically the union of method and wisdom, i.e., the union of Drimé Özer with the emanation of Tsogyal, the light ray from these ḍākinīs’ hearts who is none other than Sera Khandro, will foster the auspicious circumstances necessary to repel the marauding armies who lurk on the borderlands of Tibet.
Yet despite these efforts, in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography as well, trouble is near. When Sera Khandro is thirty years old in approximately 1922 during the time that she lived with Gara Gyalsé at Banak Monastery in Padma County, she recounts that,

That year the Northern Chinese became more powerful and caused disturbances. When everyone said that we should move the group (mu) to another location, Bön Rikdzin from Banak and Gara Tertön’s direct disciple the renunciate from Benschul Lama Ngakwang Demchok had a discussion. Having resolved the land dispute between the two factions of the lama’s household, they decided that Gyalsé needed to establish a seat. Everybody from here and there agreed with this discussion.333

This passage is another example of prevalence of land disputes over pasture rights, this time occurring within Gara Gyalsé’s household in Padma County. Also in Serta County, during that same year when Sera Khandro was visiting Drimé Özer, she recounts that, “Then, on account of the agitation caused by the Northern Chinese, the inner retinue held a discussion and decided to move the Lord [Drimé Özer]’s residence to Yusé Chawa.”354

Thus in the world of Treasure revelation where auspicious connections, uncertainty, and prophecy determine everything, the Chinese incursions into the previously stateless and unincorporated lands of Golok signaled the growing strength of demonic forces in this degenerate age, forces that could only be repelled by strict adherence to the dākinīs’ divine injunctions to reveal Treasure and benefit sentient beings.

**Conclusion**

Treasure revelation involves a process with many different stages, originating from the primordial Buddhas to Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal and then to dākinīs and Treasure protectors who guard the Treasures until the auspicious circumstances come together for them to be discovered by their prophesized Treasure revealers. This process
of Buddhist scriptural transmission relies on a pantheon of Buddhist deities ranging from ethereal to autochthonous, who literally ground the Buddhist path to enlightenment in the Tibetan earth. As the human recipients of this multidimensional divine transmission, Treasure revealers such as Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer served as mediators between these variegated celestial forces and the environmental and social realities of early twentieth-century Golok.

The first sections of this chapter considered the ways Sera Khandro models herself and her relationship with her partner(s) in a way that reflects the divine genealogy of the Treasure tradition. Just as Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava form a divine couple who produce and hide Treasures, likewise, Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer are their divinely prophesized incarnations and rely on each other to produce their Treasures. Just as there are differing literary interpretations of the importance of Yeshé Tsogyal in the history of the Treasure tradition, likewise many of Sera Khandro’s comments portray her struggle to find a place for herself as a female Treasure revealer in a society at times hostile to her religious aspirations. The following two chapters will examine this dialectic concerning the role of women in the Treasure tradition in greater detail. However, as this chapter has emphasized, Sera Khandro’s greatest influence, her greatest source of strength, and the object of her devotion is Yeshé Tsogyal.

Treasure revealers such as Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer articulate their Treasures to be fulfillments of divine prophecies dating back to Imperial Tibetan history, but the process of enacting these prophecies clearly reflects the fluctuations, insecurities, and needs of day-to-day life in early twentieth-century Golok. The tough natural environment of high-altitude nomadic life in which hail, frost, famine, and sickness were
never far away is a palpable reality in the way Sera Khandro reiterates the uncertainty of her ability to gather together the auspicious connections required to reveal her Treasures. Hints, signs, and omens alert her to the shifting winds of chance that determine her ability to actualize the prophecies she receives through visionary encounters.

Despite the ephemeral and highly imaginative quality of her many visionary experiences of prophecy and revelation, Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s Treasures had concrete applications in early twentieth-century Golok. Their revelations were not only transcendental incantations directing their faithful adherents towards enlightenment; they were also practical formulas that reflected problems specific to their particular context such as livestock health, Chinese incursions, and territory disputes between and within Golok tribes. Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer maintained balance in the natural environment by putting in and taking out Treasures from sacred mountains and lakes, ensuring clean water and favorable weather for the livestock and humans that depended on the grasslands. Their Treasure revelations appeased ḍākinīs’ agitation and ensured social harmony and physical health. They supported their local political leader’s sovereignty by propitiating to the mountain deities of the land. In turn, they were supported by lay nomadic tribesmen and women, political leaders, and their monastic and non-celibate disciples with resources necessary to allow them to pursue their religious vocation as Treasure revealers.

Sera Khandro paints a picture of her Golok society in which there was a significant overlap between monasteries, made up of permanent housing for celibate monks, and religious encampments, consisting of mobile communities including monastics and non-celibate Tantric practitioners who lived in tents. If there were any
tensions between these two groups of religious specialists, her writings do not expose them. Rather, some monastics lived their lives within religious encampments while many non-celibate religious specialists such as Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro had close ties with monasteries (Drimé with his father's monastery in Dartsang and Sera Khandro with Sera Monastery). The laity, monastics and non-celibate religious professionals alike had great respect for the spiritual and temporal power of Treasures as well as for the revealers who embodied the liberative potential of their revelations.

Thus far, this study has focused on outlining the contours of Sera Khandro's autobiographical narrative and contextualizing her writings within the religious and cultural tradition of Tibetan Treasure revelation. I have emphasized that in Sera Khandro's works, the purpose of revealing Treasures was not only to inspire spiritual realization, but also to achieve environmental, social, and physical well-being in the world of early twentieth-century Golok. Sera Khandro's writings can thus serve as a resource to help us understand more about the social and religious milieu in which she lived, but they do so through the particular lenses of the Tibetan literary genres of autobiography and biography. The following chapter turns towards reading Sera Khandro's writings as literature, analyzing the rhetorical strategies by which she represents her identity as a non-celibate female Treasure revealer. Through this analysis and through comparing Sera Khandro's writing with other relevant works, in turn, we come to see more facets of her social and cultural world.
Chapter Three: Autobiography, Gender, and the Self

Autobiography in its Western contexts has long been associated with notions of an individual, unique, and specifically Western post-enlightenment subject. Indeed it has often been assumed that such conceptions of subjectivity were a precondition for the very existence of such a genre of self-focused literature. That autobiography has taken root in the Tibetan Buddhist context with its emphasis on a lack of independently existent selfhood calls attention to the diversity of ways in which the self can be interpreted through the genre of autobiographical literature. As one of the only female-authored autobiographies in all of Tibetan literature, Sera Khandro’s Autobiography presents an early twentieth-century emic Eastern Tibetan perspective on life as a female religious visionary that offers new insights into Tibetan Buddhist conceptions of gender and selfhood. A study of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography raises the following intriguing questions: (1) What rhetorical strategies does Sera Khandro use to formulate a sense of self in her autobiographical narrative? (2) How can we analyze Sera Khandro’s Autobiography in a larger comparative perspective, drawing insights from Western literary theory as well as other Himalayan Buddhist autobiographies and hagiographies by and about women? In pursuing these questions, this chapter will highlight three facets of Sera Khandro’s self-representation: 1) rhetoric about gender and the female body, 2) dialogical encounters with a heteroglossia of human, divine, and demonic voices, and 3) the role of visions. I suggest Sera Khandro harps on her inferior female gender as a way to express humility, while she simultaneously represents herself in laudatory ways through recounting her manifold visionary experiences. Within this dialectic between
self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement, she strikes a balance between expressing herself as an imperfect human and as a spiritual pillar, thus providing a valuable example for the generations of disciples for whom she composed her reflections.

This chapter seeks to bring Sera Khandro’s autobiographical writings beyond her intended religious readership into a wider conversation on representations of gender and the self in autobiography. Woven throughout this chapter are theoretical insights drawn from the study of Western autobiography, in particular Western women’s autobiography, concerning the relationship of the self to society. Following Patrick Geary’s suggestion that hagiography “must be a privileged source for the study of social values,” I suggest that this analysis of the refractions of Sera Khandro’s literary self illuminates much about her social world.

Given the rarity of female-authored Tibetan autobiographies, a study of Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* invites us to explore the relationship, if any, that Sera Khandro’s account has with other available female-authored Tibetan language autobiographies. A comparison betweenJetsün Lochen’s autobiography, the only other extant early-twentieth-century Tibetan Buddhist woman’s autobiography, and that of Orgyen Chökyi, a late seventeenth to early eighteenth-century nun from Dolpo, demonstrates the wide diversity between different female-authored Tibetan autobiographies. Indeed, their differences remind us that the category of gender is only meaningful in relation to other social and cultural factors including education level, social class, monastic versus non-monastic status, religious sect, and geographic environment. That said, given the relatively few models of religious women in Tibetan Buddhism, it is interesting to examine some of the paradigms of female saints (Yeshé Tsogyal, Gelong
Palmo, Machik Labdrön, and Nangsa Obum) that influenced historical women such as Jetsün Lochen, Orgyen Chökyi, and Sera Khandro in formulating their own accounts of spiritual liberation.

After a brief introduction to relevant historical and theoretical issues in the study of Western and Tibetan autobiography, the first section of this chapter explores the ways in which Sera Khandro thematizes her gender and female body. Drawing on Janet Gyatso’s analysis of the tension between self-humbling and self-aggrandizing rhetoric in the genre of Tibetan autobiography, I suggest that Sera Khandro creates a self-humbling narrative primarily through repetitive comments about her female gender and “inferior female body.”357 I do not intend to imply that her litany of comments bemoaning her difficulties as a woman wanting to participate in Tibetan Buddhist ecclesiastical circles is “just rhetoric” and thus not real. Rather, I suggest that it is also rhetoric, and as such serves a literary purpose of representing Sera Khandro as a humble person. Yet, this is not the only side of the story; Sera Khandro’s self-denigrating comments about her inferior female body often solicit responses from her interlocutors that extol the virtues of the female body, articulating an encouraging message to her readership about women’s spiritual capacities.

The second section of this chapter explores the interactive, dialogical nature of her writing. Through incorporating direct speech dialogue with a heteroglossiaic host of other voices ranging from demonic to divine, Sera Khandro represents herself always in relation to others who populate her discursive world. Thus, the subject of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography is not a separate, individual subject characteristic of older interpretations of Western autobiography. Instead, it resembles the relational self that Western theorists
of women’s autobiography proposed to be characteristic of women’s writing. However, I suggest that rather than being a characteristic of her gender, the relational self that Sera Khandro narrates is characteristic of her position as a member of a Tibetan community in which connections between divinities, environmental forces, and human society were closely intertwined.

Thirdly, this chapter analyzes the role of the many visionary experiences that Sera Khandro weaves into her self-narrative that stretch her direct speech dialogue to encompass a wide range of supernatural forces. I suggest that recounting dialogues with a host of deities in her elaborate visions is an important way in which Sera Khandro formulates a strong identity for herself as a female Treasure revealer. Divine voices, in particular those of Yeshé Tsogyal and other dākinīs, continually offer Sera Khandro encouragement and provide her with examples that illustrious females do accomplish their spiritual aims despite the fact that she had no earthly female role models. Sera Khandro describes visions that appeared before her at particularly traumatic moments in her life narrative as if to balance out the negativity she simultaneously records in her mundane world. This tension between extraordinary visionary experiences in which deities laud Sera Khandro’s divine purpose and torturous worldly sufferings in which others denigrate her is another way in which her writing expresses a tension between self-denigration and self-aggrandizement that is characteristic of Tibetan autobiography. Yet ultimately, for Sera Khandro as for all Tantric practitioners striving to view the world as a pure realm, the encouraging voices and magnificent lands of the Buddhafields Sera Khandro recounts bear more weight as divinely inspired reality than the difficulties she recollects in the illusory and impermanent realm of her mundane sufferings.
**Autobiographical Self Presentations, Western and Tibetan**

In the context of Western literary analysis, the genre of autobiography has long been associated with the development of a post-European Enlightenment subject who is an autonomous individual, most often white, male, and Western.358 Until the 1980's, literary theorists understood the subject of autobiographical writing to be an individual self grounded in a Western notion of personhood. For example, Philippe Lejeunne famously defined autobiography as "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is on the individual life, in particular the story of his personality."359 According to autobiography theorists such as Karl Weintraub, individuals are those historical figures who perceive themselves as unique personalities as opposed to those who do not differentiate themselves from their social environment.360 This Western concept of the individual stems from a particular historical moment in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe when the term "individual" transformed from its older meaning of "indivisible" such as "the hye and indyvyduall Trynyte" (1425) or "the individuall Catholicke Church" (John Milton, 1641) to its more current meaning of a unique and different person, most commonly understood as a white, land-owning, educated man.361 The transformation of the term "individual" around the turn of the nineteenth century coincides roughly with the early usages of the term "autobiography" that appear for the first time in a 1797 issue of the British *Monthly Review*, replacing earlier terms including confession, apology, memoir, diary, letters, journal, and narrative.362

The foundational autobiography theorist Georges Gusdorf drew the connection between autobiography and culturally-specific notions of personhood, concluding in his
well-known 1956 essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” that autobiography is not to be found outside of the Western cultural area because it is dependent on a particular post-Copernican consciousness of the self that does not exist in other cultures in which,

... the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. No one is rightful possessor of his life or his death; lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being – or, rather, isolation is impossible in such a scheme of total cohesiveness as this. 363

Thus, according to Gusdorf’s understanding, the interdependence of selves in other cultures prohibits them from writing in a genre such as autobiography in which the author must isolate his sense of self in contrast and opposition to others.

Gusdorf may conclude that autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape “where consciousness of the self” does not exist in the sense of a Western enlightenment individual, but Janet Gyatso has made the important point that Gusdorf was certainly wrong to conclude that autobiography is an exclusively Western phenomenon given the example of the prevalence of the autobiographical genre in Tibet. To the contrary, Janet Gyatso has identified over 150 book length autobiographies in pre-1959 Tibet, only a few of which are female-authored. Tibetan autobiography is not a result of Western influence as Gusdorf would surely propose, but has its roots in the period of political and social fragmentation in the twelfth century that followed Tibet’s dynastic period (sixth to ninth centuries) beginning with figures such as Zhang Rinpoche (1123-93), the Second Karmapa Karma Pakṣi (1204-83), the Treasure discoverer Guru Chöwang (1212-70) and so forth. 364 Tibet did not inherit its predilection for producing autobiographical literature
from either of its influential neighbors; whereas India lacked a tradition of either historical or autobiographical literature, China had such a strong tradition of historical literature that autobiography was rare and what existed was obliged to impersonate historiography using a distant third person voice. Gyatso points out that like China, Tibet had a strong tradition of historiography as well as a perduring interest in recording genealogical narratives, two factors which paved the way for the development of autobiographical writing in Tibet. She also argues that the reasons for the prevalence of autobiography in Tibet relate to the importance of Buddhism in Tibet, which eclipsed indigenous religious traditions and included a competitive climate in which individual religious masters struggled to establish themselves partly via recording their personal accomplishments in autobiographical formats.

Tibetan biography and autobiography refers to the indigenous literary genre namtar (rnam thar), or rangnam (rang rnam). Namtar can be literally translated as “complete liberation story” while rangnam incorporates a self-reflexive pronoun rang to indicate “one’s own complete liberation story.” Both of these terms refer to a specifically spiritual biography or autobiography documenting the chronological trajectory of (predominantly male) Tibetan spiritual figures’ teleological liberation from the sufferings of cyclic existence to the realization of Buddhahood. Thus, far from Gusdorf’s notion of the autonomous Western individual as the subject of autobiography, Sera Khandro’s self-presentation shares more with the tradition of pre-Rousseau Western spiritual biography in which the subject of autobiography is an “individual” in its older meaning of being indivisible from the divine. Autobiography theorist Sidonie Smith defines autobiographical or life narrative as “a historically situated practice of self-
representation" in which "narrators selectively engage their lived experience through personal storytelling." Using this definition, self-authored Tibetan namtar such as Sera Khandro's work fits into a Western understanding of autobiography and can be interpreted using theoretical frameworks developed in reference to Western auto/biographical literature.

While the genealogy of spiritual biography can also be traced to Christian, Jewish, and Islamic roots, Sera Khandro's autobiography participates in the long tradition of Buddhist biography. Buddhist spiritual biographies draw on the example of the Buddha's life story, first written prior to the first century B.C.E. as jātaka tales elaborating moral themes drawn from accounts of the Buddha's previous lives. The format of Sera Khandro's story of spiritual realization is reminiscent of biographies of Śakyamuni Buddha at the same time as it recasts this foundational Buddhist life story in new ways, adjusting it to the contours of a woman's life who practiced a Tantric form of Buddhism. Just as the Buddha was born into a royal family and given every pleasure with the hope that he would inherit his father's crown, likewise Sera Khandro recounts being born into a noble family in Lhasa and raised with every luxury in hopes that she would become a political leader in Tibet. Just as the Buddha renounced worldly life in one pivotal moment in after marrying and having a son, Sera Khandro also renounced life as she had known it in one moment when she escaped from her family's wealthy home to avoid an unwanted arranged marriage. While the Buddha practiced austerities in the Indian forest for six years after he renounced lay society, Sera Khandro recounts the radical asceticism she was plunged into on her long journey to Golok and afterwards when she struggled to pursue a religious life in Golok despite a myriad of obstacles.
However, whereas the Buddha gained enlightenment under the bodhi tree sitting in solitary meditation, Sera Khandro’s enlightenment occurred in the manifestly Tantric form of her union with Drimé Özer. In this and other regards, Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* bears close resemblance to the hagiography of the paradigmatic female saint of Tibet, Yeshé Tsogyal. Both Yeshé Tsogyal and Sera Khandro’s life stories include mothers who come from the powerful Tibetan Nup (*Gnubs*) clan, fathers who are local political leaders, great beauty in youth, extreme repulsion from impending marriages, consort relationships with important male Buddhist teachers, resistance to unwanted male attention, and explicit use of male consorts to serve their own spiritual needs. Parallels in Buddhist biographies such as those listed above might inspire the suspicious reader to reconsider Paul de Man’s skeptical interpretation of autobiography. De Man asks,

\[\ldots\] can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?[^369]

Paul de Man’s assertion directs our attention to the fact that there can be no unmediated access to the self or to human experience that is not also already filtered through literary conventions and social constraints. Yet it is precisely through this already colored glass image of a life that Sera Khandro’s voice comes through; more than a repetition of paradigmatic aspects of Buddhist or Tibetan biography, Sera Khandro’s works portray a life located in a specific social, cultural, linguistic, literary, and gendered context.

Beyond being an example of Buddhist biography, Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* fits into a distinctive subgenre of Tibetan autobiography: that of Treasure revealers. Gyatso notes that Treasure discoverers have been among the most prolific
autobiographers in Tibet. While no statistical evidence is available for the ratio of Tibetan autobiography written by Treasure revealers, their importance as autobiographers relates to the connections between revelation and writing about the self. Just as Tibetan autobiographies demonstrate a tension between strong articulations of self and humble self-effacement, likewise Treasure revelation is both intensely personal, involving introspective processes analyzing ephemeral signs, and predetermined, acting to fulfill the prophecies of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. Thus, the multifaceted selfhood Treasure revealers inscribe in their autobiographies parallels the intense process of self-reflection involved in revelation.

Writing about the self and revealing Treasures are both intensely interpretive acts in which dreams and visions are the primary source of authentication verifying that the self in question is worthy of being the subject of autobiography and of being a Treasure revealer. In Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography*, visions provide not only revelations, but reassurances that Sera Khandro is Yeshé Tsogyal’s emissary, thus proving that she is an authentic Treasure revealer. In the latter part of this chapter we will examine some of these identity-forming visions Sera Khandro recounts in her *Autobiography*. In the wide open grasslands of the unincorporated region of Golok, religious and institutional authority was open and contested. Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* served to legitimize her four volumes of revealed Treasure teachings by portraying herself as a visionary with spiritual realization and unmediated access to the divine. Therefore, writing autobiography for a Treasure revealer such as Sera Khandro was both constitutive as much as it was reflective; it was part of actualizing her religious aspirations to become
accepted by her community as an authentic Treasure revealer as much as it was an account of her struggles gaining acceptance in the communities in which she lived.

The many dreams and visions Sera Khandro recounts validate her legitimacy as an authentic Treasure revealer precisely to the people for whom this mattered the most, her disciples who were practicing her revealed Treasure scriptures. Therefore, Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings, like other spiritual biographies, are both models of exemplary Buddhist figures such as Yeshé Tsogyal and Buddhist ideals such as renunciation and meditative realization as well as models for the Buddhist disciples and religious communities who emulate these figures and ideals. In this sense, her autobiography points both backwards in time to a sacred past and forwards to a future in which faithful disciples will benefit from reading her autobiography by attaining their own liberation. Hence, this double motion of reaching to a distant primordial past and looking towards a future liberation is another link between Treasure revealers and autobiography, for, as I described in Chapter Two, Treasure revealers act as emissaries sent from the primordial sacred dimension of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal to catalyze the future enlightenment of their disciples.

**Gender as a Self-Humbling Strategy in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography**

After Sera Khandro elaborates on the prophecies foretelling her illustrious accomplishments as a Treasure revealer in the opening sections of her Autobiography, she makes a self-humbling comment typical of her writing:

> Because I was born in an inferior female body, I am without a basis for expressing my realizations regarding how the beneficial deeds of [accomplishing] the two-fold aim [of helping others and oneself] arose in me and how I traversed the grounds and paths. Despite this, as I have said before, for the purpose of guiding
fortunate doctrine holders and taming those who come after [i.e., disciples], I will express a bit about my history.\textsuperscript{376}

The term Sera Khandro uses for “inferior female body” (\textit{skye lus dman pa}) could very literally be translated as “inferior birth body” but given that it is a ubiquitous term for the female body, I translate it as “inferior female body.” The abbreviated form of this Tibetan term, \textit{skye dman}, literally “low birth,” is one of the most common colloquial terms for “woman” in the Tibetan language, also used in the Golok dialect that Sera Khandro spoke.\textsuperscript{377} Sera Khandro informs us that because she is female, she has no ability to express her realization. The fact that Sera Khandro’s \textit{Autobiography} is pervaded with self-denigrating comments should be of no great surprise given that this is characteristic of Tibetan autobiography. But how are we to interpret the gendered tone of disclaimers in Sera Khandro’s \textit{Autobiography} such as this one? There is a strongly ironic aspect to this disclaimer given that it marks the beginning of Sera Khandro’s more than 400-page self-narrative!

The fact that Sera Khandro thematizes her gender and her inferior female body in what becomes a constant litany of self-denigrating comments should not be taken as somehow “natural” given that she is a female author since, as I will expand upon below, other Tibetan female-authored autobiographies such as that of Jetsün Lochen Rinpočhe (1865-1951) do not thematize gender and the female body to the degree that Sera Khandro does. In the context of medieval Christian women’s visionary literature, Caroline Walker Bynum makes a similar point that women writers did not necessarily thematize their gender as much as their male confessors and interpreters did. Bynum concludes that
Women writers used imagery more androgynously. Personal and social characteristics were more often shared by the two genders in women’s writings. The female was a less marked category; it was more often simply a symbol of an almost genderless self. When women did give the female content taken from the traditional idea of asymmetrical genders, they saw it as physical and bodily. And this physicality was seen as useful in joining with a human Christ.\textsuperscript{378}

Thematizing gender is thus not necessarily an attribute of women’s writing. Yet the mantra-like regularity with which Sera Khandro calls attention to her female gender as a limitation to her potential spiritual achievements is reminiscent of other female mystics’ self-denigrating writing styles. Monica Furlong suggests that female Christian medieval mystics had a general tendency to denigrate themselves on the basis of their gender. Hildegard of Bingen describes herself as “a weak and fragile rib;” Clare of Siena as “a useless handmaid and unworthy servant;” and Julian of Norwich as “a woman ignorant, weak, and frail.”\textsuperscript{379} Furlong attributes this “ritual obeisance” of gender-based self-denigration as a reflection of a socially imposed sense of inferiority as much as it was a literary device that helped their divine mystical visions to be heard. Likewise, we may think of Sera Khandro’s treatment of her inferior female gender as both a rhetorical strategy that adds a humanly believable touch to her extraordinary mystical revelations and a reflection of negative gender stereotypes that Sera Khandro internalized. Her laments about her inferior female form are thus not only rhetoric; they are also one way in which she describes the difficulties she faced as a rare female Treasure revealer struggling to find a place for herself in her society.

**Abandon this Inferior Female Body?**

Sera Khandro thematizes her lowly female gender even in her childhood recollections. Despairing at her father’s insistence that she study Chinese characters
because of the worldly political life Chinese literacy was meant to introduce, Sera Khandro recounts throwing her Chinese books into the river and contemplating putting an end to herself in the river as well. She makes the following prayer of lamentation to Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyal, and Venerable Tārā:

Alas, I pray to the Lotus Born One from Orgyen, all refuges condensed into one,
To Mother Tsogyal, and to the Venerable Noble Lady Tārā –
Look upon me with compassion!

This female body of mine is the foundation of cyclic existence.
Having thrown away this contaminated, unclean, negative body
Bless me with attaining a body replete with the freedoms and advantages.

As soon as I am born, having met with the dharma,
May I have the freedom to practice properly.380

Just as she was about to throw herself into the water, Sera Khandro recounts experiencing the first vision in her Autobiography; a terrifyingly ugly woman appears before her and brandishing a sword, threatens to kill her. This, Sera Khandro narrates, is enough to jar the eight-year-old Sera Khandro out of her suicidal mood.

Sera Khandro may consistently have a negative valuation of her female body, yet others in her narrative try to balance her negativity with positive counter-arguments. This dual message including her own negativity and others’ positive reassurances is clear in the passage below in which Sera Khandro recounts her visionary interaction with the deceased Gotrül Rinpoché. In a vision Sera Khandro experiences after Gotrül Rinpoché’s wife Yakza forbids her from speaking with Gotrül Rinpoché before he dies, Sera Khandro interacts with Gotrül Rinpoché:

“Because of my inferior [female] body, it is difficult for me to benefit beings in the world. Hence, having abandoned this body, if I try to attain a man’s body, I wonder if I will benefit beings?”

The lama [Gotrül Rinpoché] said,
“Don’t think like this. This body you have is that of a great female bodhisattva, the mother who gave rise to all the Buddhas. It is the chariot that traverses the grounds and paths, the foundation which propagates men who adhere to Sūtra and Tantra. Like snow comes from water, the expansive space of the greatly secret empty realm of the mother [i.e., the womb], the space (mkha’) of reality itself in which the energy of compassion goes (‘gro), is the source of both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. Hence, this body of yours is the superior [way to] benefit beings. If you wonder how it is that it is superior, before, during the time of Kaśyapa, when you were the daughter of a Brahmin named Namka Drönma (Sky Lamp), based on your pure aspiration to generate the supreme awakening and by the power of your prayers to the Lady Tsogyal, you dispelled all manifest and unmanifest negative obstacles to the life forces of men who adhered to the teachings. You raised the victory banner of the teachings. Via skillful means and auspicious connections, you propagated the happiness of beings and established them in bliss. In particular, be like a mother to exhausted sentient beings and it is certain that inconceivable benefit for beings will gradually arise.

Gotrül Rinpoché’s response to Sera Khandro’s despair transforms her negative evaluation of her female body by honoring its extraordinary qualities, qualities that reflect a Tantric perception of the positive aspects of the feminine body centered on the morphology of the womb: the womb is the source of the Buddhas, and Gotrül metaphorically describes it as associated with the two parts of the Tibetan word for ḍākinī (mkha’ ‘gro), or Sky-goer. Gotrül Rinpoché specifies that Sera Khandro’s previous incarnation Namkha Drönma dispelled obstacles to the life force of religious men, an ability which in a Tantric context refers to her capacity to engage in sexual practices. The equation between sexuality and longevity that Gotrül Rinpoché’s comment evokes persists in Sera Khandro’s writings as one of the main reasons for consort practices, a topic to which we shall return in Chapter Four.

Despite positive interpretations of the female gender such as the maternal imagery above, Sera Khandro’s Autobiography is replete with her (rhetorical?) desire to abandon her lowly female body, a body which she describes as the source of the suffering of
cyclic existence and an obstacle to her purpose of benefiting sentient beings. Speaking to a visionary woman with a terrifying appearance who repeatedly appeared before her, Sera Khandro summed up her gender-related problems in the following words:

I abide in an inferior [female] corporal body. Although I have good intentions, it is difficult to tame beings in the negative time. I have met with Treasures, yet the auspicious connections of skillful means are bad. Because of my small knowledge, it is difficult to understand the meaning of the symbols.

This inferior female body (skye lus dman pa) cannot get free from the mouth of my husband; When I wander about this country, it can’t get free of the mouth of dogs. Whatever I do, people don’t like me.

When things like these occur, I am one who must abandon this body. Even though there is no difference in the mind of enlightenment (Skt. bodhicitta) between men and women, In the perspective of disciples, my body is inferior.

I think that having transformed into a hero with a supreme body, I certainly will accomplish the great purpose of benefiting [all] beings who have been my mother.

Without this, how will this body Have a way to accomplish great benefit for the teachings and sentient beings? Lady, give me advice.363

Sera Khandro clarifies that ultimately it is not that the female body itself is inferior, but that the problem lies in the perspectives of disciples. The terrifying woman to whom Sera Khandro speaks above responds to her plea for advice with a detailed prophecy teaching her about types of dakini script and foretelling her future doctrine holders, consorts, and teachings. By including lauding comments such as that of Gotrül Rinpoché along with Sera Khandro’s derogatory statements about herself, Sera Khandro’s representations of her female gender reiterate the tension within Tibetan autobiography between self-aggrandizement and self-denigration. Yet regardless of its positive or negative valences,
gender is clearly a noteworthy issue for Sera Khandro in a way that I suggest is not relevant for male-authored autobiographies in which gender is far more likely to be an unremarkable topic.\textsuperscript{384}

**Treasure Revelation and Gender-related Difficulties**

As if she feels she must endeavor to explain her unusual status as one of the few female Treasure revealers, Sera Khandro thematizes her gender-related difficulties in the context of presenting herself as a Treasure revealer.\textsuperscript{385} From her representation of her earliest childhood experiences revealing Treasures, being female was a deterrent to being a Treasure revealer. Sera Khandro recounts that at the age of nine when she accompanied her parents on pilgrimage to U ri (\textit{Dbus ri}), they arrived at Önpu Taktsang (\textit{'On phu stag tshang}), a site closely associated with Yeshé Tsogyal, where Sera Khandro recollected that her share of texts were located. After she told this to her mother, her mother scolded her saying,

> Don’t speak like this. From the time of your paternal ancestors [such as] the Dharma King Ngaki Wangpo\textsuperscript{386} until now, there have been many who have attained accomplishment. Because it is impossible for a woman to take out textual Treasures, the King’s punishment will soon come. Be silent.\textsuperscript{387}

Far more disastrous for her life as a Treasure revealer was her partner Gyalsé’s disrespect for her spiritual calling. Sera Khandro writes that when she was twenty-two, she returned home after taking out a Treasure vessel. Sera Khandro records being unsure how Gyalsé would react to her discovery. Sure enough, he doubts her, stating:

> Before, during the time when there were one hundred great Treasure revealers, two of them actually manifested as female Treasure revealers (\textit{gter mo}). These days in this Degenerate Age, [we] don’t see the existence of female Treasure revealers.\textsuperscript{388}
Her authenticity doubted on the grounds of her gender, Sera Khandro wasn’t sure whether he would be pleased if she admitted the vessel was her Treasure, so from thenceforth she notes that she kept her Treasure revelation activities secret from Gyalsé. This was only the beginning of the divisive problems that plagued Sera Khandro when she was living with Gyalsé and his community. Sera Khandro recounts being in a social environment that was largely hostile to her, aside from a few trusted disciples and nun friends. In particular, Sera Khandro narrates that on another occasion when she was twenty-two, while out gathering firewood she had a visionary experience that caused her to return home later than expected to serve her partner Gyalsé his tea. He was furious and having slapped her, he threw her out of the house. After a fiery fight, the local people were shocked at Sera Khandro’s anger towards Gyalsé and called her a demon girl (‘dre mo). She records that,

I took a low place and kept the Treasure texts that had come to me extremely secret. During this time, one day Gyalsé went to [see] his middle brother Jikmé Könchok who was a monk at Palyül Monastery. I was alone and there wasn’t anybody around. I had an unfinished Treasure text that was from the Oral Transmission Dharma Cycle from my Treasure that was Tsogyal’s final testament together with a biography that came as a Treasure. When it became time [to finish it] and I was there writing the lines,

“I have no purpose aside from [benefiting] sentient beings.  
It is impossible for a jewel to be stained by mud.  
Phenomena depend only on interdependent causation,”

all of a sudden an old monk named Kyaga Künzang arrived. Saying he had an offering of Tibetan cake [made of barley flour, butter, cheese, sugar], he came with a full plate. He saw the text that I had written and asked, “What is this?”

I replied, “It is a Treasure scripture.”

He said, “It is amazing that you are taking care of Gara Lama’s Treasure scripture. It is not suitable for you to contaminate Lama Gyalsé.”
I answered, "Your Gyalsé having a wife like me is like the proverb of a donkey having golden ornaments on his head. I am not inflicting any harm on Gyalsé. Like the saying 'a nectar vase on top of an assembled mandala,' aside from benefiting [beings] with the inner meaning of primordial wisdom, I didn't harm him. If you think that I harmed Gyalsé, aside from me, it is certain that earlier your Gyalsé was already contaminated."389

This is an especially poignant scene, for who better to record the biography of Yeshé Tsogyal than another female practitioner who was widely believed to be her emissary? Yet Sera Khandro recounts that the monk rejected her ability to produce Treasures and that her harsh words incited his rage. In response, she threw her Tsogyal prophecy into the fire and vowed not to write profound Treasure again. Immediately after this unhappy episode in which Gyalsé's community members such as this old monk could not accept Sera Khandro's involvement in literary and religious pursuits, Sera Khandro interpreted her difficulties through the lens of her "inferior" gender. She pondered that, "Because of my inferior female body, it is difficult to benefit beings. Hence, if I had a lineage holder [i.e., a child] who could definitely benefit sentient beings, how happy [I would be]!"390

With this sentence, Sera Khandro foreshadows her ensuing pregnancy with her first child. Yet "definite benefit for sentient beings" seems to be inherent only for boys and not girls; Sera Khandro writes of Gyalsé and her own despair when the child she is carrying transforms from being a boy to a girl in her womb due to demonic influence.391

**Visions and Gender-based Self-Denigration**

Almost half of Sera Khandro's *Autobiography* is Sera Khandro's description of her prolific visionary and dream state travels to Buddhafields and her interactions with all varieties of Buddhist divinities and Tibetan demons.392 A large portion of these visions consist of her interactions with dākinīs, including Vajrārāhī and Yeshé Tsogyal.
Despite her genealogical relationship to these female divinities, Sera Khandro laments her inferior female body with mantra-like regularity in her interactions with divine figures who offer her consolation and encouragement. One of the most important visionary experiences in Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* is the episode in which Vajravārāhī confers upon Sera Khandro the prophetic registry and empowerment for her two Treasures, *The Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs* and *The Dākinīs’ Heart Essence*.

After receiving empowerment and instruction from Vajravārāhī, Sera Khandro recounts that her thirteen-year-old self asked the dākinī Sukhasiddhi,

> “You are extremely kind to bestow empowerment and instruction upon me. Because I am one with an inferior [female] body, it is difficult to accomplish the Dharma and [benefit] beings. However I can do this, how great! Why do I have the karmic residue to be empowered in these two profound Treasures?”

The dākinī answered, “Noble woman, you are not one with an inferior [female] body. Before, in response to Tsogyal’s inquiry, Guru [Padmasambhava] proclaimed:

> ‘The body of a female bodhisattva is a supreme body without [karmic] remainder; It is the mother [who gives birth to] the great assembly of primordially perfected Ones Gone to Bliss (Skt. *Sugata*).

Generate the aspiration to attain a supreme body like The Great Vajra Queen with the knowledge of the expanse of emptiness.

The beneficial deeds of the Buddhas of the three times, a dance of the moon [reflecting] in water, Arise in physical form on account of disciple’s devotion. Their source, the lotus mouth of the Vajra Queen, Is the foundation of the Buddha’s teaching, like a ripening bud.

This female body is not inferior; this body is good.

Tsogyal, you must generate the pure aspiration Never to part with this [female] body.’

Because [the Guru] spoke like this, [your body] is not inferior.”
This is one of the many moments in which Sera Khandro explicitly invokes the sacred history of the Treasure tradition in the form of the divine couple Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava to validate her own circumstances. This passage emphasizes the divine precedence of Sera Khandro’s role as a female religious figure; if Guru Rinpoché proclaimed that Yeshé Tsogyal’s female body was not inferior, then, as her emissary, Sera Khandro’s female body must also not be inferior. Similar to the passage cited above in which Grolrül Rinpoché commends Sera Khandro’s female form, this passage betrays the dual tone of Sera Khandro’s gender-based self-denigration. Thematizing her inferior female body can be subversive in that it has the ironic effect of occasioning responses from others that articulate highly positive views of women. Yet it is not only subversive; we can also interpret her negative rhetoric about being female as an internalization of the negative gender stereotypes prevalent in her communities. In early twentieth-century Golok, being female was associated with impurity and with being enmeshed in cyclic existence. As Sera Khandro laments in a prayer to Yeshé Tsogyal after Gyalsé scolds her again for revealing a Treasure:

\[
\text{... I, this messenger sent by the mother ďākinīs —} \\
\text{My impure body is being born as a woman.} \\
\text{My impure karma is grasping on to cyclic existence.} \\
\text{My impure place is the demonic land of Golok.} \\
\text{My impure deed is always having a negative community ...}\]

Nevertheless, her existence as a successful Treasure revealer and as an author of a long Autobiography proves that despite the “ritual obeisance” (to quote Furlong’s term) that she makes putting herself down for being female among other faults, her gender does not provide insurmountable barriers to her spiritual (and literary) purposes.
During the difficult phase of life with her restrictive and demanding partner Gara Gyalsé, when she was twenty-four years old, Sera Khandro recounts a disappointing experience. The incident involved being unable to accompany Gyalsé and her disciple Tupzang to attend a Condensed Intention of the Lama empowerment and reading transmission given by Katok Situ Rinpoche because, “Since mother and child had inferior [female] bodies, we had a weak karmic connection and weren’t able to find a way to go.” It is not clear from Sera Khandro’s comment exactly what the problem was, whether women and girls were not allowed to attend the monastic empowerment or whether there was another type of obstacle. What is clear is that Sera Khandro recalls being very disappointed with her situation as a woman; she narrates that she was extremely depressed and sang the following song of misery:

In the unmanifest land of the Glorious Mountain,
The Lord of the Buddhas of the three times, the protector of beings,
The glorious Lake Born Vajra of Orgyen, think of me!
I supplicate to you – look upon me!

By the power of the aspirations of the former Namnying Bazra,
I had pure karma and was empowered in profound Treasure.
The assembly of mother dakinis nurtured me like their child.
They gave me the instructions of the oral transmission of profound Dharma
In the manner of [giving me] precious wealth.

For the purpose of expanding beneficial deeds of benefiting both [self and other] and
To accomplish the aspirations of the Lotus Born Lord,
Various emanations conferred symbolic empowerment on me.

Thinking that deeds benefiting both [self and other] would certainly arise,
In accordance with the mother dakinis’ orders, I came to the eastern
Land of the demons alone
Despite great physical hardship.

Having incited the negative condition of the sapta demons of this degenerate time,
The types of karma and auspicious connections [I experienced] are like this:
I forgot about accomplishing the two benefits and
On account of the weakness of my inferior [female] body
My chance to attain profound Dharma weakened.
All the fortunate ones went off on the upper path of dharma.
I, Dewé Dorjé, wandered in cyclic existence.

Now, when I think of this, I feel sad.
I constantly think of the Copper-colored Mountain.
I would like to throw away this receptacle [that is my] illusory body.

Through the crystal column channel,
Mixing with the changeless expanse of awareness,
Inseparable from the mind of Mother Tsogyal,
I will go to the dimension of the self-appearing Unsurpassed Buddhaheld.399

Just after Sera Khandro sings this song of sadness, her perception changes and she perceives herself actually in Padmasambhava’s Buddhaheld, the Copper-colored Mountain. She despairs at her situation being a lowly woman trying to practice and teach the Dharma. Yet she also marvels to the ḍākinīs who greet her how ironic it is that in her visionary experience she is able to interact with the most exalted divinities, while in her conventional worldly reality in Tibet she cannot even manage to receive an empowerment.400 This sequence is one example of many in which ḍākinīs and divine visions provide her only source of encouragement in a world that seemed determined to discredit her.

Sera Khandro’s litany of self-denigrating comments focuses on representing herself as inferior due to being female (among other flaws), yet ultimately the message of her long Autobiography is one of triumph over the hardships she faced, including her troubles seeking liberation from cyclic existence while trapped in a female body that was itself associated with cyclic existence. Sera Khandro’s self-description was more than rhetoric in the sense that her words reflect very real difficulties she faced. Towards the end of her Autobiography, Sera Khandro writes,
When I was thirty-eight, on account of a strong negative circumstance, I felt depressed and fed up with being someone like me with a negative, inferior body, who was without a protector or refuge, and who nurtured others lovingly but was spontaneously hated in return.401

Sera Khandro repeatedly recounts her sadness and depression, in particular after her consort Drimé Özer’s death, and we can only imagine how difficult life must have been for her as a woman alone with no relatives to support her in the rough lands of early twentieth-century Golok. Yet there is also a sense in reading Sera Khandro’s Autobiography that her repeated self-denigrating comments about having an inferior female body are rhetorical lip service she pays while at the same time she presents an entirely different message. After all, she tells a little bird who lands on the edge of her yak hair tent and tries to console her during her bout of depression,

By the kindness of my realized lama who [is like] my only father, 
I saw the natural state of the self-aware Truth Body. 
Hence, I don’t need to judge [thinking that mental] stillness is good and thought is bad. 
Whatever arises extends equally as the expression of primordial wisdom. 
I don’t hope for artificial meditation involving reifying efforts.

The signs on the path of understanding, experience, and realization have manifested –
I don’t need to have hopes, fears, or two-minded doubts. 
I have cast away a meditator and a thing to be meditated on 
In the perfection of the indivisibility of the three Bodies.

Because unceasing appearances arose as an example, 
I did not need to gather many words from various texts. 
Because I have seen the meaning of primordial wisdom free from attachment, 
I am not attached to the forms of householders who engage in desirous behavior.

If I am involved in Dharma for the remainder of my life, 
This is the supreme purpose of attaining the support of a body. 
Do you understand? Do you hear me, miraculous little bird?402

In her Autobiography, Sera Khandro represents a self that is not only about the difficulties of life as a single non-monastic woman struggling to survive in a hostile
world; it is a liberation story of a woman who transcended all limitations of conceptual
mind to become constrained by nothing, least of all her "inferior female body."

**Gendered Reflections in Tibetan Women's Auto/biography**

A study of Sera Khandro's treatment of gender invites the question: to what
degree is Sera Khandro's literary treatment of gender and the female body characteristic
of other female-authored Tibetan texts? To what degree is her writing influenced by
biographical/hagiographical texts about Tibetan women? There are so few female-
authored autobiographies in Tibetan literature that it is difficult to draw any conclusions
regarding their treatment of gender. As I will expand upon in the following section, even
if Tibetan and Himalayan Studies did have access to the plethora of research on women's
writing that Euro-American autobiographical research has, stereotypes about writing style
based on the author's gender are highly problematic. Comparing Sera Khandro's
*Autobiography* with the near-contemporary autobiography of the co-founder of the
important Central Tibetan nunnery Shuksep named Jetsün Lochen (1865-1951) as well as
the autobiography of the nun and hermitess from Dolpo named Orgyen Chökyi (1675-
1729) demonstrates that the category of gender is always visible only in relation to other
social and cultural factors including education level, monastic versus non-monastic
status, and religious tradition. Interestingly, despite Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro's
shared temporal context, their autobiographies have little in common. On the other hand,
Orgyen Chökyi's writing thematizes gender, the body, and suffering in a way that
resonates with Sera Khandro's *Autobiography*. 
The Autobiography of Jetsün Lochen (1865-1951)

Perhaps the most important commonality between the renowned late nineteenth-century founder of the Central Tibetan nunnery Shuksep (Shug gseb), who was popularly called Jetsün Lochen (Rje btsun lo chen, Rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo, 1865-1951), and Sera Khandro is that both women managed to stand out in their respective communities as extraordinary women whose powerful status led them to write long works about their lives. In their autobiographies, both Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro recount extraordinary childhood occurrences (not unlike those of many male-authored autobiographies) including miracles at birth, supernatural learning abilities, and proclivities to teach Avalokiteśvara’s six-syllable mantra. Both Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro recount being recognized as emanations of Yeshé Tsogyal, although Jetsün Lochen was more strongly associated with Machik Labdrön. Both women experienced great hardship early in their lives and during their spiritual training. Jetsün Lochen recounts her turbulent life traveling with her mother and her often drunk, abusive, and unpredictable father, who even sold them on one occasion for money to pay for beer. She also describes the trials she experienced under the tutelage of her root teacher Pema Gyatso. Sera Khandro recounts hardships including starving, freezing, being socially ostracized, and working as a servant during her long trek to Golok and in her new life there. Both women have visions in which dākinīs inspire them to write down religious texts, but both women are reprimanded for writing by important men in their lives; Sera Khandro’s first partner Gara Gyalsé abuses her for writing Treasures while Jetsün Lochen writes in her autobiography:
When Teacher Chosang saw this [Ani Lochen writing religious teachings coming from her visions] he said, “You are not allowed that kind of writing!” and then he burnt everything in the fire. He kicked me in the head and from then on these visions stopped forever.\footnote{407}

Both women recount visions and dream sequences in which đākinīs offer help and encouragement, although the frequency and level of detail with which they record their visionary experiences are radically different; Jetsün Lochen’s autobiography includes approximately twelve visions, the majority of which involve đākinīs, while Sera Khandro includes ninety-two different visionary sequences, more than half of which feature her interactions with đākinīs.\footnote{408} Both women describe experiences returning from visionary travels to the realm of the dead (‘das log).\footnote{409} Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro both record having very close relationships with their mothers and feeling extremely depressed when they passed away.\footnote{410} Additionally, both women’s autobiographies contain a combination of self-humbling and laudatory remarks about themselves characteristic of Tibetan autobiography. In her autobiography, Jetsün Lochen qualifies that, “although I did not possess the knowledge to do welfare to others, I was unable to refuse their expectations,” as the prelude to describing the way that she “explained the empowerments, oral transmissions and instructions of the profound meaning of the stages of the path (theg rims).”\footnote{411} As I have elaborated upon above, Sera Khandro peppers her self-narrative with self-humbling words, often thematizing her gender, while at the same time presenting quite a different message. Nearing the conclusion of her 407 page tome, Sera Khandro writes,

Although I didn’t have the freedom to not write this, I, this one with an inferior [female] body, did not have even a sesame seed worth of knowledge from whatever perspective of the three doors [body, speech, and mind].\footnote{412}
Sera Khandro adds this comment just after she finishes describing the expansive empowerments and explanations that she gave to large assemblies of monastic and lay disciples in not only her own Treasure texts, but also those of her consort Drimé Özer and his father Dujom Lingpa. Thus, it is highly unlikely her readers are meant to take such disclaimers seriously.

Despite the many similarities noted above, Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro’s autobiographies are nearly completely different in tone, content, and style. This should be no surprise, given the vast differences between Jetsün Lochen’s life as a prominent nun in Central Tibet and Sera Khandro’s life in Golok as a Treasure revealer who had male consorts and children. Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro had very different educations as well: Jetsün Lochen gained prowess in reading from a very early age, acting as a professional reciter, or ma ni pa. Whereas Jetsün Lochen recited famous biographies as a girl, including that of the female Nangsa Obum, Sera Khandro writes that she was illiterate in Tibetan until she spontaneously knew how to read and write at the age of twenty-two. From her earliest childhood, Jetsün Lochen was a renowned religious figure, an unusual role for women. She recollects attracting crowds and private sponsors due to her ability to recite texts and give religious teachings. As one of the founders of Shuksep Nunnery around the year 1904 along with her teacher Tokden Semnyi Rinpoché, Jetsün Lochen spent the majority of her life practicing in retreat and teaching nuns and lay sponsors. Jetsün Lochen’s mother Tsentsar encouraged her religious predilections, and indeed mother and daughter traveled together everywhere.

In contrast, Sera Khandro’s mother died when she was thirteen years old. This event, her desire to escape from an arranged political marriage, and her interest in
pursuing a religious life encourage her to completely cut her family ties and pursue a new life as a religious mendicant in Golok. While Jetsün Lochen’s parents were itinerant pilgrims, traveling widely around the Central and Western Himalayas, Sera Khandro’s parents were sedentary nobility in Lhasa. These differences in social class, access to religious education, and parental support shaded their childhoods in divergent ways.

The central difference in their adult lives was that Jetsün Lochen was a meditator and a religious hierarch, a nun and an abbess. In contrast, Sera Khandro lived her life on the outskirts of religious institutions as non-monastic woman involved in revealing Treasures and practicing their associated rituals; she was a woman at home neither in the tents of Golok laypeople or in monastic contexts in which she continually seemed to incite people’s suspicion. The two women therefore had very different social communities; Jetsün Lochen had strong relationships with her community of nuns, whereas Sera Khandro lived in (often contentious) religious encampments (chos sgar) in which she never had a supportive community of female practitioners.

Another noticeable difference between Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro’s writings is the quantity of visions Sera Khandro recounts and the level of detail with which she writes of them. This difference can be understood as a reflection of the importance of visions in determining a Treasure revealers’ legitimacy, in particular visions that demonstrate their divinely mandated and prophesized roles as Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal’s emissaries. For Jetsün Lochen, recounting the pilgrimage sites she visited, the teachers with whom she studied, the teachings she practiced, the retreats she conducted, the instructions she taught, and the disciples she had
appear to be far more essential to her self-presentation as an authentic religious master than the dreams and visions that are so central for Sera Khandro.

The most noteworthy difference for our discussion between these two contemporary female-authored autobiographies is the ways they thematize (or don’t thematize) gender. That gender discrimination existed in both Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro’s lives is clear from that fact that they both mention preferential treatment of boy children over girl children: Jetsün Lochen portrays her father’s dismay at her birth as a female and Sera Khandro recounts Gyalsé and her dismay at their firstborn child’s transformation from a boy to a girl due to demonic influence.⁴¹⁵ Although Jetsün Lochen mentions being excluded from staying at larger monasteries she visited including Tashilhunpo, Gyantsé, and Ganden on the basis of her gender, she does not thematize her gender or her female body in the way that Sera Khandro pervasively does. Sera Khandro’s repeated rhetoric that “because she had an inferior female body,” she was unable to benefit beings is nowhere to be found in Jetsün Lochen’s writing. Their different geographic region and monastic status do not necessarily explain why these two extant late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century female-authored autobiographies diverge so significantly in their literary treatment of gender and the body. However, their divergences serve to exemplify the complex relationship between an author’s gender and the way he or she thematizes gender. Perhaps Jetsün Lochen’s accomplishment of building a community of nuns around her during her years at Shuksep Nunnery created an environment conducive to women’s spiritual practice in a way that Sera Khandro’s life in Golok religious encampments did not. Sera Khandro’s repetitive laments about the difficulties she faced because of her female body could indicate greater challenges she
experienced being one of the very few female Treasure revealers in a context in which she not only had little precedent (both women mention knowing few other female religious adepts), but also little supportive female community.

The Life of Orgyen Chökyi (1675-1729)

Despite the fact that Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro’s autobiographies share a common time period, Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* shares more in terms of representations of gender and female body with Orgyen Chökyi’s (1675-1729) autobiography, the *Life of Orgyen Chökyi*. At first glance, it appears that Orgyen Chökyi’s life story bears little resemblance to that of Sera Khandro. Orgyen Chökyi was born in Dolpo to a father who had leprosy and a mother who did not want her. She lived her life as a shepherd, a nun, and a hermitess, dying in 1729 at the age of fifty-five when a wooden beam fell on her head. Stylistically as well, the *Life of Orgyen Chökyi* is much terser than Sera Khandro’s elaborate and long-winded descriptions of her visionary and worldly interactions. This difference betrays Orgyen Chökyi’s humble origins as much as her editor’s disturbing abridgement of her story because her full life story “would be nothing more than a copy of the *Life of Nangsa Obum*, so it was not written.” Orgyen Chökyi’s writing is inspired by metaphors from the world of her familiar, which was a harsh mountainous terrain in which she was continually reminded of the suffering of impermanence through her work caring for animals.

Despite their temporal and cultural distance, Orgyen Chökyi’s *Life* and Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* both thematize suffering and the female body in similar ways. Orgyen Chökyi focuses on the suffering of female animals, likening their suffering to her
own on the foundation of their shared female bodies. After a leopard snatches away a mare’s young foal, Orgyen Chökyi laments,

When I ponder our female bodies  
I am sorrowful; impermanence rings clear.  
When men and women couple – creating more life –  
Happiness is rare, but suffering is felt for a long time.  
May I not be born again in a female body.  
May the mare not be born as a mare.\textsuperscript{418}

Again, after the death of a female yak cross-breed and her calf, Orgyen Chökyi despairs:

... Humans, horses, dogs, all beings,  
Male and female all think alike,  
But the suffering of life comes to females as a matter of course.  
I could do without the misery of this female life.  
How I lament this broken vessel, this female body.  
I could do without this female body with its misery.  
Ranting thoughts dwell in this woman’s body.  
From within the body, spreading outward,  
From the center of the mind misery comes unchecked.  
Like the yak protecting her calf,  
They give up life for their children.  

This female body is itself samsāra – the round of existence.  
May I attain a male body, and keep the vows,  
May I never again be born in the body of a woman!\textsuperscript{419}

From passages such as these, Schaeffer demonstrates that for Orgyen Chökyi, suffering was closely associated with the female body. He contrasts this to the autobiography of her teacher Tenzin Repa who represents suffering in general social terms that do not involve gender.\textsuperscript{420} Schaeffer concludes that, “in the Life of Orgyen Chökyi, the female body is not merely a symbol of samsāra, nor receptacle for the seeds of samsāra. It is samsāra.”\textsuperscript{421} He calls for further research into the relationship between suffering, gender, and female authored Tibetan Buddhist writings, stating that:

... we must ask if this gendering of suffering is unique to Orgyen Chökyi, or if it is found across a range of Tibetan Buddhist writings. I suggest that the strong
equation of suffering with the female body is characteristic of Orgyen Chökyi’s writing as a woman.\textsuperscript{322}

Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* stands as another example of a female-authored text in which gender and suffering are linked in a parallel way to that of Orgyen Chökyi’s writing. Both Orgyen Chökyi and Sera Khandro lament their female births and pray to be reborn in male bodies. Both explicitly compare the female body with cyclic existence, an analogy with ancient Buddhist roots.\textsuperscript{423} While portraying the suffering of cyclic existence is common to all Buddhist biography, its explicit association with women’s bodies is a theme particularly salient in biographies written by and about women. This association between women and physicality is also evident in the medieval Christian context; referring to the prevalence of fasting and other harsh physical austerities in medieval female mystics’ writings, Catherine Mooney notes that, “Women . . . are embodied physicality in a way that men, more often identified with mind and spirit, are not. Still contested, however, is the extent to which women and men shared an understanding of women’s embodied religious experience.”\textsuperscript{424} In the Tibetan Buddhist context, this association between women and physicality is, as in its Christian manifestation, an association between women and human suffering. Just as Orgyen Chökyi prays to be reborn as a man and never again as a woman because “This female body is itself samsāra – the round of existence,” Sera Khandro describes her female body as “the foundation of cyclic existence” that is a “contaminated, unclean, negative body.”\textsuperscript{425} She too wishes for an escape from the sufferings of the female body, sufferings she knows first-hand from her own traumatic experiences giving birth to three children, only one of whom lived past
childhood; she too prays to be reborn as a male in order to be of greater benefit to sentient beings.

Despite the ways in which Orgyen Chökyi and Sera Khandro thematize suffering and inferiority using gendered metaphors that can be read as their internalization of negative gender stereotypes about women and their bodies, both women’s autobiographies also betray a subversive element.\textsuperscript{426} Orgyen Chökyi elaborates on the suffering of human and animal female bodies, yet the existence of Orgyen Chökyi’s autobiography itself is a strong testament to her disavowal of negative stereotypes about her female gender. As Orgyen Chökyi recounts in the beginning of her narrative, her teacher refused her request for him to write an account of her joys and sufferings, saying “There is no reason to write a liberation tale for you — a woman.”\textsuperscript{427} Orgyen Chökyi then explains that she was “struck with the spiritual instruction of the ḍākini” and was able to write her account for herself without her teacher’s help.\textsuperscript{428} We can interpret this passage as an apologetic, explaining Orgyen Chökyi’s motivation to laud herself in written format despite the unconventionality of a woman writing, but we can also read this as Orgyen Chökyi’s assertion that her account \textit{did} have value despite her teacher’s gender-based misgivings. Also, later, her teacher doubts her on the basis of her gender, telling her, “Your woman’s mind does not understand great philosophy,” and “You are like an old woman who needs a lesson on how to get started,” but Orgyen Chökyi refuses to accept her teacher’s insults. She concludes, “‘I am not an old woman,’ I thought. ‘I have no burning desire, so he speaks falsely.’”\textsuperscript{429} In addition to these self-assertive comments, Schaeffer suggests that her association between the female body and suffering allows her to be the expert on this essential Buddhist topic since she speaks “not from books but
from her body.” In these ways, Orgyen Chökyi presents the very real societal and physical suffering that women of her milieu experienced as much as she demonstrates that these negative valuations of the female gender were ultimately surmountable. Likewise, Sera Khandro’s repetitive laments about her negative female body and her desire to abandon it because of its lesser ability to benefit beings allude to real limitations that Sera Khandro faced as one of the only women in her social world to be a Treasure revealer and an author as much as they demonstrate that Sera Khandro ultimately overcame these hardships to become one of the most prolific female authors in Tibetan literary history.

Sera Khandro’s first-hand experience with the sufferings of childbirth points towards the main difference between the lives of Orgyen Chökyi and Sera Khandro: Orgyen Chökyi’s life as a nun allowed her to eventually attain a level of autonomy in the context of a supportive female community, a freedom that Sera Khandro sought but never found. The struggle to attain an autonomous life is a major theme in both Orgyen Chökyi and Sera Khandro’s narratives, a commonality indicative of difficulties Himalayan women of their milieus faced finding freedom from housework, child rearing, and cooking in order to devote themselves to religion. Even after Orgyen Chökyi became a nun, she was distraught for years, begging her teacher for release from the kitchen drudgery that kept her too busy to practice religion. Once she had finally attained freedom to live her desired life as a hermitess, Orgyen Chökyi recounts,

“Before, when I was tending the kitchen fire, I had to get out of bed by lamp before dawn,” I thought. “I had to cook the food. Now I do not have to get up at dawn if I do not want to. If I want to take soup, I am free to do so when I am hungry. I am free to eat when I think of it. I can wear clothes on the path, and I can go naked when I am in my cell practicing. I do not have to grind the grain.
Woven and dyed things come to my ani friends, so I do not need rhubarb. The young nuns bring water . . . 431

Schaeffer explains that Orgyen Chökyi’s desire for release from the oppressive social world of the monastery with its concomitant labor duties was a desire for solitude, for “an empty valley with no people.” Yet, at the same time, he points out that she prays to “meet women friends with a similar religion.” 432 Orgyen Chökyi writes of her sustaining friendships with other nuns as well as her role as a mentor to younger nuns such as Ani Drupamo Drolma whom she encourages to stop doing kitchen work and go into retreat. 433 Her hermitage life in the mountains of Dolpo was thus filled with supportive relationships between the renunciate women who shared her life of religious devotion.

Sera Khandro, too, dreamed of independence and autonomy away from the drudgery of nomadic women’s work including milking animals, preparing tea for her life partner Gara Gyalsé, and caring for her children. Like Orgyen Chökyi, Sera Khandro despairied that even though she has renounced worldly life, she still did not have the freedoms and advantages to devote her energy to spiritual practice. She repeatedly wished that she could wander off to various unknown lands, but ultimately she could never find the autonomy to do this because she had to care for her young children. These constraints kept her in an unhappy, repressive relationship with Gyalsé until she became so ill that he finally sent her to live with her prophesized consort Drimé Özer. Even during her short years of happiness with Drimé Özer and her subsequent years as a sorrowful widow living at Sera Monastery, Sera Khandro never had a supportive community of women. Aside from her nun friend Chötreng and a few other friends, Sera Khandro described her relationships with many of the women around her as being full of jealousy and contention. Outside of the hagiographical figures Yeshé Tsogyal and
Machik Labdrön, Sera Khandro does not mention having female role models or knowing other female religious teachers.\textsuperscript{434} Nevertheless, she slowly gained greater, but never complete, autonomy towards the end of her life after she was freed from Gyalse and widowed from Drimé Özer; she traveled with her disciple Tupzang, her scribe Tsültrim Dorjé, and her daughter Chöying Drönma far and wide throughout the regions of Golok and Kham conferring empowerments, reading transmissions, and explanations of her own Treasure teachings as well as those of Drimé Özer and his father Dujom Lingpa. Thus, both Orgyen Chökyi and Sera Khandro attained levels of autonomy in their lives that were unusual for women, although Orgyen Chökyi did so in a context of a supportive female community that Sera Khandro never had.

**Female Hagiographies and their Influence on Sera Khandro’s Writing**

Distinctive metanarratives commonly appear in biographies and hagiographies about Tibetan women’s lives. Jetsün Lochen recounts reciting the biography of Nangsa Obum and being familiar with Gelong Palmo. Orgyen Chökyi mentions the extraordinary lives of Gelong Palmo, Machik Labdrön, and Nangsa Obum. Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography had a major influence on Sera Khandro’s writing. As I have described in other parts of this study, common elements between Yeshé Tsogyal and Sera Khandro’s life stories include mothers who come from the powerful Tibetan Nup (\textit{Gnubs}) clan, fathers who are local political leaders, great beauty in youth, extreme repulsion from impending marriages, consort relationships with important male Buddhist teachers, resistance to unwanted male attention, and explicit use of male consorts to serve their own spiritual needs, which I will expand upon in Chapter Four. But what other paradigms
for female religious exemplars would Sera Khandro have been familiar with? Two female religious exemplars whom Sera Khandro mentions and whose hagiographies bear significant similarities to her *Autobiography* are Jomo Memo (1248-83) and Machik Labdrön (eleventh-twelfth century). Two others that Orgyen Chökyi and Jetsün Lochen mention are Nangsa Obum and Gelong Palmo. Although Sera Khandro does not mention these latter two by name in her auto/biographical writing, she, too, would have been familiar with their life stories. In the following pages, I will briefly outline key elements of these female saints' lives and explore the ways in which Sera Khandro's *Autobiography* relates to their well-known examples.

Jomo Menmo is a thirteenth-century figure who bears a special relationship to Sera Khandro's life narrative. She is one of the two female Treasure revealers mentioned in Jamgön Kongtrül's (1813-1899) *Gter ston rgya rtsa* along with Kūngā Buma, a text Sera Khandro mentions more than once. Jomo Menmo's hagiography from this collection of Treasure revealer's biographies is quite short, but her influence on Sera Khandro is clear given that she is among the seven previous masters whose prophecies Sera Khandro includes at the beginning of her *Autobiography*. In the prophecy she cites, Sera Khandro even claims to be her incarnation:

> From the *Pure Vision Testament* of Pema Tsokyi or Jomo Menmo,

> "In the hare or the dragon year, my incarnation
Will be a householder named Sukhabazra.
By the power of prayers, she will wander in the lands of Amdo.
She will take out the *Extremely Secret Dakini’s Heart Accomplishment*
Dharma Treasure.
She will be born as the bud of the lineage of Chöwang's incarnation.
Some teachings will flourish and others will not.""
Jomo Menmo’s prophecy is particularly relevant to Sera Khandro’s life because she is a rare example of a female saint renowned for being both a Treasure revealer and the consort of one of the most prolific early Treasure revealers named Guru Chöwang (1212-1270). Although Gyatso notes that Guru Chöwang’s thirteenth-century autobiography does not mention Jomo Menmo as his consort, that Sera Khandro connected the two figures is clear from the fact that she mentions him in the above prophecy. Thus, Sera Khandro’s claim that she is an incarnation of Jomo Menmo and a descendant of Guru Chöwang is another way in which she relates her life to the divine history of the Treasure tradition, a history that for her is strongly connected to the paradigm of a divine Treasure revelation couple. Other connections tying the two female Treasure revealers together are that both were incarnations of Yeshé Tsogyal and both received their divine mandate to reveal Treasures from a visionary encounter with Vajravārāhī when they were thirteen.

Machik Labdrön, the eleventh-to twelfth-century female saint, is an example of an erudite non-celibate woman who gained the unprecedented honor of being the Tibetan founder of a new system of Buddhist practice known as Chöd, or “cutting.” Machik plays a smaller role in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography than she does in Jetsün Lochen’s autobiography, in which Jetsün explains that she was known as Machik’s incarnation. Jetsün’s life is similar to Machik’s as well in the sense that both women were renowned for being talented child reciters of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra. Yet Sera Khandro also portrays herself as having a special relationship with Machik beyond their similarities as two Tibetan women who came from wealthy nobility and pursued the non-celibate Tantric path. The only occasion that Sera Khandro mentions another (human) female religious teacher is when she describes a nun named Ané Zangmo who was a famous
incarnation of Machik Labdrön. Sera Khandro recollects being disappointed that she never got to meet the illustrious nun, who died when Sera Khandro was twenty years old. Despite this, Sera Khandro writes that after meeting two of the nun’s disciples, who came to offer Sera Khandro a skull cup and seal that the nun had bequeathed to her, she had a vision of meeting Machik Labdrön:

That night, after I prayed to the lama and the deities, I had a dream in my sleep. [I saw] a beautiful ḍākinī who said she was Machik Labdrön with a pleasant body clothed in a sky blue skirt and a stainless white cotton wrap with her hair hanging loosely down her back. In her right hand, she played a damaru and in her left, she rang a white silver bell. In a melodious voice, she spoke words like this:

Pray to the birthless Mother,  
The Great Mother of the Buddhas who is the Truth Body.

Pray to the unhindered Mother,  
Vajrayoginī who is the Enjoyment Body.

Pray to the all-pervading Mother,  
Tsogyal Lapdrönma who is the Emanation Body.

Eradicate the error of grasping to a self!

I bless you with the realization of selfless knowledge.  
I bless you with unobstructed, nonreferential vision.  
I bless you with turning adversity into favor.  
I bless you with the capacity to turn your body into food.  
I bless you with the realization of the wisdom of the Great Mother.  
I bless you that all your interactions will be meaningful.  
I bless you that you will attain the permanent domain of the Truth Body!  
Phet, Phet, phet!”

As soon as she said this, my perception transformed. Together with two ḍākinī companions, the appearance of wandering in many Buddhafields arose . . .

Sera Khandro’s rendition of Machik Lapdrön’s eloquent blessings gives voice to an all-female hierophany. After she offers obeisance to the divine Mother (Prajñāpāramitā) as the manifestation of the ultimate realization of Buddhahood, she confers realization to her
daemon sister Sera Khandro in the practice tradition for which she was best known, Chöd, in which one mentally offers one’s body as food in order to annihilate self-cherishing. That Machik Labdrön supplicates the divine in the form of the multi-faceted Great Mother is especially fitting given that she is one of the few examples of a female Buddhist saint who was a mother not only in the philosophical sense of being the mother of all sentient beings, but in the physical sense of bearing three children of her own who later became her students. In the thirteenth-century biography of Machik written by her disciple Namkhai Gyaltsen (b. 1370), he portrays the mixed feelings the young Machik expressed to her teachers after “entering into the union of means and wisdom” with a yogi named Töpa Bhadra:

Lapdrön told Lama Drapa that a ritual master named Bhadraya had seduced her. But the lama said, “That will create an interdependent connection that will bring about the welfare of beings. Don’t shy away from it.”

She then took some offerings and went to see Sönam Lama. She told him, “In Echung I met a man called Töpa Bhadra and he seduced me.”

“You are not a nun,” the lama said, “and Bhadraya is not a bad person, so there is no problem. Your family lineage will increase. You should stay with Bhadraya and it will create the karma and interdependent connections to bring vast benefit to sentient beings for a very long time. In fact, last night I had an excellent dream about it.”

Both of her lamas had given her their prophecies concerning the man, plus many other prophecies had come up. So she decided that she would settle this auspicious connection with Bhadraya. At the age of twenty-three, she went to live with Bhadra in Central Tibet.\(^{339}\)

Namkhai Gyaltsen’s depiction of Machik’s teachers encouraging her to engage in consort practices is reminiscent of the dialectic in Sera Khandro’s writing between her own hesitation and daemon’s and her lamas’ insistence that she should have consorts. Machik Labdrön is a female exemplar of the non-celibate Tantric path in which sexuality does not
go against the spiritual life, even if children are the result – Machik Labdrön had three children with Bhadraya. Likewise, Sera Khandro had three children, although only her daughter survived to adulthood. Both Machik Labdrön and Sera Khandro were actual mothers, but both illustrious women’s life narratives emphasize their religious achievements and scriptural output far more than their progeny.

Another immensely popular Tibetan female religious exemplar who was also a mother is the folk drama heroine Nangsa Obum. Nangsa Obum’s life is perhaps the most famous example of the commonly female religious figure of the “one who returns from the dead,” or delok (’das log).440 Although Sera Khandro does not mention Nangsa Obum by name, she does mention her own delok experiences traveling to the realm of the dead, witnessing the sufferings of hell, and returning back to earth to counsel her family and later her disciples on morality in both her Autobiography and her Treasure revelations.441 The outline of Nangsa Obum’s life story is that her parents compel her to marry the local king’s son against her will when she is fifteen years old. Instead of escaping arranged marriage as Sera Khandro (and Yeshé Tsogyal) did, Nangsa Obum complies with her parents’ wishes and marries. Although her royal husband and his father, the king of Rinang, love Nangsa Obum and want to give her the keys to the royal storehouse, the king’s sister Ani Nyemo grows jealous of her. She succeeds in convincing the two, father and son, that Nangsa Obum is unfaithful because she catches her giving alms to a traveling yogin. The king becomes enraged and beats her to death. While dead, she travels to the hell realms and meets Avalokiteśvara, who turns her back to the land of the living because of her positive karma. She returns to the palace transformed by her death experience and eager to teach her family about impermanence, karma, and suffering, but
they do not listen. This motivates Nangsa Obum to truly devote herself to religion; she departs from her palace house, leaving her young son behind, and becomes the disciple and then consort of the Tantric yogin Shakya Gyaltsen. Her royal family tries to battle with Shakya Gyaltsen to get her back, but the couple manifests miracles and repels the king’s armies. All are moved to faith and repent their sins. Nangsa’s true identity as Vajravārāhī becomes known, and her son becomes a virtuous king of the land.442

The story of Nangsa Obum exemplifies struggles that Sera Khandro and indeed countless other women faced between supporting their families and pursuing their spiritual lives. Nangsa Obum attempts to be virtuous as a perfect laywoman, but is torn between competing demands to care for her son, to placate the jealous sister of the king, and to pursue a religious career. It is only through her death to the world of her family that she is able to pursue a spiritual life for herself; in her narrative, life as a laywoman and life as a devout religious practitioner are antithetical to each other. Nangsa Obum and Sera Khandro’s life stories thus share more than their mutual journeys to the realm of the dead. Like Nangsa Obum, Sera Khandro becomes “dead” to her family when she escapes palace life at the age of fifteen. Yet this does not prevent her from ending up in a family context later on in Banak, Golok, struggling with her contentious and suspicious mother-in-law. Only near-death illness saves her from her life of servitude with Gara Gyalsé, freeing her to live with her Tantric master and consort Drimé Özer, with whom she gains ultimate realization. Nangsa Obum and Sera Khandro’s tales thus have many thematic similarities that highlight pivotal moments and key tensions in lay religious women’s lives: marriage, child care, tension with older women in their husbands’ families, and the desire to pursue their own religious practice. These competing demands are irresolvable;
their escalation creates a breaking point, an escape from or a death of one life and the beginning of another. Both Nangsa Obum and Sera Khandro’s life narratives are examples for Buddhist disciples of women who negotiated this tension-filled terrain and prevailed as spiritually realized women who followed the Tantric path of liberation.

All the paradigms for female saintliness in Tibet do not follow this Tantric path in the same way. Another important paradigm is that of Gelong Palmo, the most famous Buddhist nun in Tibet. Gelong Palmo (Skt. Bhikṣuṇī Lakṣmī) was a great Indian Buddhist nun who was the sister of the Indian king Indrabodhi. Similar to Sera Khandro, Gelong Palmo escaped the marriage that her royal family had arranged. Yet here is where their religious paths diverge. Gelong Palmo is renowned for the purity of her monastic vows and the boundless intensity of her devotion to Avalokiteśvara. Through her devotion, the scrupulous maintenance of her full ordination vows, and her practice of fasting, she was cured from her terrible case of leprosy. Gelong Palmo’s ritual fasting practice (smyung gnas) is still practiced widely in Tibet by laypeople and monastics alike, but primarily by nuns. Gelong Palmo’s life of celibate sanctity was certainly one that Sera Khandro respected, for she too yearned for the life of a nun during her childhood. Sera Khandro never mentions doing the fasting ritual so strongly associated with the female exemplar Gelong Palmo. The winds of prophecy carried her life in a different direction, towards the path of Treasure revelation in which she incorporated sexuality as a part of the spiritual path.

These four paradigms of female spirituality put forth very different interpretations of sanctity. Jomo Menmo was a Treasure revealer and a consort to a great lama, Machik Labdrön was a great yoginī, Nangsa Obum was an extraordinary delok, and Gelong
Palmo was a devout nun. Despite the availability of these varied examples of female sainthood, as Sarah Harding points out, for women “positions of power or even erudition in the clerical hierarchy were generally unavailable.” Examining the difficulties Sera Khandro faced finding a place for herself in the religious hierarchy of the Treasure tradition in Golok only adds one more example proving this point. The stories of these extraordinary women are exceptions to the rule of male hegemony; the lineage masters who inherited Gelong Palmo’s fasting ritual and Machik Labdrön’s Chöd rite were all male. Even so, the life stories of Sera Khandro, Jetsün Lochen, and Orgyen Chökyi are encouraging proofs that some Buddhist women did find ways to bridge the wide gap between being a human woman and becoming a female saint. Also noteworthy is that they achieved this transformation through very different life paths including becoming a nun, an abbess, a Treasure revealer, a consort, and a hermitess. That they were able to narrate their lives in the form of autobiographical literature both serves as an acknowledgement of their successful passage from mundane humanity to female sanctity as much as it paved the way for their further sanctification. Their autobiographies thus enabled them to join in the ranks of the female exemplars whose influence pervades the pages of their writing.

Despite the similarities between the hagiographies of prominent Tibetan female religious figures and the lives of female spiritual adepts such as Sera Khandro, it is not necessarily the case that female autobiographers modeled themselves exclusively on female role models. This is true not only in the Tibetan Buddhist case, but also reminiscent of Bynum’s interpretation of medieval Christian female saints’ writings. Bynum concludes that the idea that Mary and other women were models for female saints
was an idea more often professed by male biographers of females and not by female autobiographers, who were much more likely to discuss the imitation of Christ. In their interpretations of the biographical models for Jetsün Lochen and Orgyen Chökyi’s autobiographies, Hanna Havnevik and Kurtis Schaeffer do not lose sight of this point. Havnevik suggests that among others, the autobiography of the famous wandering yogin from Amdo named Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl (1781-1851) had a decisive influence on Jetsün Lochen’s autobiography. Kurtis Schaeffer explores the influence of the most famous Tibetan biography of all time, that of the Kagyü yogi Milarepa (1052-1135), on Orgyen Chökyi. Similarly, while Sera Khandro clearly modeled herself on elements of hagiographies of women such as Yeshé Tsogyal, it is likely that another important literary influence was the biography of Drimé Özer’s father Dujom Lingpa (1835-1924), which is replete with elaborate accounts of his visionary experiences that are not unlike Sera Khandro’s account. Sera Khandro’s first homes in Golok were in the vicinity of Dujom Lingpa’s seat, Dartsang Monastery. Later in her life, Sera Khandro recounts editing Dujom Lingpa’s entire textual corpus of revealed Treasures, totaling over forty volumes. Drimé Özer’s biographical and visionary textual output may also have had a significant influence on Sera Khandro’s writing, but this is difficult to ascertain since Drimé Özer’s writings appear not to have survived the Cultural Revolution.

A Genre of Women’s Autobiography? Relationality and Selfhood

The question of commonalities between women’s autobiographical writings and hagiographies about Tibetan women parallels a larger debate within studies on autobiography: can it be said that women’s autobiographies constitute an
autobiographical genre of their own? In the early 1980’s, autobiography theorists such as Mary Mason and Estelle Jelinek began to articulate this question in reaction to the nearly total exclusion of female-authored autobiographies from the canon of autobiographies studied by literary theorists that included classics such as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Cellini’s *Lif*, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Fox’s “Journal,” Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Goethe’s *Truth and Poetry*, Mill’s *Autobiography*, Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Suo*, and Thoreau’s *Walden*. They and others including Domna Stanton and Susan Friedman attempted to redress this oversight by spotlighting female autobiographies, religious and secular, and by theorizing the ways in which they differed from male-authored autobiographies. These feminist scholars criticized Gudorf’s notion that the “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life” was essential to the selfhood expressed in autobiography, a selfhood Gudorf defined as existing separately and in opposition to others. Well-known autobiography theorist John Paul Eakin concludes that the serious study of women’s autobiography and its concomitant critique of Gudorf was “the single most important achievement of autobiography studies in the last decade.”

Mary Mason’s 1980 essay “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers” was the ground-breaking beginning to this study of women’s autobiography. Mason compared the Duchess of Newcastle Margaret Cavendish’s 1656 autobiographical reflections *True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life*, Anne Bradstreet’s seventeenth-century spiritual account “To My Dear Children,” Margery Kempe’s fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe*, and Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations*. She concludes that according to these four models of female-authored autobiography, “the self-discovery of
female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other.' For Mason, women’s life-writing portrays a subject that is not separate from her social context but rather defines herself in relation to it. Hers is a "sort of evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity," or a narrative in which the subject is constituted by its relationship and interactions with others.

Another pioneering study on women’s autobiography that developed Mason’s theory of the relationality of the female autobiographical subject is the work of Estelle Jelinek. Jelinek argues that the topics that women write about are family, close friends, and domestic activities. She claims that although women’s autobiographies may include mention of historical or social events, “the emphasis remains on personal matters – not the professional, philosophical, or historical events that are more often the subject of men’s autobiographies.” Jelinek concludes that,

In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image colored by a sense of inadequacy and alienation of being outsiders or “other”; they feel the need for authentication, to prove their self-worth.

Jelinek suggests that despite the differences between women’s self narratives, these similarities including the domestic, personal focus and the fragmented self-image formulate a genre of women’s autobiography that is a discrete literary tradition of its own.

More recent critical theory has questioned the way in which early feminist autobiography theorists related the author’s gender to modes of self-presentation in a way that linked relationality to female subjectivity and autonomy to male subjectivity. Feminist autobiography theorists wrestled open Gusdorf’s association between
autobiography and the autonomous self by expanding analysis of autobiographical selfhood to include a wider interpretation of the self as relational. Nevertheless, as Eakin points out, these early champions of women’s autobiography tended to pigeonhole men’s autobiographical writing in Gusdorf’s older model of separate selfhood at the same time as they expanded that definition to include alternative constructions of selfhood for female autobiographers. More recent literary theorists such as Nancy Miller accept readings of women’s autobiography as including a relational self-presentation. However, she argues that men’s autobiography demonstrates the same relational quality that earlier theorists linked to female authors. Analyzing Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Philip Roth’s *Patrimony*, Jacques Derrida’s *Circonference*, and Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude*, Miller explores how these male authors’ autobiographical writings express their narrative selves in relation to others and as part of communities.

The interest that autobiography theorists from the 1980’s onwards applied to women’s autobiographical writings offered important critiques of Gusdorf and others’ assumption that the self represented in autobiography was that of a necessarily Western, autonomous individual. However, the over-simplistic ways in which theorists defined the parameters of a genre of women’s autobiography rested on stereotypes of women as more relational and interested in the home. Later theorists quickly debunked these stereotypes as outdated reflections of socially-constructed gender expectations instead of being defining characteristics of female selfhood. Early feminist theorists such as Jelinek compared female-authored autobiographies from a wide variety of temporal and cultural contexts because they understood gender to transcend other differences such as
nationality, time period, race, class, sexual preference, and religion. Postcolonial theorists have now demonstrated the problematic nature of this perspective.

The debates that Western autobiography theorists have grappled with regarding how to define a genre of women's autobiography offer important insights relevant to interpreting Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* in its Tibetan literary context. Theorists of European and American autobiography have debunked the grounds for articulating a separate genre of women's autobiography through demonstrating the way that both men's and women's autobiographical selves are defined in relation to others. Just as no clear distinctions can be drawn exclusively on the basis of gender between male- and female-authored autobiographies in the West, we can also apply this insight to the Tibetan context of autobiographical writing. Women such as Jetsün Lochen did not place a strong emphasis on thematizing gender and the sufferings of the female body, yet her autobiography is no less exemplary of female-authored Tibetan autobiographies than those that did, such as Sera Khandro and Orgyen Chökyi’s autobiographies.

While it is not necessarily useful to argue for genre distinctions between men's and women’s life writing, the focus that theorists of Western autobiography apply to investigating the nature of the self – independent or relational – offers useful insights for the study of Tibetan autobiography as well. For example, Sidonie Smith asks of autobiographies:

> What others inhabit the text? Is there a significant other posited in the text through whom, to whom, or about whom the life narrative is narrated? Who or what is that other – a family member, friend, mentor, lover, or even a divine force?\(^{459}\)

Additionally, Smith asks the following interesting questions about voice:

> Is the text monovocal or polyvocal? . . . If there are multiple voices, when do they emerge and when disappear? Why? Is there a blending or an unresolved tension
of voices in the narrative? . . . Is more than one group or collectivity invoked in the text, each with distinct values and languages?  

The value of the explosion of interest in women’s autobiographical writing in the West in the last twenty years for analyzing texts such as Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* lies in exploring provocative questions such as these, not in conjecturing about the status of Tibetan women’s autobiography as a genre. In particular, we might ask: where does Sera Khandro’s autobiography fall in this continuum between an isolated, independent self-presentation and a relational self? What writing styles does Sera Khandro employ to assert a sense of self in her autobiography? Does her writing style have anything to do with her gender? In the first part of this chapter we have already partially addressed these questions in terms of analyzing the ways in which her negative comments about her inferior female body act as a self-humbling strategy allowing her to present a multifaceted self that is both human and exemplary, humble and extraordinary. In the following two sections, we will focus on two other important aspects of Sera Khandro’s self-presentation: the dialogic nature of her writing and the role of the many visionary experiences she weaves throughout her *Autobiography*.

**Sera Khandro’s Dialogic Self**

Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* is pervaded with a multiplicity of voices including a wide range of divine, human, and demonic voices all written as direct speech dialogue. Sera Khandro presents a narrative version of herself through dialogic interaction with a host of others in a way that resembles the relational self that autobiography theorists articulated as paradigmatically female. For example, Domna Stanton expresses the relational self of women’s autobiography in the following way:
The female "I" was thus not simply a texture woven of various selves; its threads, its life-lines, came from and extended to others. By that token, this "I" represented a denial of a notion essential to the phallogocentric order: the totalized self-contained subject present-to-itself.\textsuperscript{461}

Sera Khandro describes her emerging identity as a Treasure revealer and as a consort through dialogic interactions with others. She presents herself always in relation to these others, be they divinities presenting prophecies or criticisms from the very human members of her communities. However, for Sera Khandro, this self-narrative woven from the threads of other's speech is not a denial of the phallogocentric order as Domna Stanton expresses it, for both male and female selves in the Buddhist context do not exist as autonomous individuals separate from others in the Gusdorfian sense. Sera Khandro's \textit{Autobiography} is an account of her rise to becoming an exemplary religious figure, but through the conversations she constantly records, her personal reflections and the social values of her milieu are always interconnected. Just as Bakhtin theorizes the word as a dialogic entity always already "entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments, and accents," likewise Sera Khandro's autobiographical self is not a self in isolation from others but rather is constituted by the social atmosphere in which it exists. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin writes,

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogical threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.\textsuperscript{462}

Similarly, Sera Khandro's \textit{Autobiography}, like Bakhtin's living utterance, is shot through with different voices in her social world. Through a dialogic process, Sera Khandro's self-narrative is able to "shape its own stylistic profile and tone" by "harmonizing with some of the elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others."\textsuperscript{463} This
heteroglossia of voices in Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* effectively produces her sense of self, a self that is closely related to other figures in her communities yet also empowered as a self-determining agent.

Sidonie Smith draws on Judith Butler’s understanding of gender as performative, as constituted through its performance and not prior to it, to argue that the self of autobiography is not existent prior to its autobiographical expression, but is actually an effect of autobiographical storytelling.464 Likewise, Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* is a narrative in which she develops her sense of herself as a divinely prophesized female Treasure revealer using the tools of dialogic speech, tools drawn from colloquial language that were easily accessible to Sera Khandro despite her lack of a formal literary education. This colloquial tone of many of the heteroglossia interactions recorded in her *Autobiography* constitutes the one way in which this relational, dialogic quality of her self-presentation could be tied to her female gender in the sense that as a laywoman and a runaway far away from her family, Sera Khandro never had a chance to get a formal Tibetan language education. Aside from this connection, Sera Khandro’s presentation of herself through dialogic interaction with others, what Mary Mason would call her relational self, is not linked to her female gender but is, rather, characteristic of her social world in which individuality was not a highly esteemed ideal.465

The dialogic interactions Sera Khandro recounts in her *Autobiography* allow her to say things she wouldn’t otherwise be able to say about herself without defying culturally acceptable models of self-humility.466 There are many instances in which other figures in Sera Khandro’s life, often important personages in her social world, praise her as an important Treasure revealer despite her vociferous denial of their lauding
comments. For example, the prominent lama from Pelyül Tartang Monastery in Golok named Gotrül Rinpoché ("Jigs bral chos kyi blo gros) was one of the first voices to recognize Sera Khandro as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal and to encourage her to reveal Treasures when she was twenty-four. Sera Khandro recounts what happened when she went to visit him:

Then, as offering supports I offered [Gotrül Rinpoché] a high quality turquoise wrapped in five-colored silk along with a silk scarf with auspicious symbols on it and I prostrated to him. When I asked him, “How are you?,” the incarnate himself got up from the middle of the assembly and offered me silver and a kata. The lamas, monks, and laymen and women gathered there all didn’t know what was going on. Each one looking at the other, they didn’t say anything.

Again, the incarnate [Gotrül Rinpoché] said, “You all don’t need to have doubt. I think this ċākini is certainly the speech incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal. You all abandon your wrong views and be faithful. This is not a deception; it is real.”

I thought, “Before [now] he has never met me or my retinue, so how can he know that I am Tsogyal? Not only that, how is it possible for someone with an inferior [female] body like me to be a ċākini? On the outside, I have little learning. On the inside, I am ignorant with regard to generation and perfection stage practice. No matter what action I begin, I cannot get past the activities of cyclic existence.”

When I wondered this, he said, “Not needing to exert yourself in learning and training, you fully comprehend all the paths of generation and perfection. Not needing to learn how to write and recite text, [you know] from the awakening of residual karma of having learned [before]. Nevertheless, not letting your own Treasures go, you must write and propagate them or the ċākinīs’ punishment will come near.”

I said, “I am not a Treasure revealer. I have never attained even one type of dharma teaching and I don’t know about generation and perfection [stage practices].”

In this exchange with Gotrül Rinpoché, Sera Khandro maintains her characteristic humility, again drawing on her “inferior female body” as one way to put herself down, despite the fact that being female cannot possibly be a reason she cannot be a ċākini. It is Gotrül Rinpoché who announces Sera Khandro’s extraordinary qualities; since his voice
speaks these lauding words, Sera Khandro is not directly praising herself by quoting him. In this way, other voices in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography speak about her in ways that she herself cannot. Yet, after she displays appropriate amounts of humility by denying Gotrül Rinpoché’s compliments, Sera Khandro hints that this was not the only reaction she had to Gotrül Rinpoché’s words by writing, “Not keeping anything that I knew secret, I spoke to him and we nurtured each other’s practices.”468

Later, Gotrül Rinpoché reiterates his praises of Sera Khandro, urging her to fulfill her life’s purpose of revealing Treasures:

Again, he said the following: “You are really Yeshé Tsogyal but because you belong to the leader of a bad lineage [Gyalse], it is difficult to understand whether you think positively or negatively [about wanting to reveal Treasures]. Not being like this, in accordance with the intellect of beings of this Degenerate Age, you must endeavor to find a way to bring about benefit for yourself and others. In particular, now, when you come back from pilgrimage, do whatever you can not to forget to find a way to take out whatever type of Treasure – body, speech, mind, good qualities, or beneficial deeds – that is for me.” Having said this, he gave me silver and a scarf blessed by the power of the divine [a kata] and made aspiration prayers.

I said, “Aside from being one who can take out the Treasure of boys and girls, I don’t have a way to take out vast earth Treasures.”

When I said this, again he replied, “Even if you don’t want to be a Treasure revealer, you are empowered with the karma of Treasures and you cannot keep this secret or it is certain that the auspicious connections will go to other powers. Because of this, not being secretive, speak to me honestly. Because we are connected by the karma of former aspirations, having relied upon each other, I think that benefit will arise for beings. Hence, we need to do this accordingly.469 Otherwise, despite the fact that I too am also one empowered in Treasures, because my root lama did not give me permission, I hid my registry (kha byang) and prophetic registry (lung byang) under the monastery wall. Later I will give it to you. I, not having the power to break the lama’s orders, amounted nothing more than an ordinary person. I turned forty-two years old this year and in this body, I didn’t [find] a way to accomplish the Lotus Born One’s aspirations. Since I have sincere prayers to [find] a way to accomplish [his aspirations] in a later [lifetime], keep this in your mind.”
Again, I said, “Although it is certain that I am not a Treasure revealer, if you think this [that I am], from now on I will do whatever it takes to write down all the texts from my deluded perception and I won’t let them go away.”

This dialogue is a very interesting exchange because Gotrül Rinpoché is not only articulating that Sera Khandro is a Treasure revealer, he is asserting that he needs her Treasures himself. Since he did not receive permission from his lama to accomplish Padmasambhava’s purpose of revealing Treasures in this lifetime, he exhorts her to reveal Treasures on his behalf. Sera Khandro’s deferential response to Gotrül Rinpoché is that she cannot possibly reveal anything more than the Treasures of a son or a daughter. The point of this analogy is that since Sera Khandro is just an ordinary woman, the only thing she can produce is children. This analogy makes sense because both children and Treasures are products of the generative act of sexuality. Thus, through dialogues such as the one above, Sera Khandro skillfully conveys her authority to reveal Treasures without having to express her extraordinary qualities in her own voice.

Sera Khandro recounts an interaction she had with Adzom Rinpoché when she was thirty-three that also exemplifies the ways in which she employs the voices of others, in this case an important religious patriarch, to present herself as a female Treasure revealer. Describing her visit to see Adzom, Sera Khandro records:

Then, when I met Drodül Pawo Dorjé [Adzom Rinpoché], the Lama said, “It is extremely good that you came here now. There are many arisings of auspicious connections that [are beneficial] for all, ourselves and others. In particular, it came to my mind a long time ago that you are an incarnation of the dākinī Künnga Bumo. I said this to the retinue including Angak and so forth. After this, when I heard that there was a woman Treasure revealer in Golok, I was sure that you were the incarnation of Buma.”

Künnga Bumo is the other of the two female Treasure revealers (along with Jomo Menmo) recorded in Jamgön Kongtrül’s *One Hundred Treasure Revealers (Gter ston brgya rtsa).*
Therefore, through the voices of others in her narrative, Sera Khandro has claimed to be the incarnation of all of the most famous female figures in the Treasure tradition: Yeshé Tsogyal (through Götül Rinpoche’s proclamation), Jomo Menmo (through her prophecy), and Kūnga Buma. After Adzom Rinpoche flatters her with this compliment, he quizzes her in greater detail about her pedigree as a Treasure revealer:

The Lama [Adzom Rinpoché] asked, “Which lama told you that you were a Treasure revealer?”

I answered, “Until I had reached the age of thirty, I had never met my lama, hence I didn’t have time to ask if I was a Treasure revealer or not. From the time I was fifteen years old I wrote down whatever I remembered and sang songs. Besides that, I did not examine whether or not I was a Treasure revealer. If one realizes the meaning of reality itself, phenomenal appearances arise as symbolic examples. No matter what happens to this one with a [walking] stick, I cannot fall down. Hence, I write down whatever arises and I explain whatever I know as oral instructions.”

When I said this, the lama said, “Aside from perhaps being one who sees him or herself as being a Treasure revealer, all the other Treasure revealers were given the name "Treasure revealer" by their root lama or other beings who have attained [bodhisattva] grounds. I have never heard of someone calling him or herself a Treasure revealer.”

Again, I said, “Like the Chinese Emperor giving titles to the masses, someone else saying whether you are a Treasure revealer or not is very difficult to determine. These days, still there are many Treasure revealers who write ample text who – aside from knowing how to recite a bit of text and having stayed in a month-long retreat examining the origin of mind – have not themselves met with a lama endowed with substantial and insubstantial characteristics, nor ripened the profound generation and perfection stages in their mind streams, nor abandoned desiring the eight worldly dharmas that are the actions of cyclic existence. Indeed, they do things like not protecting their vows and commitments and so forth. I don’t know what will happen to those who just say they are Treasure revealers.

Because of this, although other people say that I, this inferior one, am or am not a Treasure revealer, my mind is unwavering and I am without manifest and hidden commitments. For one thing, like barley and oat seeds are different from the beginning, from the time I was eight years old, the lamas and dākinīs took care of me. Second, they established me in ripening and liberation [practices]. Thirdly, no matter whether I had symbolic pages or not, without doubt or corrections based on personal ingenuity, I wrote [text] like Treasure scripture.
Although I have many clear prophecies including all my consorts, doctrine holders, and places of my disciples and so forth, until the time comes for the [ripening] of former aspirations, based on the fact that I exerted myself greatly in my own desires and did not endeavor (in the Dharma), I didn’t ask anyone if I was a Treasure revealer. Aside from this, in me all good qualities are exhausted and I have all the faults. I am a maid servant of the Gara family. Hence, I am without even a hair’s breadth of learning regarding what I see and understand. These days the fact that I am neither nun nor laywoman arose through the kindness of my holy guide The Incarnate Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Drimé Özer].”

The lama was extremely pleased and said, “Daughter of a good father, of course you are like this [i.e., a Treasure revealer].”

That Sera Khandro grappled with presenting herself as a legitimate Treasure revealer is clear from passages such as this in which the authenticity of her status as a Treasure revealer was the topic of her dialogic interactions and personal reflections. Although Sera Khandro hints that she is different from ordinary people, just as barley and oat seeds are different, she convinces Adzom of her legitimacy as a Treasure revealer due to her humility and introspective speech. Adzom’s probing questions test Sera Khandro, questioning her claims to be a Treasure revealer just as, perhaps, future readers of her Autobiography might do. Thus, through dialogues such as this one with Adzom Rinpoché, the voices of others who inhabit Sera Khandro’s narrative extol her virtues in a way that she cannot in her own voice.

The multiple voices Sera Khandro interacts with in her narrative not only laud her extraordinary qualities, but also at times present opinions that Sera Khandro does not want to put in her own voice for other reasons. For example, when Sera Khandro was returning to Gyalsé’s encampment after an extraordinary visit with Drimé Özer during the transitional stage of her life before she permanently left Gyalsé when she was thirty
years old, she recounts feeling uneasy about her return to the contentious context of Gyalsé’s encampment. She spoke with her trusted disciple Tupzang about her misgivings:

Then, since the encampment base of the household that we were going to had gone to the Gar [Gara Gyalsé’s] camp, I told Tupzang, “This year because our encampment base went to the Gar camp, there aren’t any good prophecies. It isn’t a good auspicious circumstance.”

Tupzang said, “Yes, before when Gyalsé was one with no wealth or food, I never saw his relatives say they were from the Gar camp. These days thanks to your kindness, when there is wealth and possessions, their identity as [part of] the Gara family is awakened and they need to take care of Gyalsé.”

I said, “You are [like] a young person with a child’s intellect who doesn’t know anything. It is not acceptable for you to say that. If they hear you, they will say bad things.”

This dialogue portrays the mobile culture of Golok as well as the financial hardship that religious encampments at times endured. Tupzang’s comment about Sera Khandro being the source of Gyalsé’s financial windfall is an interesting allusion to the financial disputes she had with Gyalsé not long after this time when they separated. Sera Khandro artfully places these negative words about Gyalsé and his money-grubbing relatives in Tupzang’s voice, which she then somewhat harshly refutes. Yet, in writing these words in her Autobiography, she conveys the bad feelings that both of them had about Gyalsé’s relatives without appearing to be insulting her in-laws.

Sera Khandro (rhetorically?) negates much of what the other voices in her self-narrative tell her, whether they praise her as a däkinī and a Treasure revealer, whether they tease her about needing a consort, or whether their messages are less lauding and more mundane, pertaining to the difficulties of living within her worldly communities. Chapter Four continues this exploration of Sera Khandro’s dialogic interactions, focusing on her representations of consort practices through conversations she narrates between
herself and other jealous and disapproving women in her communities, the men in her life who exchanged her between themselves, and the dākinīs who never let her forget that her destiny involved engaging in consort relationships. Somewhere in-between these dialectics concerning whether or not her female body was virtuous, whether or not she was a Treasure revealer, and whether or not sexual yoga was misconduct, Sera Khandro articulates her autobiographical self. It is through these many dialogic interactions that she can present herself as humble, but assertive, destined for greatness, yet overwhelmed with human suffering.

The Role of Visions in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography

The dialogic tone of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography stretches out to include not only interactions with humans, but also with supernatural beings. The most central way in which Sera Khandro represents herself in her Autobiography is through recounting a host of elaborate visionary experiences in which she describes in minute detail her interactions with the plethora of dākinīs, dakas, and bodhisattvas in their various celestial palaces. Nearly half of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography records events, interactions, and journeys that occurred in Sera Khandro’s dream-like visions. As I have previously mentioned, the importance of visions in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography is paradigmatic of Treasure revealers’ autobiographies in which visionary experiences receiving teachings and finding Treasures serve to legitimize their claims to be Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal’s prophesized emissaries. The key figures in Sera Khandro’s visionary encounters are dākinīs, especially the mother of all dākinīs Yeshé Tsogyal. Of the roughly ninety-two visions Sera Khandro recounts in her Autobiography, the majority of
them (forty-eight) are visions in which the central figure is a ḍākinī or some type of female divinity, including most commonly Yeshé Tsogyal, Vajravārāhī, Vajrayoginī, Tārā, Machik Labdrön, Dorjé Yüdrönma, Shelkar Dorjé Tso, Dorjé Zungma, and Dewé Gocha. While some might dismiss these super mundane reveries as superfluous fictional interludes in an otherwise interesting autobiographical account of life as a female Treasure revealer in early twentieth-century Golok, Sera Khandro’s visionary reveries tell us just as much about the ways in which she understood and sought to portray herself as her more mundane reflections do. ḍākinīs and the other divinities Sera Khandro envisions offer her encouragement in an uncertain world; they restore her inner confidence in herself and her divine purpose as a Treasure revealer, boosting her up in moments of self-doubt when others in her conventional reality distrust her. Visions appear in Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* at strategic moments, just when her worldly circumstances reach their most extreme lows. They thus form another dialectic running through Sera Khandro’s narrative between conventional worldly difficulties and divine inspiration.

In her analysis of the role of ḍākinī’s in Jigmé Lingpa’s autobiographical writings, Janet Gyatso demonstrates the ways in which ḍākinī’s language destabilizes Jigmé Lingpa’s conventional understanding of himself. Gyatso suggests that ḍākinī’s language emphasizes the unformulated quality of selfhood, which in turn reflects the undecidability of experience in the Buddhist context. Gyatso writes,

Rather, the self-consciously encoded nature of the ḍākinī’s talk demonstrates the provisional status of her words, the very relativity of distinctions, and their lack of any single determinate or specifiable meaning. It suggests a way of writing autobiography that does not violate the reality of the “self,” as Jigme Lingpa sees it, namely, its ultimate empty and unformulatable nature.
Gyatso also represents the instances in which visions offer Jikmé Lingpa affection, encouragement, advice, and recognition as a Treasure revealer. Thus, she argues that visions both bolster Jikmé Lingpa’s sense of himself and destabilize it, contributing to the ultimate undecidability of his experience.

The elusiveness of ḍākinīs’ language emerges in Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* as well, yet I would suggest that for Sera Khandro, divine visions and especially visions of ḍākinīs help her to build up a solid, self-confident understanding of herself as a female agent in a world not particularly supportive of her religious aspirations. What is at stake in Sera Khandro’s visionary life is not the prototypically Buddhist project of reflecting on the unformulatable nature of the self, but rather articulating a viable sense of self in a social world in which she had very few role models and supporters. Perhaps because of her unusual status as a female Treasure revealer and as an outsider to the Golok family lineages of Treasure revealers, Sera Khandro did not have the luxury of analyzing the unformulated quality of her sense of self as much as she felt the urgency of putting together a coherent identity with the aid of her divine interlocutors. Yet the importance of visions in formulating a coherent sense of Treasure revealers’ selfhood is not unique to Sera Khandro because she was female or because she had difficult social circumstances. In the famous fourteenth-century polymath and Treasure revealer Longchenpa’s biographical reflections, ḍākinīs bolster his confidence in himself as a legitimate Treasure revealer by recognizing him as an authentic incarnation and by confirming how and where he will extract his Treasures. Therefore, although Sera Khandro’s subordinate status as an “inferior female birth” struggling to make a name for herself in Golok society as a Treasure revealer influences the way she presents her literary self, the fact that her
\(\text{\=d\=a}k\text{\=i}n\text{\=i}\) visions bolster her sense of self-confidence resembles the autobiographical self-presentations of other Treasure revealers. The difference is that for Sera Khandro, divine visions offer her nothing but confirmation, albeit sometimes in a "tough love" form, such as when a terrifying woman threatens to stab Sera Khandro in order to stop her from jumping into the river during a childhood bout of depression. Perhaps Sera Khandro's worldly experiences of suffering and displacement serve to destabilize her sense of selfhood to the degree that her visionary life can do nothing but bolster her fragile self-confidence.

Sera Khandro recounts having visionary experiences that offered her encouragement to accomplish her divinely inspired purpose of revealing Treasures at key moments in her narrative, moments in which her worldly life was causing her great sadness and hardship. From her childhood onwards, \(\text{\=d\=a}k\text{\=i}n\text{\=i}\=s\) appear to Sera Khandro immediately after discouraging events and interactions in her worldly life. She recounts that when she was nine years old on pilgrimage to U \text{\=ri} (\text{\=D\=bus r\=i}), the night after Sera Khandro's mother scolded her for indicating that she remembered her share of texts from Önpu Taktsang, a holy place associated with Yeshé Tsogyal, she had an extraordinary dream:

That night in my dream a \(\text{\=d\=a}k\text{\=i}n\text{\=i}\) wearing bone ornaments and silk clothing adorned with various jewels arrived. Having given me a skull cup full of beer, she said, "Noble woman, drink this – it is [your] share of the \(\text{\=d\=a}k\text{\=i}n\text{\=i}\) feast."

I asked her, "If I don't arrive at the ranks of the \(\text{\=d\=a}k\text{\=i}n\text{\=i}\) feast, what is the benefit of just my share of the feast?"

The \(\text{\=d\=a}k\text{\=i}n\text{\=i}\) replied, "Train your vajra body in yogic postures. Because you are an illusory emanation of the \(\text{\=d\=a}k\text{\=i}n\text{\=i}\)'s mental energy, in not a long time we will meet again."

\(^{480}\)
Even if her mother cannot accept her divine capacities and feels she must punish her for indicating that she is a Treasure revealer, divine dākinīs immediately appear to reassure Sera Khandro that she is special by giving her a share of the dākinīs’ feast. Just after this short dream interlude, Sera Khandro continues recounting the story of her pilgrimage with her parents. In this way, visionary interludes interspersed in her narrative balance the negative elements of her conventional account, lending a two-toned quality to her narrative. They allow her to reveal her extraordinary access to the divine at the same time as she relates the story of her worldly sufferings.

Sera Khandro writes that when she was ten years old, the Chinese and Tibetan leaders met and had a conference about Sera Khandro’s leadership status. Despairing at the thought of being forced into pursuing a worldly life, Sera Khandro prays fervently to Yeshé Tsogyal:

Then, when I was in my bedroom [called] the Sunlight Place, a pleasant woman saying she was the Dākinī Yeshé Tsogyal came who was ornamented with many jewels and whose good smell pervaded the vicinity of the entire room. She said: “Fortunate Lady — why did you call me?”

I said, “My reason for calling out lamentingly to you is this: since you all who reside in the expanse of primordial wisdom have greatly powerful compassion and strength, how do you think I can accomplish my intention to practice the completely pure Dharma on an isolated mountain ravine, going from my home to being a homeless one? All my parents and relatives say that I must maintain the actions of cyclic existence. What do I need to do to dispel their strict orders?”

When I asked this, the dākinī replied, “Pray according to this during the six times of the day and night and it is certain that all of your obstacles will be pacified.”

She disappeared and I heard this from the resonance of her voice:

E ma ho!
All refuges condensed into One, Dākinī Yeshé Tsogyal,
I supplicate to you with overwhelming fervent yearning.
Pacify my outer, inner, and secret obstacles and
Grant me the blessing of spontaneously accomplishing all of my wishes.
Because I constantly exerted myself in [reciting] this, all the leaders got fed up and said that I could do whatever I wanted regarding being a leader or not.481

In this passage, Sera Khandro’s visionary interaction with Yeshé Tsogyal not only offers her encouragement and religious instruction, but actually directly intervenes to ameliorate the hardships she faces in her worldly life by helping Sera Khandro to evade the political leaders’ demands.

Visionary interludes give Sera Khandro hope and encouragement during the difficult period in her childhood when she struggles to escape the demands her parents place on her to marry and pursue a political life in Lhasa. Despairing that her father didn’t love her since he had given her away in marriage, Sera Khandro recounts that she attempted suicide by drinking a mixture of opium and alcohol. Her father rescues her just in time by forcing the unconscious Sera Khandro to regurgitate the poison. Sera Khandro recovers from this trauma only to suddenly lose consciousness for a period of seven days in which she travels to other realms as one who returns from the dead (a delok). Sera Khandro recounts traveling to various realms including Guru Rinpoche’s Buddhafield in which she met Yeshé Tsogyal in person and begged her not to be sent back into the world. Yeshé Tsogyal responds:

“Noble woman, because you are a manifestation of the form of my beneficial deeds, still you must benefit beings and return to the world. When the time comes, I will come to lead you on the path.”

Then, in the center of the mandala, there was a crystal vase. Inside of this she said there was a “ra sa ya” ambrosia of immortality and [she] poured it into [my mouth]. As soon as I touched this [ambrosia], as if waking from sleep, I returned to my physical body. Tears sprang forth from my parents and all my relatives.482

Yeshé Tsogyal in person thus nurtures Sera Khandro back to life after her depression and suicidal experience. Sera Khandro explains that although some accused her of being a
delok, her family denied this accusation for fear that her future husband’s family, the Chinese leader’s family, would disapprove. Whether or not Sera Khandro is a delok, she stuns her parents by telling them of her journeys traveling through the hells and viewing the suffering in the six realms of cyclic existence.

This pattern of stressful worldly circumstances and encouraging divine visionary interludes, most often with Yeshé Tsogyal as the main figure, continues throughout the many difficult times in her early teen years. The climax of these early visions occurs shortly after the worst devastation of her young life: her beloved mother dies at the same time as her father finalizes the plans for her upcoming marriage to the Chinese leader of Kyilung. Just as her depression reaches its ultimate low, the most important vision of Sera Khandro’s life occurs. Vajrabhairava appears before her in a dream and bestows upon her the registries of Sera Khandro’s two Treasure cycles. This vision gives her life purpose and helps to bolster her resolve to leave home and embark upon her life-long journey of spiritual practice.

After Sera Khandro’s escape from the confines of her Lhasa family’s life, trouble follows her. Hardships on the road and adjusting to the rough environment of Golok plague her. Not only that, but interpersonal problems between Sera Khandro and other women in her religious communities as well as between her and her life partner Gara Gyalsé make life difficult. During this period also, visions appear in Sera Khandro’s narrative at critical moments of despair to reassure her that her worldly problems are surmountable. For example, when Sera Khandro was seventeen years old, she was working as a servant girl after being expelled from Drimé Özer’s household by his jealous consort. At this time, she receives a letter from Gara Tertön summoning her to act
as his consort. Shortly after this, Gara Tertön’s consort Yakza threatened to abuse her verbally and physically. Sera Khandro despairs when she realizes that the auspicious connection of her prophesized interaction with Gara Tertön is ruined. Then, when she practices the clear light of the fierce woman (*gtum mo*) meditation practice[^483] she has the following vision:

> When I was there practicing the clear light of the fierce woman (*gtum mo*), my perception transformed and in a large seminal drop, there was an even, vast ground with flowers and lakes surrounding it. In the middle of this, inside of a vast rainbow pavilion, there were many offering substances. In particular, a feast offering was arranged called the Feast of the Đākinīs of the Three Bodies [body, speech, and mind]. There, heroes, heroines, and đākinīs had gathered like a market assembly of gods and men.

I wondered, “What is this?” When I went to the door of the pavilion and looked in, the Đākinī Yeshé Tsogyal acted as the head of the assembly and opened the *Mandala* of the Dharma Ocean of the Collected Teachings. I was extremely joyous and I prostrated, offering these words:

> “Salutations!
From the center of the expanse of the pure sky realm of reality,
You act for the benefit of beings with the excellent means of compassion.

To the divine assembly of mother đākinīs who gave birth to all the Buddhhas,
I prostrate with devotion from my three doors [body, speech, and mind].

By the power of auspicious connections of good prayers from former lives,
Today I meet with the assembly of mothers and đākinīs.

Having taken care of all of us sentient beings in existence,
Until the ocean of cyclic existence is empty,
Đākinī Tsogyal, may we become inseparable from you!”

After I made this prayer, two đākinīs saying they were Künselma and Dewé Gocha came and said,

> “Eh ma! One with fortunate karmic traces!
It is extremely amazing that you came, friend,
To the city of the blissful, blissful đākinīs.
The time has come for the prayers
Of your share of the secret treasury of dharma.
Noble Lady, you have [fortunate] karmic traces!"

Saying this, they both washed me and changed my clothes and [we] went into the pavilion. Mother Tsogyal smiled and said the following:

"Noble lady, how is benefiting beings going?
Have you had great difficulties in the world?
Have you not [grasped on] to the illusory land as your own?"

When she said this, thinking of the suffering I felt when I came from my land [Lhasa] and thinking of the suffering I had experienced since arriving in Amdo and Kham, I bowed before the feet of the Lady and offered these words:

"Alas! One with eyes of the treasury of primordial wisdom –

I will tell you a bit about the situation of myself, this one with an inferior [female] body.

From the time I was eight, ḍākinīs took care of me;
They reassured me in reality, visions, and dreams.

From the time I was twelve, the Accomplished Knowledge Holder Sarahapa took care of me and bestowed ripening and liberation upon me.

When I was thirteen, I obtained in my hands the non-erroneous registry of the profound Treasure of the ḍākinīs’ oral transmission.

From the time I was fourteen, I exerted myself only in benefiting others.

At fifteen in accordance with the ḍākinī’s order
I came to the eastern region of Amdo and Kham that is like a demonic land.
Not dying, I experienced the suffering of hell.

Although the karmic traces of former aspirations gathered in time,
Suddenly, again and again they went away on account of sapta demons.

For someone like me in a demonic land without virtue
[I can] forget about benefiting beings – on account of obscurations from degenerated [commitments],
It is difficult to benefit myself with pure morality.

Because of other forces, the profound Treasure consorts and doctrine holders
Have been lost [to those who] pretend to follow Vinaya rules
And see me, this inferior birth [i.e., woman] as something to abandon.

The two benefits [of self and other] not arising, I don’t accomplish the ḍākinī’s orders.
Because one cannot hear of or see [someone] with bad karma like me,
Now I will not go to the realm of the world.”

Saying this, I cried. The ḍākinī [Yeshé Tsogyal] said,

“Listen one with karmic traces of good fortune!
Don’t be saddened by the illusory land.
Adhere to the secure place of changeless awareness.

Happiness and suffering are like a dream-city.
Don’t weaken your capacity to carry awareness and emptiness on the path.

This hollow illusory body
[Must] rely on a consort to enhance bliss and emptiness.

By the power of the prayer of the Lotus [Born One],
Gradually you will meet consorts and Dharma holders.

When the time of karma and prayers gathers together,
You will skillfully subdue the five fields of disciples.

With an iron hook, you will summon of the noble hero method consort
Who grasps the quintessence of the esoteric precepts.

The sword of egoless knowledge cuts through
The eight worldly dharmas that are in opposition to dharma.

May the demonic spy who grasps on to duality
Attain the realization of the non-dual Truth Body.

Realize that all mental wavering of happiness and suffering
Are luminous and empty awareness.

One with the karmic traces of being a messenger of the ḍākinīs –
Although you don’t want to [go to the world], benefit sentient beings.

Like a precious jewel,
It is impossible that you will be stained by negative, inferior wrong views.

Like water bubbles up from hard earth,
You will spontaneously accomplish the two purposes.

Since still in the world your remaining disciples have not finished,
Intensely arouse vows and aspirations
To establish [disciples] in bliss by whatever means you can tame [them]
In the various places of the demonic land of Amdo and Kham.

Until you are twenty, keep this secret.
Abandon the bliss of ordinary men.
Benefit beings, both formless and with form,
By [means of] auspicious connection substances.

You must not rip the seal of the profound Treasure.
From now onwards, if you rely on the essential auspicious connection,
It is certain that you will take out the jewel of the two benefits.”

Having said this, [Yeshé Tsogyal] gave me a full skull cup of beer and said,
“Drink this without remainder — because it is dākinī’s accomplishment substance,
it is certain that without exertion, you will know everything there is to be known.”

In the passage above, Yeshé Tsogyal appears just in time to encourage Sera Khandro to endure her worldly sufferings for the sake of benefiting others despite the overwhelming disappointment and exhaustion she feels. All three themes of this chapter (gender, dialogic interactions, and visions) are present in this passage: Sera Khandro bemoans her “inferior birth” as a woman and the difficulties it causes her to accomplish her spiritual goals in the form of a visionary dialogue. Yeshé Tsogyal’s response to Sera Khandro is unequivocal that she must benefit beings through cultivating the auspicious connections of relying “on a consort to enhance bliss and emptiness.” After all, this visionary sequence emerges just after Gara Tertön’s consort Yakza forbids Sera Khandro access to the lama to act as his consort. Dākinī visions such as this one offer encouragement in times of distress. As Sera Khandro herself describes, “From the time I was eight, dākinīs took care of me; they reassured me in reality, visions, and dreams.” These visionary
dākinīs are the opposite of destabilizing forces in her self-narrative; they enable Sera Khandro to build an identity for herself as a legitimate Treasure revealer.

During the difficult period of Sera Khandro’s life in her mid-twenties living with her partner Gara Gyalsé, who strongly disapproved of her being a Treasure revealer, divine visions repeatedly comfort Sera Khandro immediately after Gyalsé reprimands her for revealing Treasures. Sera Khandro recounts that when she was twenty-two, just after giving birth to her first child who transformed from a male incarnation of Gara Tertön to a girl (i.e., not an incarnation), she propagated part of a new Treasure that was a (Machik) Labdrön Accomplishment Practice to monks of the Kangsar family. She records that Gyalsé discovered her Treasure teaching and scolded her. Feeling extremely sad, she prays to the heroes and dākinīs of the three realms and has the following visionary interaction:

“I beseech the Omniscient Mother Yeshé Tsogyal
And the heroes and heroines
In the unmanifest land of the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain.

I, this messenger sent by the mother dākinīs —
My impure body is being born as a woman.
My impure karma is grasping on to cyclic existence.
My impure place is the demonic land of Golok.
My impure deed is always having a negative community.

From what cause did my karma arise like this?
I am not one who took on the mind stream of the five poisons of afflictive emotions
And adhered to a worldly householder’s life.
I acted in accordance with the divine lama’s prophecy.

I thought that I would certainly accomplish benefit for the teachings and beings.
Now, not to mention benefitting others,
Even benefiting my own mind stream is on the verge of going to waste.

Marshall the forces of the might of the dākinīs who course in the mother’s expanse!
I beseech you to repel these obstacles of negative conditions!

Bless this impure realm, this ocean of cyclic existence
[To be] the glorious lotus light [realm].

Bless this impure flesh and blood body
[To be] the stainless expanse that is a rainbow body.

Bless this mind and mental events in cyclic existence
[To be] liberated into the state of great primordial wisdom.

Liberate adherence to the two types of erroneous ignorance that is Rudra
In the great unobstructed nonreferential state of the expanse.

In short, experiences of the way thing are arose like this
In me, the tramp of the unfabricated dimension –

I am without hatred or no hatred for my life partner.
I am without falling or not falling into cyclic existence.
I am without liberation or non-liberation from this illusory body.
I am without the errors or non-errors of sentient beings.

I am without seeing or not seeing Buddhahfields.
I am without attaining or non-attaining Buddhahood.
I am without knowing or not knowing the view.
I am without realization or non-realization concerning experience during meditation.

The nature of mind that is without error
Does not enter into mental fabrications regarding illusory forms.
Like the sky, [that which is] completely pure is without bias.
It is seminal essence alone, without elaboration.

In short, I sing a song of the way things are.”

I heard a formless voice coming from the sky say something like this:

“Oh my, oh my yogi –

Is the great self-emergent primordial wisdom
Free from exertion?

Is the unborn self-emergent spontaneous presence
The ground of samsāra and nirvāṇa?

Are appearances of good and bad, bliss and misery
The play of reality itself?

Is the poisonous water lily that is the eight worldly dharmas
To be abandoned quickly?

Will you take out the dakini’s heart nectar that is your [Treasure] wealth
At [the right] time?

Will benefiting both the teachings and beings
Come from the south?

You don’t need to feel upset and exhausted
By this appearance of illusory emanations.

The Lotus [Born One]’s testament does not change.
It is certain that in time, aspirations prayers will gather together.”

Visions such as this one present their message using poetic and elusive language, yet their support for Sera Khandro’s spiritual purpose is unequivocal. In the visionary interchange above, Sera Khandro represents herself (again) as one with an impure female body and as one who has wandered off the spiritual path and become engaged in cyclic existence surrounded by a negative community (i.e., Gyalsé) in the demonic land of Golok. Yet this time, in her own voice, she expresses that her spiritual realization has fully transcended attachment to her unfortunate circumstances; she has realized the true nature of mind beyond clinging to concepts of cyclic existence and freedom and beyond attaining or not attaining Buddhahood. Thus, recounting her visionary encounters not only gives Sera Khandro a way to present herself positively through others’ voices, but also allows her to find her own voice through interactions with encouraging forces who mitigate the repression that Gyalsé and others imposed on her in her mundane existence. Through including laudatory visions such as these in distinctive moments of her self-narrative just after traumatic or negative occurrences in her daily life, Sera Khandro
emphasizes the encouraging role these visionary interludes played in her life at the same time as she portrays herself as a religious visionary worthy of her disciples’ devotion.

**Conclusion**

Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* is not the story of one woman; it is the story of a woman in conversation with many others in her social world. Like Bakhtin’s living utterance, the words of Sera Khandro’s narrative are populated by a heteroglossia of voices that are overlapping, competing, argumentative, and harmonizing. The voices of hostile and amicable members of her religious communities, benign and pestilent spirits, and chimerical Buddhist divinities animate Sera Khandro’s depiction of herself and her religious communities in early twentieth-century Golok. Their conversations invoke issues of great importance to Sera Khandro such as the ability of women to act as religious figures, the virtue or vice of sexuality as a part of the spiritual path, and the balance between personal agency and divine intervention.

Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* is a liberation tale not about herself as an individual agent in a Gudorfian sense, but in a sense more aligned with medieval Christian religious autobiography in which the autobiographical subject is a soul returning to the divine. Her self-representation fits into Mary Mason’s description of the relational self of Western female-authored autobiographies, but the relationality of Sera Khandro’s self has more to do with her Tibetan cultural context in which selves were less individuated from each other than with her female gender. But if her self-presentation has little to do with her female gender, then what, if anything, can we say characterizes female-authored autobiographies? What characterizes Tibetan women’s autobiographies?
Early feminist autobiography theorists such as Jelinek claimed that styles of autobiographical self-representation had everything to do with the author's gender. Her conclusions reduced gender to a totalizing category that overlooked other differences between selves such as race, class, cultural background, and historical time period. But on the other hand, to say that writing has nothing to do with gender risks the same critique of reductionism. In the case of Tibetan women's autobiography and hagiographies about Tibetan women, there are distinctive and recurrent themes. Themes characteristic of religious women's lives in Tibet are the centrality of marriage (and its associated suffering or need to escape from it), struggles gaining access to religious education, and tensions between balancing labor (farming, animal husbandry, housework) with religious practice, to name a few. These elements are not always present in all texts written by or about Tibetan religious women and they also appear at times in men's writing, but they have a particular resonance with the stories of women's lives. It is preposterous to imagine that if Gara Gyalsé wrote an autobiography, he would record being punished for being late to serve Sera Khandro tea, rushing to return home instead of revealing a Treasure for fear of his child's crying, or feeling depressed that his partner would not accept his status as a Treasure revealer on the basis of his male gender. These issues – food preparation, childcare, and gender discrimination – are specific to the status and social roles of women in Sera Khandro's cultural context. That these themes resonate with experiences of other Tibetan women is evident by the ways in which the female-authored autobiographies we have examined in this chapter include varying degrees of intertextuality with famous female hagiographies such as those of Yeshé Tsogyal, Machik Labdrön, Nangsa Obum, Gelong Palmo, and others. Although we can articulate
some similarities in Tibetan women’s autobiographical writing, their writings vary in conjunction with a constellation of other factors including temporal and geographical differences as well as race and class distinctions. Simply because Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro were both unusual women who wrote about their lives in early twentieth-century Tibet does not mean that Sera Khandro necessarily shared a great deal in common with Jetsün Lochen, whose life as a celibate nun and abbess in Central Tibet was far removed from her own. Surely Sera Khandro shared more with her male colleagues in their Golok religious communities than with Jetsün Lochen.

That Sera Khandro’s female gender was a salient issue for her and others in her communities is clear by the frequency with which she mentions it. Similar to the writing of Orgyen Chökyi, Sera Khandro’s inferior female body is a vice that she transforms into a virtue, for her descriptions of herself as a lowly, uneducated woman, as a tramp expelled from empowerment lines, and as a maid servant to Gyalsé dramatize her humility and her human suffering. Yet being female is not only negative, as hosts of dakinis hasten to illustrate. Their words of encouragement speak not only to Sera Khandro, but to all female and male disciples who read her Autobiography, exhorting them to see the female body as “the mother [who gives birth to] the great assembly of primordially perfected Ones Gone to Bliss.”487 Through these visionary and worldly dialectics representing Sera Khandro’s negotiation between perceiving herself as an inferior woman with little community support and as a divinely prophesized dakinî, Sera Khandro forms an Autobiography befitting of a woman with religious authority that is sufficiently humble, yet assertive and confident. We will continue this exploration of the interactive nature of Sera Khandro’s writing in the following chapter, turning our focus to
another major issue about which a cacophony of divine, demonic, and human voices speak: the controversial issue of consort relationships.
Chapter Four: Consorts and Treasure Revelation Communities

Perhaps the most controversial and ground-breaking facet of Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* and the *Biography* she wrote of her consort Drimé Özer is the glimpse they provide into the world of consort practices in the early twentieth-century Eastern Tibetan religious communities in which Sera Khandro lived. The descriptions in her writings go far beyond prescriptive accounts of consort practices that can be found in other hagiographic and doctrinal literature. Sera Khandro portrays the complicated interests, relationship dynamics, and emotions of women and men engaged in consort relationships. Her writing includes ephemeral philosophical poetry evoking the Vajrayāna interpretation of the significance of the union of male method and female wisdom for the realization of Buddhahood. Yet it also includes mundane descriptions of jealousy between competing female consorts and tensions between the men who were involved with them. Sera Khandro’s multivalent accounts of consort practices as they were practiced in her communities lend insight into the following intriguing questions: 1) What are the purposes of consort practices involving sexual yoga in Tibetan Buddhism and in particular in the Treasure tradition? 2) What rhetorical strategies does Sera Khandro use to represent herself as a participant in consort practices in her *Autobiography*? 3) How does she portray the social dynamics revolving around consort practices in the communities in which she lived? 4) What is the proper moral code, celibate or non-celibate, for a Tantric Buddhist practitioner? 5) What is the role of women in Tantric sexual yoga – are they objects serving the male subject or are they also agents who benefit from sexual practices?
This chapter begins with a synoptic history of the ambiguous and controversial status of sexual practices in Tibetan Buddhism, more specifically in the Great Perfection system of the Nyingma School that Sera Khandro practiced. This history will provide background for a discussion of the purposes for consort practices within Tibetan Buddhism according to Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings. Much of Sera Khandro’s presentation follows normative ideas within the Treasure tradition, aside from the unusually clear message she conveys that consort practices are beneficial for both male and female Tantric practitioners. The most obvious precedent for Sera Khandro’s radical presentation of herself as a female Treasure revealer who uses male consorts for her own spiritual benefit is Yeshé Tsogyal, a natural model for Sera Khandro given that she was considered to be Yeshé Tsogyal’s incarnation. According to Sera Khandro, consort practices increase the pliancy of the channels and winds (rtsa riṅg) running through the practitioner’s subtle body. More specifically, consorts are essential in dispelling obstacles to the health and longevity of both male and female practitioners. For Treasure revealers, having a consort (thabs grols) is one of the several essential auspicious connections (rten 'brel) necessary for successful revelation, along with finding the proper doctrine holder (chos bdag), time, and location of the Treasure. In the context of Treasure revelation, consorts are specifically associated with the process of decoding unreadable symbolic scripts. The decoding capacity of consorts is associated with female consorts and with the celestial dākinīs who encode and guard Treasures, prototypically the dākinī consort of Padmasambhava, Yeshé Tsogyal. However, an interesting facet of Sera Khandro’s writings is that she depicts both her male consorts and
male Treasure revealers’ female consorts as having the capacity to aid in the decoding process.

After introducing Sera Khandro’s understanding of the purposes for having a consort, this chapter will explore not only what Sera Khandro writes about consort practices but the way in which she writes it, including the literary devices she employs and the tones she uses to portray the very sensitive and personal topic of her own involvement in consort relationships. As I have discussed in Chapter Three, Sera Khandro portrays her extraordinary qualities primarily through the many other human and divine voices that populate her self-narrative. These divine voices also continually remind her not to ignore the ḍākinīs’ prophecies that urge her to seek the appropriate consorts necessary for her to successfully reveal Treasures. These voices come to Sera Khandro almost always in the form of divine ḍākinīs who appear to her, teasing and taunting her to overcome her bashfulness and to differentiate between immoral sexual indulgence and pure spiritual union. What is at stake in these dialogic interactions is the question of the ethics of sexuality as a part of religious practice. Sera Khandro depicts herself as constantly rejecting the ḍākinīs’ hints and allegations, yet when she responds to their insinuations, she reveals her own commitment to the Tantric path. By presenting the necessity of having a consort not in her own voice but through the divine voices that populate her narrative, Sera Khandro portrays herself as a legitimate participant in esoteric Tantric practices involving multiple male consorts without appearing to be lustful, immoral, or arrogant. ḍākinīs give her the divine backing she needs to pave the way for her own apotheosis from being an ambiguous woman, neither nun nor laywoman, to becoming recognized as an emissary of the ḍākinīs. The divine injunctions
Sera Khandro receives culminate in prophecies directing her to realize the ultimate fulfillment of her spiritual and sentimental hopes and dreams, union with the love of her life, Drimé Özer.

Although Tantric Buddhist scriptures and iconography abound with descriptions of esoteric sexual rites and images of divinities in various poses of sexual union, little information can be gleaned from them regarding if and how Tantric practitioners actually performed rituals involving consorts. Tibetan monastic apologists have attempted to aestheticize explicit mention of sexuality in Tantric scriptures by offering sophisticated hermeneutical strategies that metaphorically interpret the often erotic content of Tantric scriptures; rather than enacting rites involving sexual yoga literally, monastics visualize practices involving consorts. In contrast, the Tibetan Treasure tradition with its predominantly non-monastic adherents maintains a vestige of a literal interpretation of Tantric scriptures in that engaging with a human consort is an essential aspect of the revelation process. There are examples of monastic Treasure revealers who do not engage with consorts, such as the founder of the immense monastic community Larung Gar (Bla rung sgar) in contemporary Serta, Golok, named Khenpo Jikmé Pûntskok (1934-2003). Nevertheless, even in cases of monastic Treasure revealers there is a persistent belief that without sexual yoga, a Treasure revealer cannot reveal all the Treasures that are available to him or her, or at least will have considerable additional difficulty. This is clear in Sera Khandro’s writing; she repeatedly laments that she could not reveal a particular Treasure due to not having a consort. Visualizing a consort is also possible, but according to Sera Khandro, it produces less powerful auspicious connections (rten 'brel) than engaging with an actual physical consort.
Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* and Drimé Özer’s *Biography* portray persistent tensions between celibate monastic and non-celibate Tantric interpretations of religious values and lifestyles. In her *Autobiography*, Sera Khandro depicts this tension through representing the difficulties she faced as a religious adept who was neither an ordinary laywoman nor a monastic. Sera Khandro recounts that this in-between status led to tension with nuns who sought to make her conform to monastic ideals and to problems with negative gossip about her sexual conduct that seemed to accompany her everywhere she went. In Drimé Özer’s *Biography*, Sera Khandro portrays his dilemma between choosing a monastic life (to the chagrin of the visionary ḍākinīs who made their preferences against monkhood well known to him) and choosing a non-celibate Tantric life (involving the complications of managing and providing for a community including multiple consorts).

Sera Khandro’s description of consort practices is not fascinating in the detail she provides about sexual interactions, for she is quite modest and metaphoric in her descriptions, but rather in the detail with which she describes the interpersonal relationships and emotional connections among people in her communities. Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings take consort practices out of the distant, analytical frameworks in which they are presented in prescriptive doctrinal and ritual scripture and place them back into the vibrant community contexts in which they were enacted, contexts filled with strong personalities and competing interests but above all great faith in the Tantric spiritual path. Her portrayal of consort practices lends itself neither to unrealistic conclusions of female supremacy nor to overly negative judgments of women’s subordination in communities involving consort practices. Rather, her writings
present women as agents, as aides, and as objects of exchange, thus offering varied perspectives on the status of women and sexuality in Tantric practice. Given that Sera Khandro herself was intimately involved in the world of consort practices that she depicts, her writings are an excellent resource contributing to a social history of the religious values and community realities of Tantric consort practices.

The Ambiguous Roles of Sexuality and Celibacy in Tibetan Buddhism

A study of the history of sexuality in Tibetan Buddhism, or more specifically in the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, deserves a lengthy book of its own. However, in order to contextualize Sera Khandro’s discussion of tensions related to consort practices in her religious communities, I will briefly introduce some broad contours of the framework within which Sera Khandro’s accounts of sexual yoga and consort practices fit. Sexuality plays an ambiguous role in Tibetan Buddhism, a fact that emerges in Sera Khandro’s writing through her descriptions of her own ambivalence to engage in consort practices as well as her descriptions of monks repeatedly requesting her services as a consort. Controversies have raged for at least one thousand years over questions pertaining to the proper role of sexuality in Tibetan Buddhist religious practice. Key questions over the many centuries of debate have included the following: 1) Should a celibate monk request Tantric initiation when consecration rites involve ritualized sexuality? 2) How can one person maintain the three sets of Buddhist vows – the vows of individual liberation (prātimokṣa, the monastic vows), the Mahāyāna bodhisattva vows, and the Tantric vows – if each set of vows contains differing interpretations of the role of sexuality in religious life? The three sets of vows listed above represent the historical
transformation of Buddhism from an ascetic religion of renunciation in early Indian Buddhism, to a Mahāyāna understanding of the bodhisattva path emphasizing benefiting others that developed in the early centuries of the Common Era, and then later to Tantric reinterpretations, beginning in the late seventh century, that emphasized ritual initiations and the transmuting of afflictive emotions such as desire into energy for the path to enlightenment.

The key hermeneutical problem in reconciling the vows associated with these three distinct elements of Tibetan Buddhism lies in the fact that initiation into Tantric Buddhism requires four consecrations (abhiṣeka). Given that two of them include ritualized sexuality if interpreted literally, they appear to contradict celibacy vows. In his exhaustive study on Indian esoteric Buddhism, Ronald Davidson has shown that the first consecration, the jar consecration (kalaśābhiṣeka) in which a teacher initiates the Tantric disciple into the mandala of a deity, represents a royal metaphor of coronation parallel to those found in the political spheres of sixth-century post-Gupta India. Yet the following two consecrations, the secret consecration (guhyābhiṣeka) and the insight consecration (prajñāpāramitābhiṣeka), follow an antinomian and explicitly sexual model. In the eighth century Hevajra Tantra, the secret consecration is described in the following way:

Then one places in the center of the mandala the Wisdom-maiden, sixteen years old, who has all the marks of perfection, who has been bathed with water containing sandalwood extract, saffron and camphor, in immaculate garments and adorned with all kinds of jewelry. Then envisaging the Family-Head (= Akṣobhya) as resting on his crown, the master honors her with worship, external, internal and secret, praising her with acclamations, and thus he should unite in her embrace. Then he should recite the amūrāga (enamoring) mantra, and as soon as there is excitation he intones the refrain of HŪM; as bliss descends, he recites pūja (worship) mantra. Then with an elephant tusk he collects the bodhicitta from her pudenda and pouring it into a shell-receptacle, with a gesture of the ring-
finger and the thumb, he drops it into the pupil’s mouth. The pupil says: “O Bliss!” and drinks it without hesitation. After this ritual in which the disciple drinks the combined fluids of the master and his consort, the third insight consecration is no less antinomian – after a series of physical and mental exercises, the disciple copulates with the female partner in order to generate the psycho-physiological realization of four levels of joy. The fourth consecration (caturthābhīṣeka) is an instruction on the nature of reality that contextualizes the previous sexual consecrations. Davidson outlines a transformation of the significance of these sexual rituals from an earlier (eighth-century) sacramental model in which “the goal was the ritual experience of sanctified copulation” to a later (late eighth and early ninth-century) yogic model. This yogic model involved ritual sexuality for the purpose of manipulating psycho-physical winds through energy channels within the subtle body in order to engender spiritual realization. Interestingly, this paradigm shift from sacramental to yogic or psycho-physiological ritualized sexuality mirrors a shift that David White articulates in the context of Hindu Tantra. White suggests that the earlier Yoginī Kaula tradition involving the ritualized ingestion of sexual fluids was replaced in the tenth to twelfth centuries by “an internalization, an aestheticization, and a semanticization of Kaula practice” in which the previously literal sexual practices became transmuted into an internal process taking place within the male Tantric practitioner. We will return to the psycho-physiological turn of Tantric sexual rites in the following section in which I describe the ways that Sera Khandro’s presentation of the purposes for sexual yoga fit squarely in the later yogic model, although the earlier substratum involving the sacramental power of fluids does not disappear.
Given the unconventional and explicitly sexual nature of these Tantric initiation rites, it is not difficult to imagine the hermeneutical quandary they posed to Buddhist commentators. Indeed, for more than one thousand years, Buddhist scholars and practitioners in Tibet have endeavored to interpret the significance of the antinomian Tantras and to explain how they can be integrated with the other two systems of vows to form one coherent system of ethics. The most common interpretive mechanism used to understand the significance of these Tantric consecration rituals is to read them as metaphoric descriptions or as visualization instructions. Indeed, this is the way they are enacted in the contemporary context, using ritual substances to symbolize the sexual rite described in Tantric scriptures such as *The Hevajra Tantra*. However, there is evidence that these Tantric consecrations were once enacted literally. One indication of this is Atiśa’s (982-1054 C.E.) famous proclamation in *A Lamp for the Path to Awakening* that “Those leading a celibate life should not accept the secret or insight / gnosis consecrations since *The Scripture of the Primordial Buddha* emphatically prohibits them.”

Atiśa’s statement prohibits monks from accepting two of the four Tantric initiations because he argues that the (literal) sexuality involved in them violated monastic vows of celibacy.

On the other hand, later exegesis attempting to reconcile the three types of vows asserts their ultimate compatibility. For example, in his commentary on Ngari Panchen Pema Wangkyi Gyelpo’s (1487-1542) text *Ascertaining the Three Vows (Sdom gsum rnam nges)*, Dujom Rinpočhe (1904-1988) articulates the ways in which these three sets of vows are not in conflict in terms of the role of sexuality in religious practice:

For example, one of the four root downfalls [of the monastic code] is sexual intercourse. If, according to the mantra words of honor, one engages in the
practice of the three recognitions, although externally the activity appears to be intercourse it does not qualify as such. A qualified mantra practitioner has transformed both object and subject into the recognition of male and female wisdom deities, so that the first of the four prerequisites is incomplete. If any of the four prerequisites is incomplete, the act does not constitute a defeat. If ordinary desire is transformed into the recognition of great bliss, the intention is incomplete. The activity of union is incomplete because one is maintaining the words of honor concerning method and wisdom. Ultimately, the loss of seminal fluid and the experience and attachment that arise from sexual satisfaction are transformed into the experience of primordial wisdom awareness, within which the essential fluid is maintained as the ultimate result. The prerequisite of the result is thereby incomplete as well.

When one recognizes that all dharmas arise from the nature of mind, like the experience of a dream, it will be impossible to contradict the essential point of mantra practice.\textsuperscript{495}

Dujom Rinpočé’s statement leaves open the possibility that if a monk who has received all three sets of vows has sexual intercourse but is able to perceive both subject and object as male and female wisdom deities, to transform his desire into the recognition of great bliss, and to transform his loss of seminal fluid and his attachment into primordial wisdom awareness, then his act is not a violation of any of his three sets of vows. While it is easier to claim one is transmuting desire and attachment than to actually do so, this reinterpretation of the meaning of maintaining monastic vows according to a Tantric view opens the door to multiple interpretations of the role of sexuality and celibacy in Tibetan Buddhism. Just as the lines between celibate monasticism and Tantric practice are more blurry than they initially appear, likewise, Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings repeatedly describe tensions between monastic and non-celibate interpretations of religious ethics. As a female consort to male religious figures, Sera Khandro often found herself caught in the middle of a dialectic between the moral superiority of strict celibacy and the expedient means of sexual yoga, a polemic which preceded her by a millennium yet has rarely been addressed from the perspective of a female consort.
Although the Nyingma School includes the greatest number of non-celibate Tantric practitioners, in fact, within the highest Nyingma teaching, the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen), there is also a degree of ambivalence regarding sexual yoga. In his important work systematizing the Seminal Heart (S Nyid thig) teachings of the Great Perfection titled *The Treasury of Words and Meanings* (*Tshig don mdzod*), the greatest thinker of the Nyingma school named Longchen Rabjampa (*Klong chen rab 'byam pa*, 1308-1364) suggested that sexual yoga fit into a category of lower teachings relating to “conventional seminal nuclei.” He argued that teachings about manipulating these lower channels and winds were only an “efficacious means’ for taking care of those otherwise blocked from the Great Perfection path, so that those people obsessively addicted to the conventional seminal nuclei can circuitously enter (the path of Great Perfection).”

Longchenpa quotes from the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* (*Sgra thal 'gyur*) to support his point:

> Since you desire to rely on the reality of seminal nuclei,  
> (I will discuss the contemplative techniques)  
> Relating to the ultimate and conventional (seminal nuclei).  

(i) Those who for the time being desire Buddhahood  
In reliance upon the conventional seminal nuclei should do as follows:

Your consort should have the complete requisite characteristics –  
When you spot one with the perfect characteristics  
Whether she be a goddess, demi-goddess, Brahmin,  
Low caste, or a heretic,  
You begin with the techniques for attracting her,  
And then you must perfect your bodies  
Via the object of reliance (i.e., consort), the channels,  
And the focus of visualization (i.e., the seminal nuclei, etc.).

Then, you must bring the conventional seminal nuclei down, retain them, reverse them (back upwards)  
Disperse them within the channels, and mix them with the winds;
You then must rely upon emptiness, eradicate your intellect,
And reverse your ordinary body and mind.

(ii) On the other hand, through reliance upon the ultimate seminal nuclei
You can meet with the objects of the empty Reality Body:

Stimulating the lamp of the empty seminal nuclei
You train on awareness’ efflorescent dynamics,
And when you finally gain deep attunement such that (their luminosity
Is vividly clear) without ordinary distinctions between daytime and nighttime,
These (luminous nuclei) directly manifest without any exertion on your part –
This is the measure indicating experiential mastery (of this practice).  

Longchenpa concludes this quotation by unequivocally stating that the conventional seminal nuclei are not the real spiritual path. His words subordinating practices pertaining to the manipulation of conventional seminal nuclei via reversing their flow, i.e., semen retention, are particularly relevant for thinking about Sera Khandro’s writings given that she was a Seminal Heart practitioner herself as well as the author of numerous commentaries on Breakthrough (thregs chod) and Direct Transcendence (thod rgal) practices that relate to these higher ultimate seminal nuclei. Not only is Sera Khandro closely aligned to Longchenpa’s teachings, but also her consort Drimé Özer is strongly affiliated with him given that Drimé Özer is one of Longchenpa’s names. Sexual yoga is thus not the highest practice in the Great Perfection system, which favored a rhetoric of uncontrived, natural simplicity beyond the complex and manipulative energetic practices that comprise sexual yoga. Despite this philosophical subordination of these practices involving manipulating conventional seminal nuclei (i.e., sexual yoga), Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings present a different picture of their significance in the Treasure tradition, a picture grounded in the social realities of the communities in which she lived.
The Purposes of Consorts in Sera Khandro’s Writings

Sexual yoga may have an ambiguous role in the broader context of Nyingma Buddhism, but in the Treasure tradition, having a consort is an essential element of the auspicious connections necessary for revelation. Rather than the older ritual sacrament model mentioned above, Sera Khandro’s presentation of sexual yoga is bound up with the internal yogic physiology of manipulating the internal winds carrying seminal nuclei through the body’s channels. She emphasizes three primary functions of sexuality in the Treasure tradition: 1) soteriological functions that incorporate sexual yoga into the Buddhist contemplative goal, 2) pragmatic functions such as curing illness, prolonging life, and dispelling obstacles, and 3) hermeneutical functions pertaining to discovering and decoding Treasures. These three functions may seem to operate on quite different registers, but they all share one purpose: to release energy blocks. Liberating ignorance, physical illness, and the “writer’s block” that occurs when the Treasure revealer cannot retrieve or decode his or her Treasures all involve clearing away obstacles and revitalizing the circulation of energy in the body according to this understanding of Tantric physiology. Therefore, increasing the pliancy of the flow of seminal nuclei (thig le) through the channels of the body (rtsa) via wind (rlung), frees blockages and produces spiritual realization, physical health, and prolific revelation. Aside from its spiritual purposes, it is important to note that the single most common reason Sera Khandro’s interlocutors give for why they must engage in sexual yoga is the pragmatic function of dispelling obstacles and increasing their lifespan. Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings thus help to ground the exotic and elusive practice of ritualized sexuality in the
real-world context of early twentieth-century Golok, a world with no modern forms of healthcare in which the efficacy of ritual was paramount.

Before presenting Sera Khandro’s representation of the purposes for consort practices, it is important to point out the caution with which she delineates the differences between conventional sexuality and sexuality that is a part of the spiritual path. She describes herself as “one in whom the great desire to have a husband does not arise” and one who “will not engage in negative libidinous acts.” She writes,

Having seen the meaning of primordial wisdom without attachment,
I do not desire the bodies of householders who fornicate.
If I am involved in Dharma for the remainder of my life,
This is the supreme meaning of attaining a physical body.

In this way, Sera Khandro draws a distinction between libidinous sexual acts that accompany the lay householder life she renounced and sexual yoga performed in her religious communities (purportedly) without lecherous attachment and with the proper intention to attain Buddhahood.

Soteriological Purpose of Sexuality, for Men and Women

From the late eighth century onwards, the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric understanding of the human body included a constellation of channels (rtsa) that come together in wheels (Skt. cakra, ‘khor lo along the central axis of the body at the crown, throat, heart, navel, genitals, or a variation of this) in which energy (seminal essence, thig le) flows. This internal subtle body is more than the physical body; it is a microcosm of the universe in its pure, divine form. The human body is the abode of a host of deities, therefore sexual yoga involves complex visualizations of deities that serve to bring the Tantric practitioner closer to perceiving his or her body and the external world in its pure,
divine form. Sexual yoga involves reversing the flow of the sexual energies that conventionally flow downwards, outside of the body. This downward flow is analogized to aging, to losing one’s vital energy, and ultimately to death. By reversing the flow of sexual energy upwards through seminal retention practices that manipulate the channels and winds of the subtle body, the Tantric practitioner is able to draw up vital energy into successively higher energy wheels (cakras) until it reaches the crown of the head, resulting not only in physical longevity but in the complete realization of Buddhahood. In this way, sexual yoga operates on a paradigm in which spiritual realization and processes of physical vitality are intimately interconnected.

The many variations of sexual yoga over hundreds of years and multiple South Asian Tantric traditions exceed the bounds of the present study, but as one example of a prescriptive account of sexual yoga that would have been familiar to Sera Khandro, we return to the writings of the fourteenth-century Nyingma polymath Longchenpa. In his commentary on the Guhyagarbha Tantra titled Dispelling the Darkness of the Ten Directions (Phyogs bcu mun sel), Longchenpa describes the process of arousing the flow of seminal nuclei and drawing it upwards in a process of seminal retention. First, seminal fluid moves down from the crown of the male practitioner’s head through the throat, heart, and navel along with the arising of successive stages of pristine cognition. Once the seminal fluid reaches the secret center (the energy center at the genitals), Longchenpa explains sexual yoga in a way characteristic of Buddhist Tantra:

Then the white and red seminal fluids are drawn in through the pathway of the vajra (penis), whence they fill the four centers and their petals from the navel as far as the crown. In this way they are visualized to be extended with unceasing bliss and pervaded with pristine cognition free from all conceptual elaborations.

As is said (Ch. 11, 9):
Those essences of attainment, sun and moon-fluids,  
Are drawn by the tongue-like vajra into the mandala.

Then in the energy channels, these (pure-essences) are arranged by means of the three essentials, namely, yogic exercises (‘khrul-’khor), visualization and non-visualization; and they are determined in a natural disposition free from conceptual elaboration. This is the genuine pristine cognition of reality, the intention of Samantabhadra.\(^{502}\)

Sexual yoga in this depiction can be understood as a reversal of conventional sexuality in which a man loses seminal fluid and (potentially) catalyzes a reproductive process that occurs entirely within the female body. His description of semen retention is characteristic of the vast majority of textual portrayals of sexual yoga in that the entire process takes place inside the male body. Indeed, it remains unclear what, if anything, the woman is doing internally during this process or how she could derive spiritual benefit from it. Nevertheless, Tantric literature includes copious detail regarding the various types of suitable female consorts. For example, in Longchenpa’s commentary on Chapter Eleven of the Guhyagarbha Tantra titled “Mandala of the Feast Offerings,” we read:

Thus, (the mudrās) aged between twelve and fifteen are devīs. Those aged between sixteen and nineteen are nāginiś and those over twenty are subsumed by (beings of) inferior species. In addition, all of them should be beautiful in form, and most desirous. They should not befriend another, and they should be able to maintain secrecy. They should be learned in the skillful means of sexual union, and great in discriminative awareness. They should have respect for their respective accomplished masters; they should have faith, perseverance, and compassion, and they should possess the extraordinary energy channel of bliss. In association with these three kinds of female consorts who are the female consorts respectively of buddha-mind, buddha-speech, and buddha-body, accomplishment will swiftly be obtained.\(^{503}\)

These sentences are only the tiniest fraction of Longchenpa’s elaborate classifications of female consorts that preceed his description of the actual sexual rite above. That these prescriptive texts were written by and for men is abundantly clear given the male-exclusive physiological and descriptive terminology they use.
Given the androcentrism of normative prescriptive accounts of sexual yoga, a fascinating element of Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* is that it is one of the very few sources that portrays sexual yoga from the perspective of the female body. Through recounting dreams and visionary experiences in which divine accomplished ones (siddhas) and dākinīs teach her, Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* contains instructions pertaining to sexual yoga that distinctly refer to female practitioners and to the female body as the locus of spiritual realization, instead of the more typical presentation of sexual yoga in which women are only sexual aides for the male subject. The longest and most detailed example of this is the dream that Sera Khandro recounts in the early part of her *Autobiography* in which the Accomplished One Kukurepa instructs the then fifteen-year-old Sera Khandro on how to manipulate the flow of seminal nuclei (thig le) via wind (rlung) in her body’s channels (rtsa). Kukurepa’s detailed explanation of channel and wind (rtsa rlung) meditation practices culminates in the following instructions:

“... Thirdly, regarding the method consort, excellently examine, seduce, and train a fully qualified hero who is an illusory emanation of the five [Buddha] families. First, having entered the door of ripening and liberation, [the hero] should be made to manifest signs and capability in outer, inner, and secret generation and perfection [stages]. Having excellently given him the body, speech, and mind commitments, his three doors [body, speech, and mind] won’t do non-Dharmic actions even for a second. By [being empowered in] the third essential empowerment, [he is] established in ripening and liberation.

Then, visualize method and wisdom [male and female] as divine. In the middle of these bodies, visualize the three channels and the five wheels. In the method’s [the man’s] five abodes [i.e., his energy wheels or cakras], [visualize] five groups of heroes. In [that of] the wisdom [the woman], [visualize] five groups of heroines. Their four limbs are the gate keepers along with their consorts. All of the other channels and abodes appear as heroes and dākinīs like the five abodes [mentioned above]. In this manner, meditate on method and wisdom.

In the middle of the wheel of primordial wisdom at the crown of the head, meditate on a “Hari” on a moon disk. At the extremity of the central channel about four finger widths [below] the navel, in the middle of a channel knot of joy
and bliss that is like the sun’s rays, meditate on a red short “a” [a shad] that is like the cut tip of a Chinese needle [i.e., very small] on which the flickering flame of primordial wisdom burns.

Then, having begun uniting the eight limbs which are the four method causes and the four wisdom conditions, when [method and wisdom, i.e., male and female] are established as one, this is the path of accumulation. The dominant condition becomes the physical sense consciousness and the supporting condition is the wavering clouds of bodhicitta at the crown of the head. Gradually experiencing the four joys is the path of joining.

Then, the method’s [the man’s] cloud of bodhicitta rains into the wisdom lady’s secret space and the white and red meet. Having dispelled the eighty types of discursive thoughts into the expanse, the inexpressible primordial wisdom of equanimity manifests. This is called the display of the three realms of the lower door.

The seminal nuclei having arrived from the [woman’s] secret space into the pollen bed of the lotus [i.e., the womb], the wind of the first time period (dus shyor) disappears and you attain the knowledge of the first ground. By pulling [the seminal nuclei] from the pollen bed up to the secret abode, the wind of the second time period disappears and you attain the second ground. By pulling [the seminal nuclei] between the secret [abode] and the navel, the wind of the third time period is purified and you attain the third ground. [The seminal nuclei] having reached the navel, the wind of the forth time period is purified and you attain the fourth ground. By pulling it to between the navel and the heart, the wind of the fifth time period is purified and you attain the fifth ground. It having reached the heart center, the wind of the sixth time period is purified and you attain the sixth ground. By pulling it up to between the heart center and the throat, the wind of the seventh time period is purified and you attain the seventh ground. It having reached the throat, the wind of the eighth time period is purified and you attain the eighth ground. It reaching between the throat and eyebrows, the wind of the ninth time period is purified and you attain the ninth ground. Pulling the [seminal nuclei] between the eyebrows and the crown of the head, the wind of the tenth time period is purified and having attained the tenth ground, you will manifest as a spontaneously present Knowledge Holder [rig ’dzin, vidyādharā].

Again, the seminal nuclei having reached the crown of the head, this is the eleventh ground [called] pervasive light. When it reaches between the crown of the head and the crown protuberance, this is the twelfth ground [called] the One with the Lotus of Non-attachment. When [the seminal nuclei] mixes as one taste with the “Ham” at the crown protuberance, you will be established on the thirteenth ground of the Vajra Holder.

Having relied on the essential instructions on union according [to the above description], this is going on the excellent quick path in which liberation is instantaneous, not depending on all the gradual causes, fruits, grounds, and paths.
Practice according to this and having ripened the seminal nuclei in your body, you will manifest as an awareness body\textsuperscript{512} endowed with the seven aspects of union.\textsuperscript{513} In this lifetime you will attain the level of Vajradhara in union [with his consort]."

As he said this, he [Kukurepa] transformed into a white seminal nucleus and disappeared into the crown of my head. When this appearance arose, I awoke from sleep.\textsuperscript{514}

This description of examining, seducing, and training a suitable male to be a consort by empowering him in esoteric Buddhist precepts is a reversal of the tomes of Tantric literature that detail the different types of suitable female consorts and the techniques to seduce them. Sera Khandro does not describe the attributes of suitable male consorts with the same level of typological objectification that other sources use to describe female consorts, but the import of consort practice appears to be the same: to engender spiritual realization through a process in which the spiritual practitioner draws up seminal fluids. Sera Khandro’s description of sexual yoga from a female perspective again reverses this Tantric reversal; in Sera Khandro’s vision of Kukurepa, seminal nuclei enter the woman’s body in a generative process in which the final outcome is not procreation but the realization of Buddhahood. Ironically, this association between drawing in seminal nuclei and engendering spiritual realization makes much more sense physiologically from this rare female perspective than the reversed process from the more normative male perspective. This is not lost on Sera Khandro, who makes analogies between the generation of children and the cultivation of spiritual realization. In fact, it is likely that children sometimes resulted from practices of this nature given that Sera Khandro never mentions birth control techniques and had three children. In Longchenpa’s and in Sera Khandro’s versions of sexual yoga, the implication seems to be that the male or the female practitioner is drawing in his or her partner’s seminal essence for the benefit of
her or his own spiritual realization. If Buddhist sexual yoga is about semen retention, then the cloud of bodhicitta raining into the woman’s lotus in Sera Khandro’s dream cannot be about her male partner’s spiritual advancement.

If Sera Khandro’s description of sexual yoga reverses more typical presentations such as that of Longchenpa, in which female consorts aid male subjects’ spiritual realization, what are Sera Khandro’s sources? One major source is clearly biographies of Sera Khandro’s divine precursor, Yeshé Tsogyal. In fact, the passage from Sera Khandro’s Autobiography above describing sexual yoga from a female perspective is nearly identical to the following passage in Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography revealed by Taksham Samten Lingpa in the seventeenth century:

Now, in my practice upon pleasure, which is Primordial Wisdom, essence of empowerment, I continually increased the rhythm of the Four Joys and never allowed it to diminish. Moreover, to allow the bodhichitta to be spilled outside is like slaying the Buddha Amitābha. There is no one left to confess the fault to, and a karma leading to the hell of Torment Unsurpassed is generated. But I was able to reverse the bodhichitta upward, and, by pressing down the vital energy and drawing up the lower energy, I held the pleasure in the ‘vase.’ I remained attentive to the bliss but did not crave it, and thus I practiced, laying aside all mentally fabricated concentration. Not for an instant did I give way to laziness. When I fixed with mindfulness the bodhichitta in the lotus of the bhaga, ignorance was completely purified and the thousand and eighty wind-energies of the first time period ceased. Arriving on the Path of Seeing the Primordial Wisdom of the two knowledges, I attained the first ground. It was then that I obtained different kinds of clairvoyance. After that, I caused the bodhichitta to rise to the secret center and fixed it there. The interdependent link of conditioning factors was purified, and the wind-energies of the second time period ceased. Thus I attained the second ground. Then I fixed the bodhichitta between the secret and the navel centers. Consciousness was purified and the wind-energies of the third period ceased. Thus I attained the third ground. In the same way, as I held the bodhichitta at the navel, the interdependent link of name and form was purified, the wind-energies of the fourth period ceased, and I attained the fourth ground. Saṃsāra, nirvāṇa, ordinary mind, Primordial Wisdom, and Coemergent Joy were purified and I realized the Svabhāvikakāya. After this, I held the bodhichitta between the navel and the heart centers. The six sense faculties were purified, the wind-energies of the fifth period ceased, and I attained the fifth ground. As I held the bodhichitta at the heart, sense contact was purified, the wind-energies of the sixth
period ceased, and I attained the sixth ground. The mental state of ordinary sleep was purified, likewise Extraordinary Joy, and as the result, I attained the Dharmakāya. Then I held the bodhicitta between the heart and the throat. Feeling was purified, the wind-energies of the seventh period ceased, and I obtained the seventh ground. The bodhicitta was then held in the throat cakra. Desire was purified, the wind-energies of the eighth period ceased, and I attained the eighth ground. The dream state was purified, likewise Supreme Joy, and as the result I attained the Sāṃbhogakāya. I held the bodhicitta between the throat and the forehead, the interdependent link of craving was purified, the wind-energies of the ninth period ceased, and I attained the ninth ground. Then I held the bodhicitta in the cakra of the forehead. The interdependent link of becoming was purified, the wind-energies of the tenth period ceased, and I attained the tenth ground. The five sense-consciousnesses of the waking state, the body’s channels, and also the Primordial Wisdom of Joy were purified. And thus I attained the immaculate Nirmāṇakāya. Then I held the bodhicitta between the forehead and the ushnisha so that the birth process was purified. The wind-energies of the eleventh period were purified, and I attained the eleventh ground. Afterward, as I reversed the bodhicitta in the ushnisha and held it there, the twelve interdependent links, as far as old age and death, were purified. The twenty-one thousand six hundred wind-energies of the twelfth period ceased, and thus were purified the four impure states: the mental states of sexual climax, deep sleep, dream, and waking. Likewise were purified the channels, wind-energies, and the essence, the mind’s support, as well as the Four Joys. Thus I attained the twelfth ground endowed with the Bodies and all the qualities of a Buddha. Becoming one who acts for the benefit of the infinitude of sentient beings, I gained mastery of all the qualities of a Buddha. Thus it was that in six months I realized the purpose of the third empowerment.515

In her writings, Sera Khandro never specifies that she read Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography, although she does mention one biography of Yeshé Tsogyal coming to her as a Treasure.516 Yet clearly Sera Khandro was not only familiar with Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography, but she also based parts of her own biographical writings on those of Yeshé Tsogyal. The quotation above from Taksham Samten Lingpa’s version of Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography may not have been the exact version of Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography that Sera Khandro was familiar with, but the similarities between the two passages are unmistakable. This is not surprising, given that Yeshé Tsogyal was a very natural model, both literary and spiritual, for Sera Khandro, who knew of few other female Treasure
revealers and perhaps no other female autobiographers. Sera Khandro models her biographical writings after Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography in another important way: just as Padmasambhava tells Yeshé Tsogyal to purchase an Indian male servant named Atsara Salé to be her male consort in addition to himself, Sera Khandro also engages with multiple male consorts for her own spiritual realization. Thus, although the concept of a female with multiple male consorts may appear to be a shocking reversal of the more common paradigm of male Treasure revealers surrounded by a host of female consorts, Sera Khandro found a strong precedent for her need of a consort to practice sexual yoga in the popular biographies of Yeshé Tsogyal. Sera Khandro and Yeshé Tsogyal’s representation of a female subject describing spiritual realization via sexual yoga may be rare in literary sources, but I suggest the reason for this is the dearth of female-authored sources and not an indication that women did not engage in these practices for their own benefit.

**Pragmatic Purpose of Sexuality: Curing Sickness and Prolonging life**

The most common reason for consort practices according to Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings is not the lofty goal of spiritual liberation, but the goal of curing others (and sometimes herself) from sickness, prolonging life, and dispelling obstacles. Sexuality, in this context, is not procreative of new life but is regenerative and restorative for Tantric practitioners’ longevity. In Sera Khandro’s writing, sexual yoga is by and large not about soteriological goals, but rather is concerned with the practical reality of preventing illness and death in a world in which there was little medical treatment aside from the power of prayer. While Sera Khandro does record experiencing
benefits to her own health and life through having consorts, she primarily writes about offering (or being asked to offer) her curative services as a renowned dākinī to other lamas in the Golok region. In several instances that I will cite throughout this chapter, Sera Khandro clarifies the connection between sexual yoga, prolonging life, and dispelling obstacles. For example, she recounts that when she was eighteen years old, in response to letters she received inviting her to visit Gara Tertön Dudül Wangjuk Lingpa, the Treasure revealer from Banak Monastery in Padma County, she tried to go there to help resolve obstacles to the old lama’s life. However, because of the extreme jealousy of his consort Yakza, who sent scathing letters warning Sera Khandro not to come near, she wasn’t able to go to the lama until it was too late. Observing the situation, a lama Sera Khandro knew named Kyilung Trülku commented, “Now, Yakza has no need for the lama. Right in front of me she said that if the lama dies, she will think nothing of it. If she acts like this, there will certainly be obstacles to the lama’s life.” Kyilung Trülku interprets Yakza’s jealousy as actually hastening her husband’s death because she prevented him from receiving the elixir of Sera Khandro’s life-saving influence. Gara Tertön’s short biography in Tartang Monastery’s Lineage History (Dar thang dgon pa’i gdan rabs) also mentions this problem, stating that Gara Tertön died after “the auspicious connections of the supreme consort in the dākinī prophecies named the Central Tibetan Lady Khandro Chönyi Dekyong Wangmo [Sera Khandro] were confused.”

Sera Khandro is not only the bestower of health and longevity through consort practices, she is also the recipient. Accompanied by her life partner Gyalsé and her ailing young son, Sera Khandro recounts that she made a visit to see the object of her greatest affection, her consort Drimé Özer, who cured her son by giving him a protection cord.
Sera Khandro writes that after he performed life summoning rituals for her, “Having each relied on the other, the benefit was that the obstacles to both of our lives were dispelled.” She clarifies what she means by “relying on each other” a few lines later, explaining that “He treated me with great love as if I were his main consort.” In another instance, after a brief sojourn visiting Adzom Rinpoché (A ‘dzom rin po che, ‘Gro ‘dul dpa’ bo rdo rje, 1842-1924), Sera Khandro writes,

In particular, the precious lama treated me with great love and having given me advice regarding the two aspects [worldly life and religion] and blessings, he dispelled blemishes regarding auspicious connections and he cured me of all my sicknesses.

The passages above are just a few examples of the pervasive link between consort practices and curing sickness/prolonging life, many more of which follow in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Hermeneutical Purpose of Sexuality: Treasure Revelation and Decoding

As we investigate the ways in which Sera Khandro describes consort practices in her writings, the major questions that arise are: Why do Treasure revealers require a consort to reveal Treasures? What is the link between sex and text? Before offering some thoughts about this intriguing quandary, first we will examine a few examples of the way Sera Khandro writes about the relationship between consorts and revelation. She expresses her need for consorts to reveal Treasures largely in the negative, by describing instances when she was unable to reveal Treasures due to not having a consort. A frequent litany in her Autobiography is comments like this one: “At that time, although I received a symbolic registry for a bit of profound Treasure, not relying on a consort, it got left behind and my body also was a little bit damaged.” This comment highlights
the connections between revelation and the physical body, a subject to which we will soon return. In another instance, Sera Khandro recounts:

Then, when I was twenty-three years old, since there were [many] holy places gathered at Chakri Öbar on the Mar River,\(^{523}\) we went there for a few days. When we were circumambulating [the mountain], the land deity emanated as a crow and came [to me]. The people gathered there actually saw him give me a six-cornered crystal vessel with the profound pages of *Life Prolonging and Wish-fulfilling White Tārā*. Everyone spread the word that I was a Treasure revealer.

At that place although there was also a *Profound Accomplishment of the Guru Dharma Cycle*, profound pages of the *Condensed Intention of the Lama*, and three vessels made of turquoise, zi stone (gzi), and agate respectively, because a consort and a doctrine holder had not gathered there, the auspicious connection went away [and I could not reveal anything] aside from just Dharma medicine and saffron.\(^{524}\)

Again, when Sera Khandro was hiding Treasures in the “black lake” in Nyithö (*Snyi stod*), she recounts that, “At that time although there was a wealth Treasure to take out, not relying on a consort, it got left behind.”\(^{525}\) Similarly, Sera Khandro writes of another instance in which she could not reveal all the Treasure due to not having a consort when she went along with her close disciples to her student Kardön’s (*Dkar don*) hermitage:

Although there was a *Vajrátālāya Accomplishment [Practice called] Expanded Profound Essence of Complete Victory over Demons*, because I didn’t rely on a consort, I found a bit of a cycle on *Accomplishing Beneficial Deeds* and I wrote it down and propagated it and so forth in detail.\(^{526}\)

Although passages such as this demonstrate that Sera Khandro could reveal portions of her Treasures without a consort, she makes it clear that having an actual physical consort present when revealing a Treasure is optimal. After describing a revelation sequence in which she engaged with a visualized consort instead of a real one, she reports that, “Because I didn’t have an actual consort or doctrine holder, I left behind the auspicious connections of the mind-support and beneficial action vessels.”\(^{527}\) In Drimé Özer’s *Biography*, Sera Khandro makes an interesting connection between having a consort and
being able to reveal earth Treasures when she recalls a dialogue between Drimé Özer and herself during one of her visits to him when she was still together with Gyalsé:

The Lord [Drimé Özer] said, “... In particular, don’t forget to find a way to let the Dharma cycles that are earth Treasures come to you.”

Dewé Dorjé [Sera Khandro] replied, “Because I am a female beggar, it is like what the Lord Milarepa said — although I was empowered in many earth Treasures, because I didn’t rely on a consort, I didn’t take out any earth Treasures aside from just three. Now, it will be okay for them to come. Now, the power of the Guru’s prayers having awoken, we, male and female partners, have met. Because I was lost under the power of another, I didn’t find a way to come to you as I have told you before.”

Sera Khandro quotes herself in the third person voice in the biography she wrote of Drimé Özer, promising him that she will reveal the earth Treasures that she could not reveal earlier when she had been under the power of her repressive life partner Gyalsé. Although it is not clear exactly how her situation relates to what Milarepa said, the strong connection she makes between her consort relationship with Drimé Özer and her ability to reveal earth Treasures is intriguing.

Beyond inspiring auspicious connections, consorts have a more specialized role in the Treasure revelation process that begins to address our inquiry about the relationship of sex and text in the Treasure tradition. Female consorts are thought to aid the Treasure revealer in decoding the symbolic scripts in which Treasures often come. Symbolic scripts themselves are associated with the feminine in that they are encoded in dākinī scripts. One connection between Treasure scripts and dākinīs is the paradigmatic dākinī Yeshé Tsogyal, who is credited with remembering, transcribing, hiding, and encoding Padmasambhava’s Teachings. According to the explanation of the Treasure tradition by Drimé Özer’s brother the Third Dodrupchen Jikmé Tenpé Nyima, the link between having a consort and decoding text lies in the consort’s ability to arouse “spontaneously
arisen bliss (*lhan skyes kyi dga' ba*)" in the Treasure revealer. Just as in sexual yogic contexts in which bliss acts as a salve, increasing spiritual realization through untying the knots of energy blockages in the body's channels, so too for a Treasure revealer, bliss serves to clarify the meaning of Treasures encoded in symbolic script. Given this connection between consorts and decoding Treasures, we should not be surprised to find that Sera Khandro writes in Drimé Özer's *Biography* that during one of her visits to him,

> At that time, since he could decode the profound Treasures that newly came to him extremely quickly, the Lord [Drimé Özer] thought that it was because he had met with Dechen Dewé Dorjé. During his evening [practice] session, when he recited the dākinīs' feast offering, he visualized Dewé Dorjé and prayed that in this life and all his incarnations he would meet Dewé Dorjé and be her intimate consort.

But what about Sera Khandro – as a female Treasure revealer can she make use of a male consort in order to experience bliss and aid in her Treasure decoding process? According to Sera Khandro's writings, the answer is yes. As a result of Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer's union, Sera Khandro recounts similar benefits for both of their revelation processes:

> In particular, it became extremely quick for both of us to decode our Treasures. Also, for me, by the power of the abundant auspicious connections, I elucidated and propagated the *Anu Yoga Esoteric Precept The Entrance to the Quick Path of Vajravārāhī's Essential Drops* and the *Profound Explanation of the Meaning of the Great Bliss of the Upper Doors and Enjoying the Three Realms of the Lower Doors* that were teachings in the *Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs*.

Sera Khandro does not give any further detail as to specifically what her male consort(s) did to augment her ability to decode Treasures, but she does suggest that the support of a consort was at times of mutual benefit, enhancing both her own and her male partner's ability to decode their Treasures. She quotes Drimé Özer making this claim as well in his *Biography* after he tells her the prophecy that he will have one superior consort who will
benefit his Treasures: "On account of [our being equals], we can act as consorts for each other."\(^{533}\) If the connection between consort practices and decoding Treasures is bliss, then it would make sense that a consort of either sex in heterosexual union with a Treasure revealer would boost the revealer’s decoding capacities. Yet if female consorts have a special relationship to the coded and symbolic dākinī language based on their shared femininity, this equation would make less sense and it would seem that female Treasure revealers would not necessarily need male consorts to decode Treasures. Sera Khandro’s biographical writings suggest that it is the auspicious connections garnered from a consort of \textit{either} sex, male for herself, female for male Treasure revealers, that makes the difference in decoding Treasures.

Returning to our question of the relationship between sex and text in the Treasure tradition, according to Sera Khandro’s writings, I suggest that both sexuality and textuality are generative processes that rely on the physiology of the human body to produce something new, be it material or textual Treasures or, more conventionally, human offspring. The Treasure tradition draws on Tantric subtle body physiological processes of manipulating the flow of seminal nuclei in order to cultivate spiritual realization, emphasizing the connection between sexuality and realization by analogizing their products, progeny and textual/material revelations. Thus, the requirement of uniting with a consort in order to reveal Treasures in the Treasure tradition can be seen as an extension of previously strong Tantric correspondences between the physical and spiritual realms. The unique addition of the Treasure tradition to this Tantric equation is its distinctly material product.
In two instances that I have already mentioned, Sera Khandro makes the
collection between the materially generative processes of sexuality and revelation
explicit. To recapitulate, Sera Khandro humbly defers her disciples' exhortation to show
them the new Treasure she has just revealed by telling them, "This is my daughter that I
have taken out as a Treasure – I wonder if I can take out a son?" Her disciple, the nun
Chötreng, is undeterred by this and insists on seeing the Treasure. On another occasion as
well, Sera Khandro compares progeny to Treasures in a similar context when she humbly
rejects Götül Rinpoche's statement that she is an extraordinary Treasure revealer. She
tells him, "Aside from being one who can take out the Treasure of boys and girls, I don't
have a way to take out vast earth Treasures." This statement is interesting because Sera
Khandro specifically connects earth Treasures, not mind Treasures, to the production of
children. She also connects earth Treasures in particular to her physical relationship with
Drimé Özer when she tells him,

... although I was empowered in many earth Treasures, because I didn't rely on a
consort, I didn't take out any earth Treasures aside from just three. Now, it will be
okay for them to come. Now, the power of the Guru's prayers having awakened,
we, male and female partners, have met.

It is perhaps coincidental that Sera Khandro gave birth to three children (not by Drimé
Özer) and also claims to have revealed three earth Treasures before she lived with him.
Yet, here again, there is a link between the physicality of earth Treasures and the
(potential) physical product of heterosexual sexuality. After all, Sera Khandro is able to
reveal mind Treasures at times without the full benefit of a consort, but she cannot
produce earth Treasures without Drimé Özer. The connections Sera Khandro makes
between sexual production and textual production make more sense if spoken by a
woman. However, the Tantric psycho-physiological connection between drawing up the seminal nuclei of one's partner in order to produce spiritual realization also makes more sense from the perspective of female physiology, despite its rarity. Yeshé Tsogyal and Sera Khandro's biographies portray sexual yoga without the complex reversals that Longchenpa and the Guhyagarbha Tantra require to relate the process of drawing in seminal nuclei to male physiology. However, with a bit of maneuvering, the connection between sex and text as materially generative processes can relate to both male and female bodies.

Visions of Divine Encouragement

Sera Khandro's autobiographical writing is pervaded with accounts of her visionary interactions with hosts of divinities in their elaborate Buddhafields. These visionary sequences are more than spiritual interludes in an otherwise autobiographical account of Sera Khandro's life. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated the ways in which Sera Khandro's visions allow her to describe herself as an authentic Treasure revealer and as Yeshé Tsogyal's divine emissary without making arrogant claims in her own voice. Instead, Sera Khandro denies these lofty honors that others apply to her and in so doing, she crafts an autobiography that is simultaneously self-aggrandizing and self-humbling, humanizing and divinizing. One of the main topics of Sera Khandro's dialogic interactions with the đākinīs who reappear before her is consort practices and the role they should or should not have in Sera Khandro's life. Đākinīs urge her not to abandon her promise to fulfill their prophecies decreeing that she must seek and consummate consort relationships. Yet in her responses to their exhortations, Sera Khandro struggles
with ethical questions about the role of sexuality in religious practice and the relationship it has to monastic vows in what is a microcosm of larger debates within the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. In her *Autobiography*, Sera Khandro grapples with questions such as: how can one distinguish between conventional lust and sexuality for religious purposes? Is it acceptable to engage in sexual yoga with a monk if it will enhance his spiritual realization and prolong his life? Is it better to avoid the slippery slope between skillful means and sexual misconduct by living a chaste life? Sera Khandro’s dialogic interactions with her divine counterparts give voice to these controversial topics. Through these conversations, Sera Khandro narrates her own apotheosis from human woman to divine ākīnī. By emphasizing her divine backing, she removes herself from the constraints of conventional morality and justifies her unconventional use of male consorts as a part of her spiritual path. In this way, Sera Khandro portrays herself as a woman who is neither promiscuous nor arrogantly self-assertive, but who follows in Yeshé Tsogyal’s footsteps as a yoginī who seeks her own spiritual realization via a Tantric path involving sexual yoga with male consorts.

The interactions Sera Khandro recounts on the subject of consorts in her biographical works take on a playful tone, with ākīnīs almost teasing and taunting her. They remind her that she is not a nun, not a laywoman, but a Treasure revealer and Tantric practitioner who must fulfill her vows to act in accordance with their prophecies. Sera Khandro records that when she was a fourteen-year-old girl living in her father’s house in Lhasa about to be given away in marriage by her father to a Chinese political leader, she had the following dream:
A young and beautiful ornamented woman saying she was Dorjé Yudrön asked
the following: “Lady, who is your boyfriend? Do you know who he was [in his
former] birth? How is his fortune?”

I said, “I don’t have a boyfriend whom I desire. Even though I don’t desire him,
my parents and relatives say that I am one who has been given to the junior leader
from Kitrong (Skyid grong dpon chung).”

She said, “The junior leader from Kitrong is a pleasing youth. It is not a mistake
that he is your husband.”

My mind was not pleased and I sang this song:

“Hey, hey, deceiving girl –
You are definitely not Dorjé Yudrön.

This manner of desiring the bodies of men
Makes you a prostitute.

Although the Kitrong junior leader has a great body,
Impermanence is like summer flowers.
When autumn frost comes, their radiance fades.

Like this example, [he] is a transient phenomenon.
I don’t know the merit of his [previous] birth.
His appearance is as a householder.

Although he is a magnificent, radiant youth,
I, this girl, don’t want him – I give him to you.”

Again, she said, “Lady, don’t be angry! I spoke honest words.”

I replied, “If you don’t speak with liking for the junior leader of Kitrong, it is
okay if I listen.”

She said, “Aside from sizing you up, I don’t have a need for a husband.
Nevertheless, I have honest words to tell you. Listen and [these] thoughts will
come true.”

Having cupped her hands to my ear so that others wouldn’t hear, she said this:
“Next year it is certain that your Treasure consort from former lifetimes and lama
from former lifetimes named Drimamépé Özer Thayé (Stainless Boundless Light
Rays) who is an incarnation of Namnying, Vairo (Vairocana), and Yudra and who
is an unrivaled Treasure revealer will come up from lower Dokham.537 If you stay
together with him in the moon fortress at Gangri Thökar,538 it is certain that China
and Tibet will remain peaceful and happy for the next fifty years. If you don’t do this, it will be time for you to go to the eastern direction of Dokham.  

The ḍākinī Dorjé Yudrön playfully irks Sera Khandro into confirming her disgust for worldly husbands before she prophesizes Sera Khandro’s future consort Drimé Özer and her journey to Golok. This prophecy mentions the tenuous issue of peace between China and Tibet, demonstrating that this was an issue of concern for Sera Khandro in the late 1920s and early 1930s when she wrote her *Autobiography*. Visions such as this foreshadow events in Sera Khandro’s narrative and provide an opportunity for her to clarify the distinction between worldly lust for men’s bodies and having a prophesized relationship with a spiritual consort.

Although visionary figures frequently make prophecies about Sera Khandro’s consorts, she responds to their visionary suggestions with suspicion and rejects their claims that she needs a consort. It is never Sera Khandro’s idea that she needs a consort, but always something that other voices assert. For example, Sera Khandro writes of an interesting interaction she had with the ḍākinī Dorjé Zungma when she was nineteen years old and already living with Gara Gyalsé:

One day a vision arose in which I arrived at the feast row of the ḍākinīs of the three realms. Although I thought it was like this, I didn’t have the capacity to distinguish [what it was]. The channels of my body were numb and it was as if my mind were suddenly dark. I asked someone who said she was Dorjé Zungma: “Although I have come to the ḍākinīs’ feast row since I was young, I have never experienced anything like this before. My body is uncomfortable and it is as if my mind is shrouded in darkness – why is this?”

She answered, “This is because you are of a Treasure lineage and the time has come that you need to rely on a method consort. It is important to establish a noble man in ripening and liberation [instructions] and to rely on him as a consort. Because your channels are disturbed, your perception is like that.”

Again I said, “In this area of Domey Golok, it seems that [men] are of poor ancestry with a ghostly pallor. They are ash-colored without food or clothes and
have rude, thorn-like personalities. Thinking that adhering to them would not bring the perfect realization of means and liberation, I let it go. Although a man of good lineage is like a winter flower, some have already gone away due to the influence of others, some hesitated because of their vows, and since some were rich, it was as if they didn’t want me because I was poor. Now, whatever you say, needing a consort does not arise in me. Although there are method consorts superior to them with the vision of the secret esoteric instructions of the quick path whom I could rely on to bring me to actually realize the holy primordial wisdom of the self-liberation of lustful desire, I have no need or ability to attain them. If I meet with a man who is an unsuitable receptacle, it will be seen as a perversion of the path of mantra and will certainly be the cause for myself and others to go to the lower realms. Hence, I think I will make a pledge to live alone.”

When I said this, she said,

“Enchanting woman who desires desirelessness –
Associate with a method consort and
The primordial wisdom of great bliss will manifest.

Through your pure karma and aspiration prayers, you are empowered in Treasures.
If auspicious connections do not arise, the two benefits [of self and other] will be difficult.

If the method, wisdom, prayers, and [the right] time coincide,
Abandon lazy people and those who save face.

You must be careful regarding finding a way for the auspicious connections to arise.

Since you are not one who has a way to live alone,
Energize all men with bliss and
Show those who have desire the desireless clear light.

Find a way to bring [men] to the ground of union.
By this, the two benefits will arise, yoginī.

Although primordial wisdom free from desire manifests [in you],
If you meet with a consort of noble lineage,
Having excellently attained the perfecting teachings,
The [energy] knots at the wheels of the five abodes will liberate.

All appearances will arise as the wheels with letters.
In this life you will attain the awareness body in union.
This is the dharma of great yogis of mantra.
There is nothing more profound than this quick path.  

Seal it in the expanse of your heart.  
Show this path to those with the karma.  
It is certain that [they] will attain the union body of no more learning.  
Keep it secret from those who are not receptacles [of this teaching].  

Don’t show it to the wind —  
This is the chariot to wandering in the lower realms.  
Your domain is marvelous.  
It is certain that whomever you connect with, it will be meaningful.  

Dorjé Zungma’s explanation to Sera Khandro relies on the physiological yogic model of the purpose of sexual yoga; the symptoms of physical discomfort and mental dullness that Dorjé Zungma diagnoses require the cure of sexual yoga. Sera Khandro’s response to this is not outright negation, but is rather a lamentation that in her area of Golok the men are rough, thorn-like, and almost barbaric without proper food or clothes. Her despair resembles that of a woman who is searching for the right man, for he is as rare as a winter flower and is either unavailable, monastic, or too wealthy to be interested in a poor woman like herself. Since consorting with a normal man not specially empowered in esoteric precepts would be a perversion of the Vajrayāna path, Sera Khandro concludes that she is better off staying alone. Dorjé Zungma’s response emphasizes the importance of gathering auspicious connections (rten 'brel) to benefit both herself and others, and since having a consort is one of those necessary connections, she cannot live alone. She exhorts Sera Khandro to “energize all men with bliss.” Yet those who benefit from this sexual yoga will be not only these fortunate men, but also Sera Khandro, whose energy knots will be liberated, resulting in her own complete realization of Buddhahood. Dorjé Zungma’s remarks are thus words of encouragement, reminding Sera Khandro that no
matter how unattractive and raw the Golok men around her seem, she will have the good fortune to meet her prophesized consort.

Later in her Autobiography, Sera Khandro recounts that when she was twenty-five years old, another vision came to her in which a little bird emissary of the dākinīs appeared. The bird reassured her that despite the uncertainty of gathering all the auspicious connections necessary to reveal Treasures, in time Sera Khandro would find the appropriate consort and disciples she needed to accomplish her lofty spiritual purpose:

Then, in the twelfth month when I was doing a bit of teaching to my disciple Tupten Zangpo, the nun Chötren, and the people of Getso (Dge mtsho) on the explanation of the Cycle of Supplemental Esoteric Precepts on the Secret Path of the Knowledge Holders from Gara Terchen Rinpoche’s profound Treasure, a turquoise blue bird [from] Mon in the South said the following:

“Ki ki yogi,
Ki ki yogi!
Don’t be distracted, listen to me with your ears!

I, this blissful blissful happy happy turquoise bird
Come from the city of great bliss dākinīs.

I carry a secret symbol of inexpressible bliss and emptiness.
Nevertheless, I will speak a bit about the way in which
The beneficial deeds of taming your disciples will arise.”

Thinking that this was a bird from the dākinīs’ land, I said this:

“Incarnation coming from the divine with a beautiful form,
[Sitting] on top of a fragrant resplendent green tree trunk,
You ask me about my situation in a melodious voice.
You, messenger of the dākinīs with a good voice –
Don’t be distracted and listen to the meaning of my words.

I, this girl with bad karma named Pema Drolkar,
Arrived at the negative, evil land of Golok.
I did not have the strength to rise above mediocrity with regard to taming beings
Of this area [that is like] a muddy vessel of water.
This dharma to be taught that is like vital ambrosia
Is sealed in my heart without a place to express it externally.
This wealth given to me by �可视化 that is the vital essence of Treasures
Is without anyone to teach it to because it becomes the basis for wrong views.

I bury it in the expanse of the white dressed Ďākinī of the realm of emptiness.
This Treasure vessel for a later [time] that is a support for body, speech, and mind,
I seal [it in an] immutable hidden vessel as a rediscovered Treasure.

[I], a servant always without leisure,
Bought the suffering of physical and verbal hardship.
Sick with an uncertain illness, several years went by.
On the outside, I was always afflicted with physical illness.
On the inside, I quarreled with my kind life partner.
In-between, the people of the area criticized and insulted me,
Saying bad words to me as if they saw me as their arch enemy.
Good and bad things such as these and so forth have happened.
I think that this is how my actions and beneficial deeds have occurred.
Thinking and thinking [about this] is the basis for sadness to increase.
Who has negative karma like me?

Although I attained freedom, I am without power to go to the Buddhahelms.
Although I want to help beings, I don't have the strength to tame those whom I have to tame.
Although I am empowered in Treasures, I did not rely on the essential point of auspicious connections.

Because I have an inferior [female] body, all the husbands hate me.
Method consorts who are supreme consorts of perfecting [practices] are [as rare as] stars in the daylight.
There are more ordinary sinful consorts than trees.
It is difficult to practice according to the dharma and [I] become the cause of ruin for myself and others.
Having thought about the meaning of this, I maintained moral conduct.

Nevertheless, mother Ďākinīs always
Said that I need to rely continuously on the one commitment that is
The supreme method of examining, seducing, training, and [establishing in] ripening and liberation
One with the supreme form of a hero who arouses bliss.
Repeatedly [this] was expressed in symbolic registries that came to me periodically:

‘Exhort the consort Bimarasmī’
Who is a great bodhisattva who maintains commitments and is endowed with residual prayers from many lifetimes.
By this and by the power of Dharma with a bit of auspicious connections,
In a secret manner the two benefits [self and other] will gradually arise.’

Because of this, I tell this bit of my circumstances
To you, agreeable turquoise blue bird.”

[The bird] said:

“Ki ki yogi!
Ki ki yogi!
If you come around the habitat of the turquoise bird, the tree endowed with fruits,
It is carefree and pleasant.
It is the gathering place of the flock of pleasant sounding birds.
Thoughts in accordance with the Dharma will naturally arise.
If you rely on the one commitment of having a supreme method consort,
[which is] the habitat of a Treasure revealer,
The auspicious connections of the excellent method will naturally come together.
[Like] a gathering of golden swans amassing,
Your actions and beneficial deeds will expand to the utmost.

Nevertheless, on account of sentient beings’ negative minds in this degenerate era,
[Beings] don’t know the enduring commitment that is in accordance with the Dharma.
Obstacles such as demonic powers and so forth will be great and
Because of inferior merit, [people] won’t behave in accordance with the Dharma.

They will have wrong views of those who adhere to the teachings
And will criticize, abuse,
Disrespect, and abandon them like a rock on the road.
[Beings] will uphold men blessed by demons with perverse prayers
As [they protect] the eyes in their forehead.
They will dedicate this life and the next [to them].

When I see behavior like this and so forth,
I cannot see you staying in this land.
Generate the intention for the time to come to go to the
Blissful, blissful, happy, happy land of the ḍākinīs.  

The long-winded turquoise bird who is an envoy of the ḍākinīs continues his prophetic words, encouraging Sera Khandro by foretelling that she will prevail over the negative forces of this degenerate era. His words warning of the demonic powers that cause beings to have wrong views of those who adhere to the teachings and to “criticize, abuse, disrespect, and abandon them like a rock on the road” seem to suggest that the sexual yoga the ḍākinīs prophesize was not accepted by all in Sera Khandro’s milieu. The encouragement the bird gives Sera Khandro is apropos at this juncture in her narrative. It comes when her efforts to reveal Treasures were being stymied by her life partner Gyalsé, when she felt like she “did not rely on the essential point of auspicious connections” that the ḍākinī prophecies repeatedly pronounced. Sera Khandro acknowledges the divine prophecies exhorting her to follow the path of Secret Mantra, but she despair[s at her inability to actualize their injunctions. She laments the distance between her divine dreams and her mundane reality filled with the sufferings of physical illness, quarrels with Gyalsé, and local people’s negative gossip about her. She projects a tone of uncertainty in her reflections, a tone of concern about the future and about her ability to fulfill the lofty goals she (and the ḍākinīs) have set for her. Yet divine figures such as this bird mitigate Sera Khandro’s disappointment with her mundane obstacles, encouraging her to pursue her dreams and reminding her that these dreams require sexual yoga.

As a result of her worldly sufferings, Sera Khandro repeatedly writes of wishing to leave this world of pain and misery in what reads almost like the words of a suicidal person. Divine visions are all that sustain her struggle to benefit beings in this world. She
is constantly looking forward, praying, hoping, and dreaming of a day when she no longer needs to endure her worldly sufferings, when her dākinī sisters will come down to escort her to her divine resting place alongside Yeshé Tsogyal in the Buddhasfields. This yearning to leave the world is clear in the following dialogue with another visionary bird who comes to Sera Khandro when she is out on a mountain collecting wild garlic with her close disciple Tupten Zangpo. Sera Khandro, then twenty-four years old, converses with the little bird:

I wondered if this little bird came from the Copper-colored Mountain. Thinking that if this were the case the bird would certainly understand questions and answers, I said the following:

“Hey, hey illusory little bird –

Where are you from?
Was your journey long or short?
Do you feel weary from flying from your home?
Is your land pleasant?
[You] who bring secret words of clarity to me
What is the name of the dākinī [who sent you]?

I am a servant whose purpose is not accomplished.
It is decided that benefiting others will not happen.
Now I, this one with an inferior [female] body, desire to go
To the blissful, blissful land of the dākinīs.

Although I am empowered in extremely profound extraordinary Treasures
By the power of the prayers of Shelkar Tsogyal,
Because I am an inferior woman with little courage,
I did not find a way to attract a consort or a doctrine holder.

Although I am without hatred towards the high and low local people,
They demonstrate many types of unpleasantness towards me.
Their main topics of conversation are perverse views and blame.

Now in this area of the negative town of Banak,\textsuperscript{547}
I will not propagate a single word of my profound Treasure.
Having re-hidden the [Treasure] vessels and profound pages,
I will go wander the country as an ordinary person.”
When I said this, again the bird said:

"Listen noble lady!
[I], a brilliant illusory Garuda,
Came from the directionless direction of the Glorious Mountain.
I am not weary from flying.
I came on a path of wind aided by deities.
The music of the ċākini's symbolic words
Is the secret speech of Lekyi Wangmo.

The time for you [to go] to the ċākini's land
Has not arrived.
When you are satisfied with the horns of a bull,
The consort coming from no direction
With the radiant stripes of a tiger will come to welcome you.548
Continually apply yourself in numerous feast and sacrificial offerings
To the mother ċākini.

Auspicious connections depend only on
[Your] good and bad actions.
When you meet with consorts and doctrine holders,
Do not be swayed by the sapta [demon] of laziness!

Act according to the ċākini's orders and
It is certain that the lantern of the teachings of the two Treasures549
Will shine in the east and south.
In time, the ċākini will certainly give you symbolic images of
[what is to happen in] the future.
In time, we will meet
In the unmanifest land of the ċākini.550

Here again Sera Khandro bemoans her inferior female body as the reason for her lack of
courage and her inability to attract the proper consorts and doctrine holders. It is not that
she doesn’t want to fulfill the ċākini’s injunctions, but that she feels incapable of drawing
together the requisite auspicious connections. Given Sera Khandro’s negative perception
of her capacities, visions like these provide encouragement when she is on the brink of
giving up. The tension between Sera Khandro’s self-doubt and ċākini’s encouragement
creates a sense of anticipation and suspense in the reader, who internalizes the uncertainty
Sera Khandro projects while anxiously waiting for her to unfold the story of her
liberation. The worldly struggles that she laments in these visions humanize her as well as betray the level of contention that existed in her social communities regarding consort relationships, whether prophesized or not. Dākinīs and their emissaries come to remind Sera Khandro that although she is in this world, she is not of this world and that in due time, they will come to welcome her home.

As the passages above demonstrate, divine visions reassure Sera Khandro that she will find the consorts she needs to accomplish her spiritual goals. Even so, Sera Khandro represents herself as rejecting their exhortations to find a consort to the detriment of both her spiritual and physical health. Visionary divinities argue that since Sera Khandro is neither a nun nor a laywoman, engaging with consorts does not contradict her religious vows. What is at stake in these dialogues is more than Sera Khandro’s bashfulness about taking on a consort, but rather relates to the larger question of how to uphold the proper morality in the context of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Sera Khandro’s autobiographical representation of her dilemma between renouncing sexuality and engaging with consorts reflects larger tensions within Nyingma religious communities in Eastern Tibet between the lifestyles of non-celibate Tantric practitioners and celibate monastics. While the morality of maintaining celibacy vows is beyond reproach, the communities in which Sera Khandro lived in Eastern Tibet were (and still are) primarily headed by non-celibate Tantric masters, a circumstance that indicates their potential (but not guaranteed) higher status. In Sera Khandro’s writings, engaging in sexual yoga is a dangerous endeavor; practicing the quick path of Secret Mantra leads to liberation, but it also leads to the hell realms if done with conventional lust. This tension between maintaining celibacy and
engaging with consorts on the Vajrayāna path to Buddhahood is clear in a dream Sera Khandro had when she was thirty-six years old:

That night in a dream, two mendicants who were traveling pilgrims, one big and one small, came to my place after nightfall.

They said, “How are you?”

I answered, “I’m fine. Are you two tired?”

The big mendicant replied, “Although we are not tired, for a long distance we didn’t find much to eat on the road. Nevertheless, having come before you, because we need to attain a teaching, we both offer our bodies to you. We need you to first give us food to fill us and later Dharma to liberate us.”

I said, “Having practiced completely pure dharma, if you two stay only on a secluded mountain, I will give you as much of the necessities of food and clothing as possible. Otherwise, although you give me your bodies, you don’t need to entrust yourselves [to me] as servants. It is acceptable if you assiduously practice on a secluded mountain.”

When I said this, the mendicant answered, “The meaning of our offering our bodies to you is not to think of a way to be your servant or to reside like a sage in rock caverns and mountain slopes! Because you are a Treasure revealer, for the purpose of being your consorts we thought we would stay [with you].”

Feeling great fear, I said, "Precious Lama think of me! Kind One, think of me!"

He said, “Although you don’t desire me, in any case, you need to take this small monk under your care.”

Because he repeatedly said this, I responded by saying, “I am not a Treasure revealer. I don’t need a consort. Before, I have never had disciples with deteriorated vows like you two. Still now I won’t take you on. You two, wherever you go, go [away]. Don’t stay in this land. Even if I have to kill you both, I won’t consider engaging [with you].”

Again, they said, “I know whether or not you are a Treasure revealer. Look in your [Treasure] registry – among your five main method consorts, one is this small monk. If you don’t take him on as a consort, you won’t be able to decode your Treasures as well. Hence, consider this.”

Becoming a bit confused, I asked, “What land are you two from?”
When I asked this, he replied, "We are from Nyakog (Nyag khog). The small monk's name is X.\textsuperscript{551} Hence, because the Lotus Guru's prophecies are undeceiving, [his] prayers and the [proper] time have gathered together."

Again, I said, "Although the Guru's prophecies are undeceiving, because I am of bad ancestry, I didn't find a way to act in accordance with the prophecies. From one perspective, since I am a woman, even though I met with doctrine holders and method consorts, I didn't dare recognize them [as such]. From another perspective, thinking that I would offend the one with the characteristics of a great bodhisattva whose body had received mantra, who exerted himself in unsurpassed practice, and who relied on the path of enhancement, means and liberation, and union without depending on successively traversing grounds and paths in order to attain an awareness body, I guard my commitment vows like the eyes in my forehead. Until I attain permission from this consort [i.e., Drimé Özer], even though it is in accordance with my Treasure prophecy, my mind is decided and I don't think about associating with a single consort. Even still, despite the fact that I am not a Treasure revealer, I will certainly abide by commitments without [a difference between that which is] openly perceived and hidden.\textsuperscript{552} Hence, from whatever perspective, you two go home."

Then, the bigger mendicant having dissolved into the smaller one, both of their bodies disappeared and their voices spoke the following:

"Young ravishing beauty,
Insatiably to look at, one with the body of supreme great bliss,
One who speaks the truth, whose mind has abandoned deception,
Greatly loving, powerful dākinī, you I praise.
The supreme excellent path of accomplishing Buddhahood in one lifetime,
[Is] adhering to the Vajra[yāna] path of accomplishing the two benefits [of self and other] at one time.
Enjoy a consort who arouses bliss together with emptiness and
May you stay together without separating for an instant."

Having said this, they disappeared into the appearance of a red light in the direction of the sunset.

Then, an old woman came and asked, "Did you know those two mendicants?"

I said, "Although I don't know them, they spoke about various strange things. Why is that?"

When I asked this, she answered, "The small monk was sent to you by your method consort [named] Akaré. The big mendicant is called Segyal. Hence, since you have a bit of obscurations between method and wisdom [i.e., between you
and your consorts], you need to be careful.” As soon as she said this, I awoke from sleep.\textsuperscript{553}

This conversation between Sera Khandro and the two visionary monks highlights the tension between celibacy and sexual yoga. Sera Khandro haughtily rejects the monks she considers immoral for wanting to compromise their monastic vows, but in the end it turns out that Sera Khandro has rejected a consort who actually was prophesized in her Treasure registry. If this is the case, then Sera Khandro’s highly moral rejection of the mendicants’ untoward advances was not entirely the right choice for her. The separation between celibate monastics and non-celibate Tantric practitioners thus becomes blurred, an issue we will return to later in the chapter. Sera Khandro hesitates in her decision to reject the monks’ advances because the monks seem to know who she is despite her humble denials, yet ultimately she chooses the safer path of maintaining her chastity. In rejecting the small monk as a consort, the big monk tells her that she won’t be able to decode her Treasures as well as she might have. This example confirms that according to Sera Khandro’s writings, the connection between decoding Treasures and having a consort has to do with engendering bliss in sexual yoga, not with a shared feminine quality between female consorts and symbolic ḍākinī scripts.

Rejecting opportunities to engage with consorts results in not only difficulty decoding Treasures, but in actual physical illness. It is not only male religious adepts who search Sera Khandro out for her curative powers, but Sera Khandro herself who needs to engage in sexual yoga in order to stay healthy. As she makes clear, it is both a blessing and an obligation to fulfill Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal’s prophecies; she can reject their divine injunctions only at the risk of her very life. Sera Khandro writes of battling repeated bouts of illness throughout her life, illnesses that often appear to be
some type of arthritis (‘bam gzhi) that particularly affected her legs. But that was not the only illness she faced, as the following conversation from the Autobiography between Sera Khandro and a visionary woman shows:

Then, in the tenth month of that year [c.a. 1927 when she was 35], I was oppressed with a terrible illness and was on the verge of death. At that time, on the night of the twenty second day of the twelfth month, in my erroneous perception an old woman with a good body, tormented by lustful desire, and with faultless sense faculties like [those of a] young woman came and said the following:

“Ya, ya – girlfriend, what sickness do you have?
Tell me the symptoms of your sickness.
If you are sick with lustful desire that is the cause of existence
I know a good medicine.”

To that, I replied,

“Older sister, neither an old woman nor a young girl,
I, neither a nun nor a wife, will tell you the way that I am sick.

From the time I was young, lamas took care of me.
They blessed my mind stream with both ripening and liberation [instructions].

I am expert in the essential points of enhancement, means, and liberation.
I don’t need to be bound by the noose of lustful desire.

By the kindness of my consort Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Drimé Özer]
The three types of [karmic] propensities\textsuperscript{554} are liberated from their base.
Samsāra and nirvāṇa are alike in awareness and emptiness.

I have seen the unsurpassed meaning
Of the desireless and free from desire primordial wisdom
In which bliss and emptiness are without meeting and parting.

I am not sick with the cause of existence.
My passion has been purified as great bliss.
Obtaining manifest co-emergent primordial wisdom
Ripens into the self-empty Truth Body.
I do not fear\textsuperscript{555} this sickness of lustful desire.

I am tormented by a sickness that is a combination of illnesses:
My heart is uncomfortable as if it is a large drum beating.  
My lungs are uncomfortable like bellows being blown.  
My gall bladder and spleen are like putting wild horses in order.  
The nerves of my two eyeballs are about to be cut.  
I can’t hold up my head — it is heavier than a diamond.  
Blood and bile pervade like water in all my channels.  
My wind is not harmonious as if quarreling with an enemy rival.  
Long and short breath comes out of both my mouth and nose.  
This collection of elements that is my body is like inanimate matter.

This collection of various illnesses has gathered together.  
This mass of light that is the primordial wisdom of mind  
Is on the verge of going out via the path of the white silk channel.  
These are my symptoms.  
If you know how to diagnose, then diagnose this.”

She said:

“You, yoginī who is a doctor of channels and winds –  
One with a beautiful face whose body liberates into light,  
The origin of these various illnesses is  
Obscuration by the sapta [demons] regarding the method of auspicious connections.

Because [as] a youth, [you] abandoned sustaining your life and  
On account of deteriorated commitments, [these illnesses] and so forth are incited.  
When the time comes together, many negative conditions will afflict your body.

Although you see the meaning of not staying in [cyclic] existence,  
You have not purified subtle [karmic] propensities.  
On account of the mental illusions of hopes and fears,  
You didn’t act in accordance with the prophecies.  
You abandoned [engaging with] a bodhisattva who adheres to the Dharma.

Why do you behave in the manner of the doctrine of the lesser vehicle with your three doors (body, speech, and mind)?  
You don’t see attaining the results  
Of the extraordinary Dharma of the quick path of mantra?”

Again, I said,

“Listen older sister of similar lineage:
If [one] can practice the extraordinary Dharma of Secret Mantra, 
That quick self-fruition is reality itself, 
I have no doubt. 
I pray that in this and all my lives 
I meet with this quick path.

Nevertheless, these days in the Degenerate Age 
Peoples’ desire burns like fire. 
Under the pretense of being mantrins, they practice non-virtue. 
They assemble false Treasures, which are the ruin of themselves 
and others. 
They throw away their seminal fluid through fornication 
Like spit in the dust.

Those who practice according to mantra are almost non-existent. 
Because of this, thinking that my female body 
Would become the basis for my own and others’ ruin, 
I entered the path of physical discipline.556

Thinking I would be able to abandon having negative thoughts and 
negative [future] births, 
I abandoned wrongdoing and negative consorts for a long time. 
Who will I harm by the pleasant meaning of 
Entering into the path of the two truths?5557

In response to Sera Khandro’s explanation, the old woman gives her an elusive prophecy 
foretelling the places and the key figures who will aid her in accomplishing her divine purpose. In the passage above, Sera Khandro represents herself in a more self-confident tone befitting an older, more experienced woman as she unabashedly tells the visionary old woman of her spiritual realization. Yet the old woman is not convinced of Sera Khandro’s excuses for not practicing sexual yoga; rejecting consorts may be morally reprehensible, but it is also the cause of her physical illness according to the old woman’s playful words. She claims that Sera Khandro has chosen to follow the discipline of the lesser vehicle (Hinayāna) even though she has the superior capacity to follow the quick path of Secret Mantra (Vajrayāna). For her part, Sera Khandro recoils from the potential moral dangers of the quick path. She rejects the old woman’s allegation that she
suffers from an illness caused by desire that can only be cured by the medicine of engaging with a consort.

Sera Khandro’s ambivalence regarding the morality of consort practices is a continuous theme. She recounts yet another playful visionary interaction with an old woman who appeared before her when she was thirty-eight: 558

At that time, I got a strange illness that caused me extremely sharp pain in my lotus. On the tenth day of the twelfth month, during a practice session, a secret vision arose. An old woman came to me and said the following: "What kind of sickness do you have?"

I said, "I don’t have a way to explain my sickness to you (because) it is in an embarrassing place."

She said, "I know a medicine that will benefit your sickness."

I asked, "What is the medicine like? Do you have something to give me?"

She said, "I don’t have it, another person does, but you won’t take it, right?"

I said, “Unless I can’t find the medicine to take, when I find it if it is possible that it will help me, I will take it.”

When I said this, she said,

"Ha ha, you won’t take it! You won’t take the medicine! If you will take it, I will show you the supreme medicine!

The ambrosia that conquers afflictive emotions abides In the moonlight at the top of the 32 [channels] 559 (In) a Vajra body possessing the six elements and five [cakras].

That which resides there comes down through the path of great emptiness [i.e., the central channel]. By falling down through the four [cakras], It emerges at the city of the 64 channels [i.e., the secret cakra].

If your lotus receives and is nourished by this sprinkling [of ambrosia], Auspicious circumstances will come together and all [your] physical sickness will be dispelled.

The king of medicine who possesses this [ambrosia]
Is the one with the name of Banza⁵⁶⁰ and so forth who is in the south. You will meet him at the place where the three rivers gather. By this, dangers to your life will temporarily be eliminated."

Again, I said,

"Listen old woman who talks [like a] monkey, I, the woman Dewé Dorjé, I am not sick because I haven’t found a husband.

The four elements of my illusory body are agitated and Because I have not destroyed self-cherishing, I am always tormented by sickness.

If there is any possible way to cure this, I think I should rely on the protection of this supreme medicine. Nevertheless, it is decided that I will not rely on This perverse medicine of yours.

Don’t speak these false words and Go away to whatever land you like."

She said, "Girlfriend, don’t get angry! My words are definitive and are not monkey talk! If you do not rely on a method companion, even if you take other medicines for a lifetime, it seems that there will be no benefit and you won’t find a way to cure your various illnesses."

I said, "If I am sick, I am the one who has to experience suffering. You do not need to experience it. Now I would like you to leave me alone. At the end of my life that is like a setting sun, aside from wondering if I can accomplish the completely pure Dharma, I don’t think about needing to take on a consort."

Although our conversation was not finished, because of something else, I awoke from sleep.⁵⁶¹

In the passage above, Sera Khandro responds to the celestial old lady with an almost sassy attitude, rejecting her playful but serious words as if they were “monkey talk.” But the instructions the old woman gives her are by no means trivial. The old woman describes a process of seminal nuclei descending down from the crown of the man’s head through the other four energy centers of his body and into the woman’s lotus. This description is reminiscent of Kukurepa’s long visionary instruction to Sera Khandro in
the early part of her *Autobiography* in which he teaches her how to draw up seminal nuclei into successively higher parts of her body resulting in complete Buddhahood. The old woman’s description of this medicinal “sprinkling of ambrosia” that Sera Khandro needs to cure her gynecological problem is interesting in that it emphasizes the explicitly fluid nature of this exchange. But if Buddhist sexual yoga is about semen retention, then how can Sera Khandro enact the old woman’s advice without causing her consort harm by taking his seminal essence? Clearly there are multiple ways to engage in Buddhist sexual yoga beyond semen retention.

Regardless of what type of sexual interaction the old lady prescribes, Sera Khandro represents herself as wanting nothing to do with it. One way we can interpret Sera Khandro’s flippant response to her divine interlocutor is modesty. As one of the only female autobiographers and female Treasure revealers to write so extensively about herself as a religious adept, Sera Khandro preempts potential criticism by representing herself as a skeptic who preferred to follow the moral high ground of virtuous discipline. But this is not the whole story, as divine figures such as the one below remind us. Just after the old woman above has failed to convince Sera Khandro, the mountain deity Nyenchen Tanglha (who Sera Khandro claims is her real father) appears to drive the message home:

Together with this, a person wearing a loose white woolen garment holding a jewel vessel in his right hand and a yak [hair] whip in his left riding a black horse with black fetlocks⁵⁶² and wearing a turban ornamented with silver mirrors came and said the following:

“Hello! How are you?”

I thought that he didn’t seem to be human. “Do you know if I’m fine or not?”

He answered, “My knowing is okay. However, you didn’t obey me.”
Again, I said, "If you know, then that’s it. It isn’t important whether or not I obey you. You are not my lama."

He said, "Although I am not your lama, I am the equivalent of your lama."

Thinking that perhaps he was Nyenchen Tanglha, I didn’t say anything.

Hence, he said, "It is difficult for what you are thinking to happen – who has a way to repel the aspiration prayers of Guru Padma? Moreover, in accordance with the prophecies of the mother dākinīs, it is important to be skilled in the method of auspicious connections. When you don’t act accordingly, forget about finishing out your lifespan. Your body will become completely exhausted. Because I say this with good intentions toward you, examine this method. You are not a nun with Vinaya rules who needs to let auspicious connections go away to other powers. You are also not a cheating woman who engages in lustful sexual misconduct. When the circumstances of favorable conditions gather together, because there will be a great benefit to yourself and others, you need to think accordingly."

Saying this, he gave me a Treasure vessel.

When I asked, "What is this?," he answered, "It is a hidden registry which discloses a testament of Yeshé Tsogyal." Saying this, he disappeared like a rainbow in the sky.563

As in the previous vision, initially Sera Khandro snubs this unknown apparitional figure as if to say she cannot possibly listen to all the suspect advice coming from visionary personages, ranging from demons to bodhisattvas, who appear before her. Yet, when she realizes the divine figure is her own father, the powerful mountain deity Nyenchen Tanglha, she cannot challenge the veracity of his words or the decency of his intent. She does not concede to him verbally, but rather gives him the last word. She allows him to articulate her in-between status as neither chaste nun nor sinful laywoman, but as a woman who must foster auspicious connections involving sexual yoga. In this manner, Sera Khandro weaves together her lengthy Autobiography using the voices of others who express her special status as a divine emissary, as a Treasure revealer, and as one who
must engage with consorts at the risk of her very life. By allowing others to utter superlative claims about the benefits of her role as a consort, Sera Khandro is free to deny her abilities, making herself appear all the more humble and believable to her readers. After all, who has the ability to defy Padmasambhava’s command?

These ephemeral visionary voices articulate the different purposes for having a consort—spiritual realization, curing illness, and revealing Treasures—while, at the same time, their shared quality as somatic processes emerges. Through Sera Khandro’s retorts, the dilemmas of her situation become clear: how can one differentiate between conventional lust and spiritually beneficial sexual practices? Where is a Tantric practitioner to draw the slippery line between the virtues of celibacy and the benefits of sexuality? Sera Khandro’s visionary encounters point towards these quandaries, but her accounts of life in Golok religious encampments and monasteries develop these and other consort-related tensions as they manifested on a social level in the communities in which she lived.

**Consorts and Community**

Visionary interactions such as those I have described above emphasize the esoteric purposes of consort practices on the path of Secret Mantra, but Sera Khandro’s accounts of the social dynamics in her religious communities ground consort practices in the mundane world. Interspersed between descriptions of her visionary experiences are passages in which Sera Khandro portrays tensions related to consort practices that were often very conventional and not particularly spiritually enlightened. These include unhappy relationships, patriarchal and nonconsensual exchanges of women between
powerful men, jealousy between women, and negative gossip. Her descriptions of consort practices go beyond physiological processes of manipulating channels and winds; she describes their human context in relationships with men and friendships and rivalries with other women. The detail Sera Khandro’s works provide regarding the emotional relationships connected to consort practices offers new and previously un-researched information about consort practices, which have most often been understood in the context of philosophical religious doctrine divorced from the human communities within which they occurred. Also typical of the more mundane variety of human relationships, Sera Khandro’s writing gives us glimpses into her private sentimental life, a life spent devoted to her lama and lover Drimé Özer, which will be the topic of the following chapter.

**Trouble in Paradise: Consorts and Community Tensions**

The social dynamics Sera Khandro portrays in the religious communities revolving around Treasure revelation in which she lived read almost like a cinematic drama including intense jealousy, competition, friendship, love, and sorrow. Sera Khandro records that after she escaped impending marriage in Lhasa, right from the beginning of her new religious life, she was confronted with the jealousy of religious community leaders’ female consorts. Given her youth and great beauty, Sera Khandro seemed to threaten most of the women around her. When she traveled to Golok at the age of fifteen with the important Golok incarnate lama Drimé Özer, who remained the central inspiration for her spiritual and sentimental religious devotion throughout her life, she recounts tensions within the group of traveling pilgrims over her interactions with him:
Without letting his close entourage see, the Lord himself [Drimé Özer] gave me medicine for my wounds [sores from extreme cold] and food and drinks. Despite this, everyone said, “Because of this Central Tibetan girl, Akyongza [a skyong bza’, Drimé Özer’s consort] won’t come.” Because of this problem, I didn’t dare go before him and I prostrated to him from afar and circumambulated him.\textsuperscript{564}

Sera Khandro’s identity as a threat to the consorts already connected to Drimé Özer such as the “Lady of Akyong” was clear to everyone from the beginning. Not only women discouraged Sera Khandro from interacting with Drimé Özer, but also male pilgrims despised this interloper from central Tibet’s proximity to their lama. Still on the road from Lhasa to Golok, Sera Khandro recounts:

Then, we gradually arrived at the Tsidam meditation cave where the Lord himself needed to take out a profound Treasure. If I went there, it was certain that he would take out the Treasure without leaving anything. Despite this, Tapen (Rta pan) said to me, “Why did you come here? It will be difficult for you to cross the Pen River (Spen chu),” and he didn’t let me go. I went together with Jikdrön (Jig sgron, her nun friend) before the Lord and it was just a middling auspicious circumstance.\textsuperscript{565}

To the chagrin of men such as Tapen who were hostile to Sera Khandro’s entry into their religious encampment, Sera Khandro recounts perceiving herself, even at sixteen, to be Drimé Özer’s prophesized consort necessary for his successful Treasure revelation.

After arriving at Drimé Özer’s household (bla brang) in Golok that Sera Khandro refers to as both a Treasure encampment (gter sgar) and a monastery (mgon pa) named Dartsang (Zlar tshang), Sera Khandro wanted only to stay near Drimé Özer to study and practice Dharma, yet she was rebuffed primarily by supporters of Drimé Özer’s consort Akyongza who refused to allow Sera Khandro to live in such close proximity. Sera Khandro explains:

At that time the caretaker of the lama’s household named Akyap Trülku said, “The Central Tibetan girl is not allowed to live here. When she lives here, it is certain that Akyongza will not come back.”
Because he was angry, I said, "Since I am a good person, there is no reason why Akyongza won't come. If I stay here, what harm will there be?" Saying this, I didn't leave. 566

Yet Sera Khandro soon saw the merits of avoiding Akyongza's wrath by moving further away from Drimé Özer to work as a servant girl for a local Golok nomadic family connected to the Dartsang religious encampment. After working as a servant for a short while, the time came for Sera Khandro to return to Dartsang to request religious teachings from Drimé Özer. She recounts,

Then, gradually I came to know [how to do] the [servant] work and having understood the [Golok] language, after I stayed there for over a month, it became time for the religious teachings, so I went together with the nun from their [her employer's] family named Tsüldrön to the monastery. At that time, because Akyongza had come to the lama's residence, not daring to go before the Lord himself, I sent a message to Öbar asking what religious teaching I should request. 567

Even though she states that her presence wouldn't cause Akyongza any harm, her efforts to avoid Akyongza betray the tension between them.

During this time when Sera Khandro was working as a servant and doing the preliminary practices she requested at Dartsang from Drimé Özer and his brothers, she received a letter from Gara Tertön Dudül Wangjuk Lingpa (Mgar ra gter ston bdud 'dul dbang phyug gling pa, 1857-1911) inviting her to visit him at Banak Monastery (which she also calls a Treasure encampment, gter sgar) in contemporary Padma County, Golok. As I have previously explained, the implication in Gara Tertön's invitation was that the then seventeen-year-old Sera Khandro could help to cure his illnesses and propagate his Treasure teachings by acting as his consort. The problem with this, of course, was that fifty-odd-year-old Gara Tertön already had a consort, who did not appreciate having the young Sera Khandro as competition. Sera Khandro writes,
At that time because Gara Tertön’s partner was Yakshulza (Yak shul bza’), she sent me a message saying, “You don’t have to come to my area. If you come, this will happen to the Central Tibetan girl.” I heard that she said she would certainly verbally and physically abuse me.\textsuperscript{568}

Because of Yakshulza’s threatening messages warning her not to come to Banak, the auspicious connections between Sera Khandro and Gara Tertön disappeared. However, after two years passed, again Gara Tertön invited Sera Khandro to visit Banak because, as he told her in a letter, she needed to make an auspicious connection with Drimé Özer whom he had also invited. At long last, Sera Khandro traveled with an old woman named Chöki (Chos skyid) to Banak when she was nineteen years old despite the threat of the wrath of Yakza. On their way, when they reached a place called Nyimdo (Gnyi mdo), they happened upon a person from Banak who gave them the following news in response to Sera Khandro’s inquiry about Gara Tertön’s health:

Oh, the lama and Yakza had a marital dispute and haven’t spoken to each other for about two months. The lama says that because Yakza confused his auspicious connections, he’s going to the Buddhafields. His health is extremely disturbed and although they have recited many rituals, since it is difficult to benefit him, it is certain that he will pass away.\textsuperscript{569}

The confused auspicious connections that the passerby mentions refers to Gara Tertön’s earlier request for Sera Khandro’s services as a consort. Therefore, because Yakza prevented Sera Khandro from coming, she thwarted his only means of staying alive. This instance demonstrates that consorts were not only seen as aides to their male partner’s longevity, but they could also be accused of causing their demise. Sera Khandro recounts with evident bitterness the negative reception she received upon her arrival at Banak as a nineteen-year-old servant girl coming from Dartsang:

When we arrived close by the lama’s bedroom, two servant girls from the lama’s residence were carrying empty barrels. Yakza’s nun Tsöndru threw out ashes and
so forth. Knowing who I was, she harmed the auspicious connections as much as she could.

I called out to my mother and said the following:

"Ho, ho, listen Chöki -
This negative circumstance of the three — ashes, empty barrels, and perverse prayers —
Gathering together at one time
Is a negative omen that [our] merit is exhausted.

Oh my — their thoughts
Are all prophetic.
Before anyone knew who I was,
Even though nobody said it was me,
They demonstrated types of things that corrupt auspicious connections.

If I think of the behavior of people in this negative time,
I pay the price of suffering.
Do you know this?"

She said, "Don’t speak like this. Since we are beggars, they will abuse us."

Then we came up and went into the monastery asking if we could find lodging. Lama Tongpön Mönlam from before and Lama Naropa came and asked, “Are you two tired?”

I said, “I have no problem. Since the old lady is aged, she is very tired.”

Then, when they prepared the necessities of lodging, firewood, and so forth, again I asked Mönlam Gyamtso, “How is the lama’s health?” Did Trülku Drimé not come?”

He answered, “The lama’s health is extremely disturbed and it seems as if there is nothing to do. The Trülku [Drimé Özer] didn’t find a way to come. Now, we don’t dare tell Yakza that you have arrived. Since today the lama said that a guest of his would be arriving and he appeared joyous, it seems that he knew you were coming.”

Then, although I stayed a few days, they didn’t find a way for me to go before the lama. That year in the second month on the twenty-eighth day when the sun rose, I heard that the lama was about to pass away. Feeling sad, I went to a willow grove on the side of the monastery. At that time, a lot of people were calling my name. Wondering what it was, when I looked, the direct disciples of the lama including Dogé Lama Tenzin, Lama Naropa, Mönlam Gyamtso, and so forth were
leading a horse and saying, “You need to come. Since the lama is on the verge of death, Yakza says that it is okay if you come.”

Everyone said, “There is no way for you not to go.”

I said, “Long life to Yakza. What is the meaning of [her acting like] I would kill a boy in front of his mother? Before, I have been speaking important words to her for two years. During that time, she said I was not allowed to come. Now, after all the water has collected under the bridge, it makes no difference whether I come or not. You all didn’t prepare conducive conditions in accordance with knowing that I had come here. Now, when the lama is about to pass away, since it is certain that I don’t have a way to do anything [to help him], I won’t go.”

Again, they said, “Although we knew you had arrived before, we didn’t have a way to tell Yakza. Aside from this, it is not that we didn’t prepare conducive circumstances.”

“If she dares to establish rules regarding the Treasure Revealer Lama, of course [you all could] dare to tell [her] that I have come. Now, although it is like this, I won’t go.”

Having applied religious vows, Lama Tenzin and Tsering Wangdü from Bangyül didn’t give me the freedom not to go. I went together with them and although everybody said, “How are you?,” I gave absolutely no reply and went up into the house.

The lamas, monks, and disciples were holding a feast offering. I thought that it was as if they were giving a traveler food for the road. Although it seemed that they were providing a feast offering as a way for the lama to depart, I didn’t say anything.

Then, the lama’s direct disciple, the renunciate Ngakwang Demchok came from the door of the lama’s bedroom and said to me, “Come before the lama,” and we went there. I offered prostrations and he looked upon me with the eyes of a mother, smiled, and gave me a nice silk scarf. With his right hand he held my left hand and prayed.

Sera Khandro then made a supplication prayer to the Lama, shortly after which he passed away while holding her hand. She recounts feeling devastated by Gara Tertön’s passing because she felt that he had something to teach her but wasn’t able to due to the obstacles that his wife Yakza caused. Despite this, her wishes were fulfilled when he came to her in
a vision and granted her empowerments in his Treasure cycles and commanded her to maintain and propagate his teachings. The passage above dramatizes the bitter rivalry between Sera Khandro and Yakza. Her description of Yakza paints her not only as abusive towards her, but as the cause of her husband’s death through her defiance of the dākinīs’ prophecies. Sera Khandro’s anger at the negligent and abusive way she was treated by women such as Yakza jumps out through the words on the pages of her Autobiography, adding a human touch to the often extraordinary tone of her autobiographical reflections.

In compliance with the prophecy of another lama named Kangdong Bönpo Gönwang who told her to spend time with Gara Tertön’s son Gara Gyalsé, Sera Khandro then entered into what turned out to be a very turbulent relationship with her “life partner” (tshe grols) Gyalsé. Problems in their relationship stemmed from the fact that Gyalsé disapproved of Sera Khandro’s calling as a Treasure revealer. He punished her verbally and physically for revealing Treasures. Gyalsé felt that he was losing power to his woman as she became locally renowned as a dākinī and as a female Treasure revealer. Sera Khandro portrays him as being an irascible, difficult man with whom she often quarreled. Yet after giving birth to their daughter Chöying Drönma when she was twenty-two years old, Sera Khandro was tied to her family and stayed in their bitterly discordant relationship until she was thirty years old.

Another factor in Sera Khandro’s unhappy relationship with Gara Gyalsé was the fact that her intense feelings of devotion and love for Drimé Özer never stopped even after she entered into a relationship with Gyalsé. Perhaps in response to this (Sera Khandro does not tell us), Gyalsé offered Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer as a consort,
exchanging ownership over her as if they were trading ownership of a precious object.  

Although Sera Khandro greatly desired to live with Drimé Özer, she writes of being extremely upset about being given away by Gyalsé and feeling humiliated and rejected by him and his community. During these difficult years living with Gyalsé (when she was twenty-two until thirty), although she traveled to see Drimé Özer on several occasions, she always returned home to Gyalsé's community in Banak despite her marital unhappiness. To make matters worse, by the end of Sera Khandro’s time living with Gyalsé, he had taken on another wife named Saldrön (Gsal sgron) about whom Sera Khandro has nothing positive to say. Sera Khandro was replaced right before her eyes with another woman, this time a daughter-in-law who had the approval of Sera Khandro’s bitter rival, Gyalsé’s mother’s Yakza.

While all these machinations were going on during the period that Sera Khandro was living at Banak with Gyalsé and his entourage, Sera Khandro developed an increasingly close friendship with a lama from Tartang Pelyül Monastery named Gotrül Rinpoché (’Jigs bral chos kyi blo gros, or Dpal yul sgo chen sprul sku). Gotrül Rinpoché plays a key role in Sera Khandro’s narrative in that he is the one who first recognized her as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal and popularized this during their first meeting when Sera Khandro was twenty-four years old. Gotrül Rinpoché strongly supported Sera Khandro’s Treasure revelation and periodically requested that she give him her Treasures in order to improve his health. He often gave advice about what Sera Khandro needed to do to actualize her dākinī prophecies and to cultivate the proper auspicious connections, advising not only Sera Khandro but also Gyalsé and Drimé Özer about Sera Khandro’s future. In this way he played a prophetic role almost like that of the
divine visions in Sera Khandro’s life. Sera Khandro writes of times when Gotrül Rinpočhe gave Gyalsé unsolicited advice, telling him in ways he did not appreciate that he needed to treat Sera Khandro better like the dākinī Treasure revealer that she was. For example, Sera Khandro narrates the following interaction that occurred when she was twenty-seven years old:

Then, in the dragon month [the third month], since a letter arrived from Gotrül, Gyalsé and I along with some attendants went to the area of Yūtsi [Gyu rtsi] to see the Trülku. His arthritis having gotten worse, all the group of his disciples and attendants meditated on joy. Each of them stayed there exerting themselves in their own practice. When we met [Gotrül], he was revived with happiness as if meeting a person who came alive from the dead. Then, having stayed there for fifteen days, we spoke in detail with Gotrül until there was nothing more to say from all perspectives regarding worldly and religious affairs.

In particular, when Gotrül Rinpočhe gave much advice regarding my present and future to the Gara Trülku [Gyalsé], it didn’t agree with Gyalsé and he said the following: “It seems as though you are a noble dākinī who appears to be Yeshé Tsogyal and who someone like me is not empowered to have as a consort. Gotrül always says, ‘It is not suitable [for you] to separate from your dākinī by various means.’ Although a man must lose power to a woman, what is the meaning of my not having power over someone like you? An old worldly householder man will never have a way to take another layman’s wife.”

I also said, “Thinking that I was of a high birth, did Gotrül give you advice? According to your thoughts, since everyone can see that I am an old sinner from a polluted family who is inferior to Saldrôn [Gyalsé’s new wife], you don’t need to say this. You have control. From one perspective, it is easy to take on a female body and from another perspective, my father’s name is far away. From a third perspective, people who have a little pity [for me] are like the proverb “uncle rabbit’s horns.” Seeing me as an object of compassion, of course he [Gotrül] was speaking to you. You don’t need to be upset and worried about this.”

Gyalsé smarted at the idea that Gotrül Rinpočhe had such a high opinion of Sera Khandro. A subtext of his discomfort was that he wondered whether Gotrül Rinpočhe had an ulterior motive for his laudatory treatment of her. The proverb Gyalsé uses that, “An old worldly householder man will never have a way to take another layman’s wife,” seems to imply this. As a way to appease Gyalsé’s resentment, Sera Khandro responds
with typical self-humbling rhetoric, putting herself down (at least rhetorically) lower than even his second wife Saldrön in order to make Gyalsé feel superior. As the passage above suggests, Sera Khandro’s relationship with Gotrül Rinpoché is murky – she never explicitly states that he was her consort, and given the fact that he was an important celibate monastic incarnate in her community, it would be unseemingly for her to do so. However, the way that she writes of her interactions with Gotrül Rinpoché suggests that they had an intimate relationship. Sera Khandro recounts the following experience she had with Gotrül Rinpoché when she was twenty-six years old:

... On account of his [Gotrül’s] giving me an auspicious silk scarf, a silver ring, an expensive, high quality piece of coral, and in particular a vajra and bell as supports for secret commitments, although various uncertain signs arose such as all the large channels in my illusory body vibrating, fluttering and trembling, and a tapping sound like the sound of a horse’s tail swishing and so forth, I let them go. When I did this, it was as if he knew. In the manner of possessing divine pride [manifesting] as Hayagrīva, he resided in the dimension of the great bliss of awareness and emptiness. Because of my sickness, for a long time I had a bit of realization that elucidated [what was in] other people’s mind streams. Based on this, as soon as he visualized something, it became clear [to me]. Hence, having visualized [myself] in the form of a wisdom race, I exhorted the five root bodhisattvas and the sixteen goddesses. Having made offerings to the heroes and ḍākinīs residing in the self-emerging, spontaneously present palace, they were satisfied with the taste of bliss and emptiness. The teacher and students’ minds became inseparably of one taste and [they] delighted in nondual space and primordial wisdom. As soon as that happened, all the previous visualizations disappeared into space like a dream when one wakes from sleep.580

Having a joint visualization like this with Gotrül Rinpoché including sensations in her subtle body channels does not necessarily mean that Gotrül Rinpoché was Sera Khandro’s physical consort, but it hints as much. When Sera Khandro was twenty-eight years old, she was devastated when Gotrül Rinpoché passed away. Just before he died, he told Sera Khandro that the son she was carrying was his consciousness incarnate in her and that the boy could only be cared for by Drimé Özer or he would not live. Gotrül
Rinpoché was not explicitly declaring fatherhood of Sera Khandro’s third-born child (who Sera Khandro claims was fathered by a hero who came to her in a vision), but the insinuation can hardly be ignored.581

The final impetus for Sera Khandro’s last departure from Gyalsé’s community was an extremely serious case of arthritis that left her unable to walk and on the verge of death at the age of thirty. Unable to resist anymore, her disciples, including her trusted disciples Tupzang and Tsültrim Dorjé (her scribe), brought her to Drimé Özer, who himself was also ill. Because Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer were prophesized consorts, they were both able to gradually cure each other’s illnesses and help decode each other’s Treasures through igniting the auspicious connections of method and wisdom. Thus, Sera Khandro’s sojourn in Golok went full circle, back to Dartsang where she had initially arrived with Drimé Özer’s entourage at the young age of fifteen. Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro had a beautiful love affair in Dartsang, despite Drimé Özer’s other consorts’ displeasure at having to share their man and their community’s resources with an outsider. This displeasure is evident in the following passage from Drimé Özer’s Biography in which one of Drimé Özer’s consorts named Pasham Taré (Pa’ sha’m ta re) made a solemn promise to Drimé Özer not to continue to speak badly about Sera Khandro. Sera Khandro writes that in an attempt to cure him of an illness he got when he was forty years old just before Sera Khandro’s arrival in Dartsang, Pashamtaré encouraged him, saying:

“Trülku, don’t speak like this. No matter what provisions you need to find a way to support your life, stop creating obstacles to this! According to your orders, I certainly will do whatever actions you need done.”
In particular, since she prayed over and over for the Lord to find whatever way [he could] not to go and to stay for our benefit, the Lord thought of his commitment vows to his consorts and promised not to go to the Buddhahfields.

Pashamtaré promised to do whatever the Lord wanted and in particular, she promised that even if Sukha Banzra [Sera Khandro] came near him, she wouldn’t say a word.582

Sera Khandro’s description of this scene depicts the displeasure that Drimé Özer’s other consorts felt at the idea of Sera Khandro’s increasing proximity to him. Indeed, this was a concern of Drimé Özer’s as well and was one reason why he initially hesitated to take Sera Khandro on as a consort. During the momentous exchange scene in which Gyalsé offered Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer, Drimé Özer explained his concerns to Gyalsé saying “. . . Not only this, I wondered if my consorts and so forth would like it [if I took on Sera Khandro as a consort], so I let it go.”583 Drimé Özer overcame these hesitations, and his other consorts at least tolerated Sera Khandro’s presence in Dartsang while Drimé Özer was alive, despite the underlying dissatisfaction they felt.

Sera Khandro’s happiness living with Drimé Özer was short-lived; when she was thirty-four, a plague struck Dartsang and both her young son Gyurmé Dorjé (the incarnation of Gotrül Rinpoché) and Drimé Özer became ill and died. No sooner had Drimé Özer passed away than his consorts expelled Sera Khandro from the lama’s household. Once again, Sera Khandro, along with her daughter and close disciples Tupzang and Tsültrim Dorjé, was without a community in which to live or a place to call home. The recurrent experience Sera Khandro had of being unwelcome and forced out of households by other women is indicative of the many ways in which Sera Khandro was threatening to other women. With her half-Mongolian ancestry, Sera Khandro’s skin color was most likely very pale compared to other Golok women, which in combination
with her youth and beauty seems to have made her a desirable consort. Her increasing stature as an extraordinary ḍākinī, visionary, Treasure revealer, skilled writer, and orator must also have caused her to have a higher status than her humble position as an outsider from an unknown family would suggest. Additionally, Sera Khandro and her two children posed economic concerns and potential family succession problems in the households in which she lived. In particular, Drimé Ōzer’s other consorts wanted nothing to do with their household (bla brang) providing economic support for a woman with children who would then compete with their own for limited resources.584

Despite her lack of support from other women in her communities, Drimé Ōzer’s closest disciple Sotrül Rinpoché (Bsod sprul sna tshogs rang grol), who was the incarnate lama of Sera Monastery not far from Dartsang, took Sera Khandro in and gave her a permanent home at Sera Monastery. Yet again, social problems followed Sera Khandro to this monastic setting. Sera Khandro writes, “At that time, I offended the perceptions of the local people... Some said that “Since she is a contentious woman, she will harm all of us.”585 But due to Sotrül Rinpoché’s strong support, Sera Monastery became a comfortable place for Sera Khandro to live. From her retreat hut near Sera Monastery, Sera Khandro wrote her biographical works and her four volumes of revelations. Indeed, Sera Khandro’s close alignment with this monastery is evident given that it is the source of her name, the ḍākinī from Sera.

The Exchange of Women

As this brief description of Sera Khandro’s dramatic and frequent travels between Gara Tertön and Gyalse’s community at Banak, Drimé Ōzer’s community at Dartsang,
and Sotrül Rinpoche's residence at Sera Monastery demonstrates, Sera Khandro lived a life full of instability, uncertainty, and difficult relationships. Not all of her recollections of community life are negative – she enjoyed positive and fruitful connections with many people who were true friends to her until she died, most notably (aside from Drimé Özer) her daughter Chöying Drönma and her disciples Tüpa Tenzing, Tseltrim Dorje, Sotrül Rinpoche, and the nun Chötreng. Yet along with these friendships, tumultuous dynamics related to consort practices characterized Sera Khandro's community life. Sera Khandro was exchanged or told to go serve as a consort to other men for the purposes of increasing their longevity and aiding their revelation processes multiple times in her life. If Sera Khandro's account of the events in her life can serve as an example, we can deduce that the nonconsensual exchange of women as consorts for male religious figures was a commonplace aspect of consort culture in early twentieth-century Golok and beyond. While this is a disturbing element of Sera Khandro's biographical writings, it should be interpreted as part of a larger story, a story in which Sera Khandro also had a degree of autonomy and agency regarding searching out her own choice of consorts, although much less so than the powerful men with whom she interacted.

The most prominent example of the exchange of women that Sera Khandro recounts in both her Autobiography and Drimé Özer's Biography is her narration of the circumstances in which Gyalsé gave Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer without her consent when she was twenty-four years old. Sera Khandro despairs that her life partner had thrown her away like a worn-out object, but the fact that these powerful men discussed the fate of her future without her consent is not even noteworthy to Sera Khandro, perhaps indicating that it was not unusual behavior. In her Autobiography, Sera Khandro
records that during a ceremony to consecrate a new large prayer wheel built by a lama named Hor Öchung in Golok, Gyalsé and Drimé Özer had a chance to meet and speak with each other:

When the two of them were there speaking amicably about worldly and religious affairs, the Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Drimé Özer] said to Gyalsé, “You should find a way to get clothing and jewelry for your consort (mkha’ ‘gro). Don’t leave her in this bad way with no jewelry looking like a household servant! Otherwise, because she is your consort (thabs grogs) it won’t look good to other people [if she is not dressed well].”

Gyalsé replied, “Okay, of course I will get clothes and jewelry. Thinking that it wasn’t suitable to treat this girl with great reverence for fear that she would develop an attitude, I didn’t let her become powerful. Although I did whatever was necessary, I didn’t say a single excellent word [about her] and I forgot her clothes and jewelry and so forth [perceiving them] as insignificant. Otherwise, she is in a relationship with me because of my father’s former aspiration prayers – she is not one who is prophesized for me. Perhaps she is your prophesized consort. She constantly prays single-mindedly to you and your father [Dujom Lingpa]. In particular, when she hears your name automatically tears flow from her eyes and with goose bumps on her body she prays in a loud voice and sings hymns of sadness. In any case, if [you] do a retreat [with her], perhaps obstacles [regarding] your retinue and life force will be dispelled. I offer you this consort (mkha’ ‘gro) of mine – aside from you, she has no husband. She has a gentle disposition, a lucid intellect, and she doesn’t associate with other men.”

Although he said many things, fearing too many words, I won’t write them [here].

Again the Lord [Drimé Özer] said,

“Your consort is unlike others. When she was fifteen years old, we came together to this area [back from Lhasa to Golok]. At that time she had great tolerance for the three sufferings of cold, hunger, and thirst and her mind turned one-pointedly towards only the holy dharma. Despite the fact that she is clearly prophesized in my registry, from one perspective, I wondered if I would be able to do a retreat. Not only this, I wondered if my consorts and so forth would like it [if I took on Sera Khandro as a consort] so I let it go. In particular, because she lived with you as your representative, thinking that we would go against each other, I didn’t say anything. Still now I wonder if I can enter a strict retreat for a few years.”

This passage portrays Gyalsé’s intentional disregard of Sera Khandro as well as the reasoning behind it: Gyalsé feared that Sera Khandro would have a conceited attitude,
that she would gain power over him if he treated her lovingly and gave her jewels and clothing befitting of her rank as his ḍākinī consort. Sera Khandro also portrays Gyalsé’s lack of interest in her by his easy admission that she does not belong to him but rather has faith and devotion for Drimé Özer alone, a fact that could only have been a sore point between Gyalsé and Sera Khandro. Here the overlap between religious devotion and love in Sera Khandro’s feelings for Drimé Özer comes to the fore: because of her signs of devotion for Drimé Özer including prayers, tears, and goose bumps, Gyalsé gave her away to him. The passage above also portrays the difficulties Drimé Özer faced taking Sera Khandro on as his consort. Sera Khandro explains that Drimé Özer had two dilemmas: one was his desire to do retreat, i.e., to live a celibate ascetic lifestyle, and the other was the problems he faced maintaining accord with his other consorts if he were to take her on as well.

Sera Khandro also represents this same scene in Drimé Özer’s Biography:

Then, one day Gartrül [Gyalsé] said, “Although my ḍākinī is extraordinary, aside from the connection of my father lama’s aspiration prayers, she is not prophesized for me. If you take care of her, it seems that it will benefit your longevity. She has immeasurable faith and devotion [in you] and at all times she prays to you and your father. Because she is praying to be reborn in service of [your] teachings, it is certain that she has residual karma [to be with you].”

The Lord [Drimé Özer] sat in equanimity and didn’t say anything. When Gartrül said it again and again, the Lord replied, “What the Gara Trülku says is good. From now on, if it is agreeable to my consort(s) and my brothers, aside from me, this ḍākinī has no husband. You are not allowed to give her to anybody else. Although she is in my prophecies and registries about the future, from one perspective she was with you. From another perspective, wondering if I could go practice in a mountain hermitage I thought I needed to remember to be without things to do. Despite all this, because the Lotus Guru’s prayers are undeceiving, for the sake of needing excellent auspicious connections, you say that I need to be together [with her].”

Gara Gyalsé said, “The ḍākinī is not my destined wife. I abide by my words giving her to you.” Saying this, [they] spoke about many important things.
In this way, Sera Khandro describes how she went from being Gyalsé’s life partner to being one of Drimé Özer’s consorts through no direct action of her own. She does not represent either herself or Drimé Özer as appearing too eager – only after Gyalsé offers Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer several times does he accept, according to the above passage in the Biography. Given Sera Khandro’s love for Drimé Özer, one might think that she would be overjoyed with the opportunity to exit her unhappy relationship with Gyalsé and live with Drimé Özer, but this is not exactly the case. For one thing, the conversation in which Sera Khandro is exchanged occurs when she is twenty-four years old and she does not actually leave Gyalsé’s community for the last time until the age of thirty. For another, she describes feeling threatened and humiliated by Gyalsé’s move to get rid of her. Just after the exchange scene at Hor Öchung’s consecration ceremony, in her Autobiography she recollects her reaction to this dramatic event:

When I told Tupzang all about the story of Gyalsé giving me to the Precious Incarnate [Drimé Özer], he said, “Because our family’s chance to have the good fortune and merit to have someone like you is weak, we know that [Gyalsé] is preparing to expel you by whatever means. Nevertheless, expand your mind and don’t forget to find a way to stay with Gara [Gyalsé].”

I replied, “As you say, wondering if a bit of benefit will come to Gara Tertön’s seat, no matter what happiness or suffering comes my way, it is decided that I will live there.”

Sera Khandro represents herself as being determined to stay at Banak with Gyalsé rather than feeling relieved to escape him. In making this choice she appears almost obstinate, determined to fulfill her promise to benefit Gara Tertön’s Treasure teachings by living at Banak. Just as she rejected much of the ḏākinīs’ advice urging her to take on the proper prophesied consorts, by staying with Gyalsé, Sera Khandro appears to be turning her back on the ḏākinī prophecies that decree Drimé Özer to be her proper consort. Aside
from her promise to be the caretaker of Gara Tertön Treasure texts, another reason that could have contributed to Sera Khandro’s obstinate desire to maintain her place in Gyalsé’s community could be economic – with two children to care for, Sera Khandro relied on Gyalsé’s family resources in order to sustain herself and her children. Moving to Drimé Özer’s community meant being the newest of Drimé Özer’s consorts, a position that may not have been very desirable or stable for Sera Khandro. Whatever the reason, she draws out her departure from Gyalsé over the course of six long years despite the heavy foreshadowing in her Autobiography foretelling her upcoming reunion with Drimé Özer. The result is a suspenseful drama filled with unhappiness, longing, and its eventual fulfillment when Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer are finally reunited.

While the above scenario in which Gyalsé and Drimé Özer exchange rights over Sera Khandro is complicated by the fact that Gyalsé’s move to offer her to him may have been a reaction to Sera Khandro’s strong emotional attachment to Drimé Özer, there are instances in which Sera Khandro is told by important men in her life to act as a consort to men that she didn’t even know. One instance of this is when Drimé Özer sent Sera Khandro off to Adzom Rinpoché (A ‘dzom rin po che, ‘Gro ‘dul dpa’ bo rdo rje, 1842-1924) when she was thirty-two years old during the time that he and Sera Khandro were living together at Dartsang. Despite Sera Khandro’s protests, she records that she complied with Drimé Özer’s command and went to the eighty-two-year-old Adzom for the benefit of all involved:

At that time, a messenger arrived from Adzom’s encampment (A ‘dzom sgar) with a written order saying that I needed to go to Adzom’s encampment. I said the following to the Lord (Drimé Özer): “I won’t go to Adzom’s encampment. From one perspective, I am without [good] legs and since my little son is so young, I don’t have a way to abandon him. On top of that, in any case, I have never made a decision [based on] a discursive thought and let myself go under another person’s
influence. Although it seems like I have come to you, [this is in] accordance with your command. Aside from the fact that Gartrül [Gara Gyalsê] didn’t want me, it wasn’t my idea [to come here]. Because of this, now, no matter how I think about it, I think I won’t do anything that is misleading for myself and others. In particular, after your lifetime, I wonder if I can practice assiduously on a secluded mountain. Aside from this, I have no thought of needing to live together with a consort. Now also I don’t want to go. That is my answer.

Aside from this, since I am a helpless woman, it is easy for just about anyone to steer me around like a tied dog. Because Lama Adzom is a holy master renowned in all of China and Tibet, if a messenger brings a written command for an inferior one like me, of course I must go when I am summoned. Because I am narrow-minded, I feel uncomfortable going. In particular, because before we were under the influence of others, we didn’t come together until now. Now negative circumstances have become friendly and we have the opportunity to be together at one seat. At this time, I cannot separate from you for even an instant. Like a child circles around his mother, my mind has become extremely attached to you. Hence, if I don’t have to go, I would like it.”

The Lord said, “I too am attached to you – if for one day I don’t have to separate from you, I feel extremely happy if I can be with you, happier than if I had a house full of jewels. Yet, if you could be a consort endowed with auspicious connections and prolong his life not for one year but for one month, not for one month but for one day, in general the Buddhist teachings and sentient beings would be happy. In particular, it would be a resource for oneself and others to accumulate a vast store of merit. Especially, as it was previously expressed in your vajra prophecy, ‘If the essential point of an auspicious connection with Akara bazra occurs, it is certain that benefit will arise for all of our life’s Dharma and disciples and so forth.’” Hence, it was decided that I would go there.  

Sera Khandro employs striking similes to describe her situation and the intense emotions she felt: she is powerless to control her own destiny, led around like a tied dog to serve as another man’s consort when all she wants to do is stay with her lover like a child desires to be around his mother. She is not the only one with emotional attachment; Drimé Özer, too, desires to be with Sera Khandro more than he desires a house filled with jewels. Yet, she has no choice but to comply with the orders of the powerful men Drimé Özer and the elderly Adzom Rinpoché. Hence, rather than staying in Dartsang enjoying her precious moments with Drimé Özer, Sera Khandro sets off to Adzom’s encampment in Kham.
There, she exchanges teachings and nurtures auspicious connections with Adzom Rinpoché. When she returns from her journey two months later, her disciples are amazed by the fact that as a result of the auspicious connections Adzom and Sera Khandro cultivated, the arthritis in her leg is completely healed. Sera Khandro recounts, "Since my leg was not like it had been before, I [could walk] on my own. They [my Vajra siblings] were amazed and feeling great joy, their faith was nurtured."\footnote{591} Hence, Sera Khandro may have protested being sent away from Drimé Özer to serve the needs of a famous geriatric lama she didn't know, but she conveys the positive consequences of the experience as well as her initial reluctance and resentment.\footnote{592}

**Monastic Versus Non-Celibate Tantric Lifestyles**

In the examples above, Sera Khandro represents herself as a powerless object of exchange between important male religious figures. However, in other instances she also demonstrates that she had the power to veto would-be consorts whom she deemed unsuitable. On several occasions, Sera Khandro rejects monks who approach her for her services as a consort. Sera Khandro’s multiple rejections of would-be consorts who were monks relates to a pervasive tension evident in her writings between the Tantric value of having a consort in order to dispel obstacles to longevity and the monastic value of maintaining strict celibacy. Based on Sera Khandro’s narrative, the nuances between these two competing behavioral models were often complex and difficult to negotiate. On the one hand, Sera Khandro demonstrates great respect for the monastic goal of pure celibacy, but on the other she participated in a world of Tantric practice in which celibacy was sometimes an obstacle to spiritual realization. According to her writings, it often
came down to Sera Khandro to choose the correct path between avoiding immoral vow transgression and engaging in necessary consort practices. Sera Khandro’s writings thus demonstrate that the line between monastic and non-celibate Tantric lifestyles was often unclear. Monastics sought Sera Khandro’s services as a consort while Drimé Özer, a Tantric religious adept, experimented with the celibate monastic lifestyle. Sera Khandro herself struggled with maintaining an intermediate social position as neither nun nor married laywoman, beholden to neither nunnery nor family yet open to the criticism of all.

In contrast to the above instances in which Sera Khandro was exchanged between men entirely without her consent, in the following passages she demonstrates that she also had agency to choose with whom she would share her potent curative powers. In the exchange below, another powerful man in her life, this time Gotrül Rinpoché, exhorts her when she is twenty-seven years old to serve as a consort to a monk she doesn’t know in order to dispel obstacles to his life:

At that time, Tibir Tuksa Trülku along with a few of his attendants was doing a retreat in the area. Gotrül said to me, “Now since you have the auspicious connections to be able to dispel the obstacles to Titrul’s life, don’t ignore finding some way to do this. Given that he is dressed as a monastic, last year he requested full ordination before Dodrup Rinpoché. The astrological signs were extremely disturbed. In particular, in the prophecies of Dzokchen Rinpoché and many other great masters, it is said that for the sake of stabilizing his life force, he needs to secretly have a liaison with an intelligent wisdom lady. Not only that, even though he is a Treasure revealer, since he is the leader of a big monastery, he didn’t behave as a mantra and [acted] in a very honorable manner [i.e., as a monk] and resided only doing meditation practice. Because there is no one better than you to maintain his life force, don’t ignore this.”

Again I said, “If he is without mistake a Treasure revealer, why does he need to be a hypocrite? The leader of Orgyen Minling is of course famous for being a Treasure revealer. Because of this, I don’t know if it is certain that if one is not a monk, one cannot be the head of a monastery. I will not be his method to dispel the obstacles to his life force. From one perspective, I have a husband. Moreover,
because stealing the vows of a monastic is the cause for a great offence, certainly I will not do that."

Again, Gotrül said, "For what reason do you have to make your body [his] receptacle? You have mastered the esoteric precepts of the three channels, seminal nuclei, and wind and you do not engage in perverse behavior. Moreover, aside from only being for the benefit of another person, if you are without selfishness and negative thinking, how could it be an offence? Since I am certain that Gyalse has decided [that it is okay], from that perspective, I will be responsible for your not being affected by defilement. Now if he is without a method [to dispel his obstacles], it is certain that Titrül will not live beyond thirty-eight or thirty-nine years."

Again I said, "Even if Gyalse is agreeable, since more than him, I have an extraordinary root consort [Drimé Özer], if he does not agree, I will not take an important action. If I help him by just reciting a feast offering is that okay? Even if it isn’t okay, since I am without anything to do about it, I will not have manifest and hidden commitments."

He replied, "Now go together with one of my monks to Titrül and it will be beneficial for both of you."

Then, I went according to his order. The incarnate himself [Titrül] established the wheel of the three seats [Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and wrathful ones] and taught in detail regarding worldly and religious matters such as the essential points regarding the three abodes of breathing in and exhaling wind, the stages of visualizing the three vajras, and so forth. In particular, he made the aspiration prayers to be held as a son of the dākinīs of the mother Tantras in this and all of his lifetimes. Having given me his porcelain cup and a long necklace made of various precious jewels, we left the actual auspicious connection for later.

Then, having come before Gotrül, when I told him the whole story in detail, he said, "Being unaware that formerly he was your extraordinary consort, now your taking him on is greatly amazing! Still it is important for you both to be careful regarding methods. Like the proverb that says, "If deities are profound, then demons are profound," it is unacceptable for you to let yourself fall under the influence of obstacles at any time."

Having given me his silver coated porcelain cup, a secret meditation instruction, and many other substances, we [Sera Khandro and Gyalse] returned home.

This passage reveals a great deal about the blurred line between monasticism and consort practices at the same time as it presents an ambiguous picture of Sera Khandro’s relationship to Titrül. Gotrül Rinpoche urges Sera Khandro to have a secret liaison with
Titrül, citing prophecies of figures such as Dzokchen Rinpoché in support of his cause. Gotrül’s words depict that it was not unheard of for monastics to be vow holders externally, but secretly engage in relationships with “wisdom ladies” who were the panacea for their illnesses and energy blocks. His words also underscore the close connection between being a Treasure revealer and being a non-celibate Tantric practitioner (a mantrin or sngags pa) in that he must offer Sera Khandro an excuse for Titrül’s celibate status: since he is in charge of a large monastery, he had to be a monastic, implying that otherwise he would follow the more typical path of being a non-celibate Treasure revealer. Sera Khandro is suspicious of this equation, citing the example of the head of the important Nyingma Monastery in Central Tibet, Orgyen Mindroling Monastery, who was both a (non-celibate) Treasure revealer and the leader of a monastic community without hypocritical external and internal behavior. Indeed, in the contemporary context as well, it is not uncommon for Nyingma monasteries to be headed by non-celibate religious figures. Sera Khandro refuses Gotrül’s exhortation to be the lama’s consort on two counts: first, she already has a husband, and second, she fears destroying a monk’s vows. It is noteworthy that even though this interlude occurs when she is still living with Gyalsé, she makes it clear that her primary allegiance is not to Gyalsé but to her “root consort” Drimé Özer. Regarding the question of preserving monastic vows, Gotrül Rinpoché rationalizes what is, according to Sera Khandro, Titrül’s hypocrisy by explaining that since Sera Khandro has gained mastery over her channels, seminal nuclei, and winds, nothing she does is perverted behavior and therefore she won’t be destroying the monk’s vows. Sera Khandro is also less than convinced by this, and she reiterates that she is not one who maintains manifest and hidden commitments. In
other words, she is not one who presents herself as doing one thing in public for all to see while secretly engaging in something else.

However, despite her stand against the hypocrisy of acting as the monk Titrül’s consort, she did go to see him. Given that her descriptions of consort practices are usually euphemistic, it is difficult to determine from her writing the exact nature of their exchange. Sera Khandro seems to indicate that she left the auspicious connections of acting as his consort for later while making enough of a connection with him to help him avert obstacles to his life and to satisfy the command of her close friend and supporter Gotrül Rinpoché, with whom she also had a highly ambiguous relationship. Hence, in the passage above Sera Khandro represents herself as having both satisfied the demands of Gotrül Rinpoché and having made a strong statement that she would not participate in sexual acts that controverted monastic vows.

In the following example, the borderlines between ethical behavior and esoteric Tantric practices appear a bit clearer, as does the strength of Sera Khandro’s voice when she firmly rejects the untoward advances of a young monk:

At that time, one day a man named Gara GyaltSEN came and said again and again, “Since I have received permission from GyalSÉ, we need to make a connection.”

I thought that it was as if his mind had been inspired by demons. I said many times that from whatever worldly or religious perspective, based on pure ethics, one must accumulate a store of merit by the [six] perfections such as giving and so forth and [I said] it is unacceptable to waste a precious human body endowed with the [eight] freedoms. But because lust had arisen in his mind-stream, he ignored [my] meaning. He said many things that undermined cause and effect and related to mistaken behavior.

I was extremely depressed. Feeling sad about [people’s] attitude in the degenerate era, I said the following:

“Lotus Born One, protector and refuge of the world,
Knowing One, Dakki Tsogyal of the changeless dimension,
Look upon me, this vagabond Dewé Dorjé, with compassion! 
Bestow blessings that will dispel negative conditions and obstacles.

Listen you who are losing the vows \(^{598}\) of physical discipline –
Send your thought from your mind!
Examine your body, speech, and mind:
On the outside, your attire is that of [a monk’s] three robes.
On the inside, you have great lustful desire equal to that of a bird.
The thought in your mind is like that of a petty thief or a bandit.
At all times, you enjoy the negative wealth of offerings [given to monastics]

I don’t desire one with a negative body like you.
Even though I am one with an inferior [female] body,
If you look at my face, I am of a beautiful dākinī lineage.

Although I appear like a woman with childish intellect,
My mind sees the essence of the birthless three bodies. \(^{599}\)

Although I engage in activities as if I am a person in cyclic existence,
I do not need to separate from the primordial wisdom of equality.

Having mastered the ten winds,
Everything that appears [exists as] the dimension of great bliss 
[And] is liberated in the expanse of the dimension of evenly extensive primordial wisdom.

I don’t have a need for someone with a body like you.
In this life and the next both, I won’t do negative things.
You, imprudent one, consider this properly.
Don’t exchange your body endowed with a purpose for one with little purpose.

When the fruits of karma undeceivingly ripen,
You will have done worthless things like this.
Now, control yourself regarding this meaning.\(^{7}\)

Having said this, I was freed from obstacles. \(^{600}\)

Sera Khandro thus adamantly rejects the advances of a monk whom she perceives to act out of lust. Passages such as this one have a pedagogical purpose in Sera Khandro’s narrative – they serve as a message to her readership that consort practices must not be performed out of lust by unethical monastics who abandon practicing the six perfections
and who give up the fortunate condition of having a precious human birth endowed with freedoms. In responding to the monk, Sera Khandro emphasizes her own desireless state, as well as the dual nature of her status; on one level, she represents herself as only a woman of meager intellect who appears to be a householder, but underneath her humble stature she expresses that she has attained extraordinary realization. Her reaction to the lustful monk demonstrates that she is more than a sexual object being passed around by powerful men. The monk, whose name Gara Gyaltsen implies that he was Gyalsé’s relative, attempts to seduce her by claiming that he received Gyalsé’s permission. However, in this instance, Gyalsé’s authority does not surpass her own.

Although this passage seems to set a clear boundary between proper ethical behavior for monastics and non-celibate mantrins, it is not without its own obscurity. Immediately after this interaction, she writes that a terrifying woman appeared before her and scolded her, saying,

> From the time you were young, I have lovingly raised you as if you were my one child. Now, on the basis of one small situation, you abandon your bodhicitta [intention] to benefit others. What is the meaning of your putting forth this mental confusion?  

Instead of being rewarded for her virtuous act of refusing to allow a monk to transgress his vows, Sera Khandro writes, “The collection of elements [of my body] was extremely disturbed and I became oppressed with an illness that was difficult to bear.” This is the illness that divine visionary dvākinīs repeatedly diagnose as a sickness resulting from Sera Khandro’s not engaging with a consort. Therefore, the passage above could also be read as another instance in which Sera Khandro rejects a consort that she was supposed to take on according to divine prophecy. Whether one interprets the passage above as correct behavior befitting a proper woman who rightfully rejects the immoral sexual advances of
a lustful monk or as a detour in defiance of ḍākinī prophecies that determine Sera Khandro’s life, it again exemplifies the pervasive tension in Sera Khandro’s writing between celibate and non-celibate interpretations of moral conduct for those on the path of Secret Mantra.

**Drimé Özer’s Dilemma**

In Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings, tensions between maintaining a life of celibate monasticism versus non-celibate life as a Tantric religious specialist (a *mantrin* or *sngags pa*) concern not only monks’ transgressions but also those of non-celibate figures such as Drimé Özer. Sera Khandro depicts Drimé Özer as a person who struggled to determine what kind of life was appropriate for him. The following passage from Drimé Özer’s *Biography* describing events in his seventeenth year addresses precisely this question of celibate versus non-celibate religious life:

Then, one day when [Drimé Özer] went to rest, he thought that it would be good if he were a monk. After a few days had passed, he went before a great monastic khenpo named Lama Chögyal who was ordained by Drimé Özer’s holy direct disciple [named] Sotrül Rinpoché, who was a disciple prophesized by the Precious Lama [Dujom Lingpa] when he was in retreat. When he thought that he needed to become a novice monk, that night in his dream there was a woman with an ugly body who said, “Your cowardly behavior is wretched!” Saying this, she beat her chest and cried intensively.

The Lord asked, “Why are you so miserable?”

She answered, “What’s wrong with me crying? It concerns the way people behave these days. Not only me, this old woman, but the ḍākinīs of sacred places and lands are angry.”

Again, the Lord asked, “Why are the ḍākinīs of sacred places and lands disturbed?”

She replied, “If I explain [it to you], it is as if there is no limit to what there is to explain. If I tell you just a bit, you will understand your fault.”
The Lord said, “What fault of mine has affected you?”

She said, “If [we] are not affected by [your] faults, it is good. Look at the signs of this negative degenerate era. Not protecting your vows to be a mantrin (sngags pa), you shave your head. Saying you are a fully ordained monk endowed with the three [i.e., Hinayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna vows], you enter into mantra. Although you are empowered in profound Treasures, on account of bad people, you have little courage and you let [your Treasures] go. These are the faults to your life as a Treasure revealer.”

The Lord answered, “Even if Treasure revealers enter monastic training, how does that harm Treasures? Before, even the Lotus Guru took monastic ordination before Küngabo. Having received the name Shakya Sengé, he became one with a shaved-head and bare feet. Despite this, later, he guided all in the land of Tibet with Treasures.”

She replied, “I know the Lotus Guru’s experience. You don’t. Before, when the Guru resided in the Unsurpassed [Buddhafield], I worked [for him]. From the South Western Milky [Lake], having become unified with the mind of the Buddhas, he came as an emanation body. Not relying on the gradual grounds and paths [regarding] all the knowledge of what to abandon and attain, he attained mastery over all good qualities of omniscience and primordial wisdom. As a sign of this, he became sovereign as the Buddha of Orgyen and then he took the noble Öchak Lhamo as his wife. Having collected all the heroes and heroines of the sacred places and lands, he subdued them with his strength. Then, he resided as a yogi who behaved as an ascetic. Having practiced asceticism in eight charnel grounds including the Cool Grove charnel ground and so forth, it is true that he collected all the formless beings including the gods, men, demons, nāga spirits, nyen spirits, land deities, the eight classes of demons, and so forth under his power and established them in Dharma. If you become a shaven-headed monastic, I don’t know if you will be an ascetic [like him].”

Saying this, she disappeared.

Early the next morning when he was having breakfast, the body of the Lord himself was uncomfortable and he felt great pain. He thought that he had gotten a cold, but he kept it secret. After several days had passed, when the Lord got better from his cold, in the area near him a contagious disease arose and many people got sick. In particular, the Lord’s middle sister named Paltsé and her spouse became afflicted with illness and were on the verge of death. Two people from their locality came to summon the Lord himself and when he went there together with his attendants, his sister and her husband were on the verge of death. Hence, the Lord gave precious substances and having given the Precious Lama’s [Dujom Lingpa’s] blessing substance, he performed a body offering [ritual] and a meditation practice. The husband could not be saved from death and passed away.
His sister was cured from illness. Having given her worldly advice, the Lord himself came home. He performed a [ritual that] remedied the Ğâkiniś’ agitation and an offering ritual and so forth and then all the sickness in the land went away.604

Treasure revealers cannot be celibate monks because they will not be able to retrieve their Treasures according to this ugly Ğâkiniś who visits Drimé Özer and showers her dismay upon him. She is angry because he has failed to protect his vows as a mantrin and instead pursued the externally laudatory path of becoming a monk to the detriment of his vows as a mantrin and his ability to reveal Treasures. That Drimé Özer employs the example of the Lotus Guru, Padmasambhava, in defending his decision to become a monk demonstrates the power that figures central to the mythology of the Treasure tradition such as Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal had as models for Treasure revealers. The young Drimé Özer attempts to follow the ethical code exemplified by Padmasambhava, but he does so incorrectly; Padmasambhava is a maverick figure who embodies both ascetic discipline and the powers of Tantric subjugation. The reaction of the wrathful lady above indicates that Drimé Özer should not compare himself to the extraordinary deeds of the Lotus Guru and instead should take on vows appropriate for his status as a Treasure revealer. It was his fate to live as a mantrin, and as proof of that, Sera Khandro describes the plague that spread in Drimé Özer’s local area. Not only did Drimé Özer’s incorrect decision affect himself, it also affected his community and resulted in the death of his sister’s spouse. Again we see the interrelationship between the divine (ďâkinîś’ anger), community welfare (plague in the land), and the individual (Drimé Özer’s incorrect behavior) that characterizes Sera Khandro’s understanding of the role of the Treasure revealer in the world. It is only through proper conduct and proper ritual
intervention, in this case Drimé Özer’s ritual offerings to the dākinīs, that harmony can once again be restored.

Sera Khandro also portrays Drimé Özer’s dilemma between choosing a life as a monastic or a mantrin in the exchange scene in which Gyalsé gives Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer. When Gyalsé offers Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer, he accepts the offer and then explains that he hadn’t approached Gyalsé earlier to ask for her because of two reasons: 1) he wanted to do a strict retreat, and 2) he was concerned that his other consorts would be displeased. If Drimé Özer’s words are any example, life as a mantrin was no easy path – balancing the needs of multiple consorts left Drimé Özer hesitating to invite Sera Khandro into his household. His desire to do a strict retreat was a desire to escape the busyness of the social world by living as a monastic. Yet each time Drimé Özer sought to become a monk, visionary dākinīs prevented him by whatever drastic measures necessary. For example, towards the end of his life when he was thirty-eight (shortly before Sera Khandro lived with him), as a result of social disturbance in his community, Drimé Özer again yearned for the peace of monastic life:

At that time because a liar spoke much talk that annoyed the Lord, he set his mind on one yearning and thought that in his subsequent lifetimes he should be a monk. When he had this thought that he need to be a monk, one day in his dream he saw a gathering of many women.

When he wondered what this was, they said, “You don’t know us?”

He answered, “I don’t know [you].”

They said, “We are messengers of the mantra protectors. Since you are acting as a monk, because your head and limbs belong to us, its okay if we cut them.”

They aimed a knife at his head and were about to cut him and they displayed much other cruelty. They disturbed the channels [in his body]. Not giving him a chance to be comfortable, he awoke from sleep. 

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The ḍākinīs indicate that his very body belongs to them and to Sera Khandro as their emissary; he is not free to become a monk because monasticism is tantamount to rejecting ḍākinīs. Through including visionary interludes such as these in Drimé Özer’s Biography, Sera Khandro emphasizes that Drimé Özer’s status as a mantrin is more appropriate and efficacious for him than being a monk would be.⁶⁰⁶ Although she portrays herself in a humble manner by denying her own need for male consorts (at the same time as she inscribes it through the voice of her visionary interlocutors), she has no hesitation portraying Drimé Özer as a mantrin who needed consorts in order to fulfill his prophesized destiny.

Sera Khandro is Neither Nun nor Laywoman

Sera Khandro represents her own social position vis-à-vis the dilemma between celibate and non-celibate religious life squarely in the non-celibate category. Unlike Drimé Özer, Sera Khandro was not drawn to monastic life. Although she wished to renounce the world, she recounts that from childhood, lamas told her that she should not be a nun because she was a ḍākinī. According to Changtrong Druptop Rinpoché (Lcang grong grub thob rin po che) who spoke to her and her family when she was eight years old,

This girl is without mistake an emanation of the Lady Sakya Hayagrīva (Sa skya’i rta mgrin dbang mo). Hence, neither being a householder nor a nun is appropriate. When it is time, her [dākinī] heritage will awaken, so until then do whatever you want.⁶⁰⁷

As a devout religious woman who was not a nun, Sera Khandro occupied an indeterminate social position between monastic and lay life, beholden neither to a
nunnery nor to a lay household. As she expresses to a beautiful woman who appeared before her later in her life when she was forty,

I am called neither nun nor wife (nag).
I am not a nun, but I am as disciplined as a nun.
My vows regarding the three trainings on the path\textsuperscript{608} are without deterioration.
Without being impure (nag med), I am given the name “wife” (nag mo).
As if I were impure (nag can), [others] expel me from the land and see me as something to abandon.
But I don’t remember having a hair’s breadth of impure fault (nag nyes pa).\textsuperscript{609}

Sera Khandro’s verse is a play on the deliberately parallel words for “laywoman” (nag mo) and impure or negative (nag). She figuratively places herself in both categories of being a nun and a laywoman; she is a nun in the sense of being disciplined and she is a laywoman in the sense that others see her as an impure person like a laywoman. But in a literal sense, she explains that she fits into neither category. This lead to many uncomfortable social situations for her because she was criticized both by nuns for being immoral without proper monastic vows and also by other Tantric consorts who by and large despised her out of jealousy, leaving Sera Khandro with only a few female friends.

Sera Khandro recollects an interaction she had with a nun that illustrates the difficulties of her position as neither nun nor laywoman. When she was seventeen years old and trying to extricate herself from her temporary stint as a servant girl in a Golok household, her employers introduced her to their relative, the nun Tsülldrön, and suggested she live with Tsülldrön in order to accomplish her religious goals. Sera Khandro writes,

[her employer said] ... At the religious encampment, since our nun Tsülldrön is there, go and live there and don’t lose our horse.”

I acted according to his words and went to Tsülldrön’s place.
[Tsüldrön] said, “Now you need to go before Trülku Murasang and cut your hair and request vows. Otherwise, you can’t live at my place.”

I thought that since there was a rich household of [the man] named Sotrasang, that household would continuously give me some butter. At all times they periodically gave me a share of food that wasn’t meat such as rice and wild sweet potatoes and so forth. Thinking that I was going to live with Sotrasang, Tsüldrön wondered if I would take [her share of the offering].

I said the following: “It is okay if I don’t cut my hair and take vows. It won’t harm your purity. Even when I think of the conduct of you completely pure nuns, someone like me who is young and without wealth would not make it on my own as a nun.”

She got mad and stood up. Having grabbed my shoulder, she led me before Murasang and said “Trülku, please take a tuft of her hair [i.e., make her a nun]. She has gone astray from the middle [way] and although she has a pure mind, she doesn’t listen to anybody and I don’t know what to do with her.”

The attendant said, “Stay here for a moment. Ask him after he drinks his tea.”

The Lama said, “Pity – you seem to be one with great merit and one with a big share of food.” He gave me a piece of meat with a joint in it.

Tsüldrön said, “The Central Tibetan girl doesn’t eat meat.”

Again he gave me some cheese and I thought that it was an accomplishment substance. Aside from just a little bit, he didn’t give her [Tsüldrön] any. I alone ate the [cheese] and the ensuing understanding was that I mixed my mind with the mind of the lama.

When I stayed there [like this] for a short while, the attendant said, “Amazing – This girl’s eyes are like those of a meditator! Before, who was your lama?”

Using the example of the sky for my awareness, I pointed to the sky.

He said, “She is a heretic – she says her lama is the sun.”

Again he asked, “Do you know the Dharma?”

As a symbol of self-emergent knowledge of the senses of the five doors of the ocean of various elements, I touched my hand to my eyes, nose, ears, tongue, and body.

[The attendant] didn’t understand and asked Tsüldrön, “What is this?”
She said, “Last winter she requested Dharma. Maybe [her] meaning is this? Otherwise, I don’t know.” Having said this, she didn’t have time and went away.

I stayed and after the lama had tea, I said this:

“From the time I was fifteen years old, I wondered if I could accomplish the genuine Dharma. Hence, don’t minimize directing your attention to [helping me] go on this path. Because I have a great purpose, it seems that it doesn’t matter whether I cut or don’t cut my hair. It was Tsülḍrön’s idea. If this body of mine doesn’t go under the strong power of another, I will not engage in meaningless relationships with religious people, lay householders, and so forth. At all times, I will see if I can accomplish benefit for myself and others. Not becoming attached to food, clothing, or wealth, I will try to accomplish pure divine Dharma. If, on account of having an inferior [female] body, my thoughts do not go on this path, since I am not in opposition to you, please think accordingly.”

The lama said lovingly, “Oh, yes, not getting attached to food, clothing, and wealth, if you wonder if you will accomplish the pure Dharma, it seems you will accomplish the Dharma. If you have great attachment to cyclic existence, it seems you won’t accomplish the Dharma. These days religious people don’t direct their minds away from cyclic existence and in the summer, they delight in butter, in the winter, they beg for barley, and at all times it is as if they are ghosts carrying around [their own] dead bodies.”

He spoke about Dharma such as this and so forth and having put a golden statue on my head, he prayed. He gave me one of seven pills made from the powdered pieces of Patrül Rinpoché’s skull and other religious medicine and protection cords with the energy of mantra and so forth and he gave me advice.

Then, I came back and told Tsülḍrön, “I promised not to have a physical relationship with lay people or with religious people without a purpose. Otherwise, I will not be a nun.”

She said, “Wow – it is as if you wear wild yak hair on your face.” Who would dare say dirty words such as these to a lama like him?,” and she pinched my cheeks.

I said, “Since I said things that I am able to do, there is no ‘not daring.’ I wouldn’t dare [tell the lama about] trainings and vows becoming secretly deteriorated.”

She didn’t say anything.

The reasons Sera Khandro gives for not taking monastic vows are both practical and more existential. She worries that “someone like me who is young and without wealth
would not make it on my own as a nun.” In a foreign land with no family support, Sera Khandro didn’t feel that she would have the ability to be independent as a nun. Thus, problems between Sera Khandro and the nun Tsül drön arise not only over the merits of celibate versus non-celibate religious life; they are competing for the support provided by the wealthy Sotrasang family, and this leads Tsül drön to become exasperated with Sera Khandro. Yet Sera Khandro and the nun Tsül drön differ on a more existential level as well. Sera Khandro suggests that whether or not she is a nun will not ultimately affect her life’s purpose of trying to accomplish the completely pure Dharma. In a way, her words deny the necessity of Tsül drön’s vows, since Sera Khandro suggests she can practice religion without the external structure of monasticism. Sera Khandro boldly asserts to Lama Murasang that she will not have sexual relationships with religious or lay people without a purpose, but in so doing, she is also asserting that she will engage in consort practices for religious purposes. Tsül drön criticizes Sera Khandro for her overt statement, but Sera Khandro turns Tsül drön’s criticism around and effectively silences her by insinuating that Tsül drön is guilty of secretly transgressing her monastic vows. In this way, Sera Khandro defends her choice not to be a nun while at the same time she asserts a subtle claim that her non-celibate life is more ethical than that of a nun who cannot maintain the full three types of Vajrayāna vows. This exchange between Tsül drön and Sera Khandro comes at a pivotal moment as just after this, Sera Khandro introduces her first account of being summoned to act as a consort to a prominent male religious adept, Gara Tertön of Banak Monastery. This argument between Tsül drön and Sera Khandro thus exemplifies the negotiation that was going on between monastic and non-celibate visions of religious life in Sera Khandro’s early twentieth-century Eastern Tibetan
communities, a negotiation that is very much ongoing in the contemporary sphere of religious life in Eastern Tibet.

Negative Gossip

The nun Tsüldrön is not the only one who criticizes Sera Khandro for being a non-celibate female religious specialist; according to Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography*, gossip within the communities in which she lived was a constant problem. Other scholars have analyzed the role of gossip in different contexts relating to Tibetan Buddhist women. Hanna Havnevik notes that in Dharamsala, she continually heard gossip about nuns breaking their vows and getting pregnant. Despite the popularity of jokes relating to the moral laxity of nuns, her informants claimed that nuns very rarely actually disrobe but those that do are always blamed for their moral transgression (and not the men involved).\(^{616}\) In the case of contemporary Labrang society in Amdo, Charlene Makley suggests that negative gossip about nuns is significant because it represents Labrang resident’s discomfort with the breach in gender roles that nuns embody:

> Scandalous gossip about nuns thus worked to defrock them; gossips resolutely *re*-sexed nuns by sharply differentiating them from monks, and by claiming the uncontrolled and hence negative corporality of females to be typical of all.\(^{617}\)

In the case of Labrang nuns and Sera Khandro’s reflections, gossip works as a form of social control; gossip is a sort of public opinion “barometer.” Makley suggests that people in Labrang society gossiped widely about the alleged illicit sexuality of nuns as a way to remove them from their gender-crossing role of approximating high status men with their shaved heads and red robes. Likewise, Sera Khandro’s repeated mentions of negative gossip swirling around her demonstrates the discomfort many in her Golok
society felt with her indeterminate status as neither nun nor laywoman. Sera Khandro’s frequent comments about fearing gossip or experiencing its ill effects relate to her role as a woman who had not completely renounced sexuality but who spent time around monastic communities. According to Sera Khandro’s self-representation, negative gossip about her as a potentially lascivious woman followed her each time she went anywhere near male monastic personages. She describes herself as a sort of social pariah, causing negative gossip to befall whichever male monastic she encountered. Thus, tensions in Sera Khandro’s social life occurred not only in non-celibate communities with jealous female consorts, but also in monastic contexts prone to negative gossip about women.

Just after Yakza finally allowed the nineteen-year-old Sera Khandro to visit her husband Gara Tertön on his deathbed, Sera Khandro recounts going to see her friend Kitrül (*Skid sprul*), a lama she felt an affinity towards since he was also from Central Tibet. Yet again, she ran into insurmountable problems based on her identity as a non-celibate religious woman:

Then, I went before Kitrül and having stayed there for a few days, I told him all about my happy and sad circumstances. At this time, he said, “Now you don’t have anywhere to go – live here at my place and you won’t have to think of [finding enough] food and clothes.”

When I thought I would stay there for a period of time, the Trülku’s sister had negative thoughts and said, “Your actions are unacceptable. I don’t know what our Trülku will consider. In his last life, Kilung Tukchok Dorjé was a mantra adept (*sngags ‘chang*).” Also saying other negative words to me, she demoralized me.

I replied, “Why do you think like this? It is certain that the Trülku will not take me as a wife. He is old and moreover he is extremely strict regarding his monastic behavior. Why do you have wrong views regarding our [good] conscience?”

Even though I said this, still she didn’t believe me and she constantly mentioned much unnecessary [negativity] to both the Trülku and me. Hence, one day,
because an old woman had died deep in the mountains, the Trülku went there. I secretly left and went to Karnang Gabma.\textsuperscript{618}

When Sera Khandro saw Kitrül again, she explained to him the reason for her surreptitious departure:

Then Kitrül came to beg for alms for a few days. On the way, he stopped to drink tea at the home of a mother named Taza Drönpo and her child. Because he sent a messenger to summon me there, I went before him along with the messenger. When I asked him how he was, the Trülku said, “Why did you secretly run off when I wasn’t there?”

I answered, “Sir, wherever I go, I harm everyone’s perception and become the basis for their wrong views. Hence, this is the reason why I didn’t stay.”

He also said, “If that is so, since I don’t know if we two will meet again and again, wherever you go you need to be careful regarding rivers, enemies, and dogs. In particular, if you want to go to Machen, it is not okay unless you have a good friend [to help you]. Since I have heard that it is difficult to become free from the mouths of dogs, beggars, and so forth, a danger to your hands will be a danger to your travels.” He gave me a protection cord, commitment substances, and so forth along with more than five [coins] for travel money, and then I returned home.\textsuperscript{619}

In non-celibate communities, Sera Khandro was the bane of other female consorts’ lives; around monastics, she was a threat to their monastic vows and a basis for others to develop wrong views (log lta) and harmful perceptions (mig lam la gnod pa). Kitrül’s sister is suspicious of his association with Sera Khandro, fearing that since in his last incarnation he was a non-celibate \textit{mantrin}, he would remember this and take her on as his consort. No amount of convincing on Sera Khandro’s part can relieve Kitrül’s sister of her distrust, hence Sera Khandro decides to leave. Despite this, Kitrül himself treats Sera Khandro lovingly, accepting her decision not to stay with him and warning her of the many dangers of a life on the road in Golok including dogs, beggars, river crossings, and enemies (possibly bandits?). In this way, Sera Khandro is once again essentially expelled from a new home for being a non-celibate young woman threatening others’ monastic
vows. The didactic value of these repeated experiences of alienation is that they strengthen Sera Khandro’s (and her intended readers’) resolve to lessen attachments to the impermanent and misery-filled appearances of this world in favor of seeking spiritual liberation.

According to Sera Khandro’s writings, negative gossip not only causes uncomfortable situations for Sera Khandro; it also causes her to modify her behavior in order to avoid gossip circulating about her. In this sense, gossip has a regulating effect that suggests the social mores of the communities in which she lived. This is particularly evident in relation to Sera Khandro’s visits to Gotrül Rinpoché; his status as a celibate monastic hierarch at Tartang Pelyül Monastery makes him someone with whom Sera Khandro felt she shouldn’t interact for fear of tarnishing his reputation. Yet, although she repeatedly mentions her fear of negative gossip affecting Gotrül Rinpoché, she always writes this in the context of her visits to him. For example, when a monk messenger comes to Banak to summon the then twenty-four-year-old Sera Khandro to Gotrül Rinpoché’s presence so that he may ask her for some of her Treasure teachings, Sera Khandro fears that she will cause others to have wrong views of him:

> Although I thought that among the four pillar doctrine holders [of my Treasures], [Gotrül] was the northern pillar named Dharmamati, because I had an inferior [female] body, others would have wrong views about the Trülku so I told Jikchö the following: “It seems as if your lama is one who doesn’t know anything. He says I should send a letter including whatever this old lady remembers in her mind – best a prophecy, middling an accomplishment practice, and worst no less than a single four-line verse . . .”\(^{620}\)

The interest Gotrül Rinpoché expresses in Sera Khandro’s revelations is among the first validating experiences Sera Khandro mentions, although she mitigates his praise for her by expressing her inferior position as a woman and suggesting that gossip about her could
harm the celibate lama. On another visit to see Gotrül Rinpoché, Sera Khandro again writes of her concern about bringing negative gossip upon the lama. Sera Khandro recounts that when she was twenty-six years old, because she suffered from an uncertain illness, another lama named Trado Lama (Khra rdo bla ma) predicted that Gotrül Rinpoché had the antidote to her illness. Sera Khandro writes,

Then, we gradually arrived at Pelyül Monastery. I thought that since I didn’t have a big purpose with Gotrül, it was okay if I didn’t go to his presence. When we were at our lodging above the monastery, my disciple Palden Gyamtso and Jikmé Chöpel both came and said, “The Trülku wants you to come. Accordingly, you should go quickly.”

I said, “Aside from just meeting him earlier, I don’t have a big reason to go. Moreover, it is not acceptable if I go because the gossip will make him notorious.”

The two of them said, “No matter what anybody says, let them say it. Let’s go.”

I replied, “I won’t go. Why should I go? I won’t act like a dog or a beggar wandering around a monastery for no purpose. If gossip affects him, because he is the ally of the area, it will be the cause of a great fault. Aside from this, for me, the best would be union in the sphere of reality, middling would be to make a [religious] connection, worst would be only causing [others] to gossip about him. In short, this is the knowledge of one who is of a ďakini lineage regarding producing the cause of attaining the supreme fruit of accomplishment. Nevertheless, don’t say even a bit of these words to others. These are my secret words to travelers about to go.” Saying this, I went to sleep. Hence, they couldn’t do anything and left.

Sera Khandro’s illness that can only be treated by meeting Gotrül Rinpoché, her great hesitancy to go to him that stretches over several pages of her Autobiography, and her concern that she will bring negative gossip upon him all point towards the interpretation that he was her consort. The great lengths to which she goes to emphasize that she was concerned over gossip affecting Gotrül and that she was not particularly interested in visiting the lama almost overshadow the very strong statement she makes that from her perspective, it would be beneficial to make a connection with him. Her resistance to
going before him is finally worn down when two of his monks come and insist on taking
her to him. After they visited for a while, Sera Khandro recounts,

    When he told me that he had some good and bad words for me and to listen to his
words, he told his retinue to go outside the door. Because we two were alone, I
thought that gossip would affect him. We sat in front of the window in the room
and having spoken in detail regarding worldly and religious affairs, he gave me
advice.

Though Sera Khandro feared the gossip her visit would bring upon Gotrül Rinpoché, for
her, the visit was successful in that she was cured of illness. Gotrül Rinpoché encourages
Sera Khandro to reveal her Treasures and also encourages Gyalsé (who is there with Sera
Khandro) to help her accomplish her religious goals.

Sera Khandro may have had good reason to fear negative gossip affecting Gotrül
Rinpoché if she indeed was having some type of relationship with him. However,
problems related to gossip followed Sera Khandro to other monastic contexts as well in
which she was completely innocent of the allegations against her. For example, when
Sera Khandro was devastated by Drimé Özer’s death, Sotrul Rinpoché invited her to live
nearby at Sera Monastery. Sera Khandro mentions the following incident that occurred
shortly after she moved to Sera Monastery at the end of her thirty-third year:

    Then, we gradually arrived at Sera Monastery. Sotrül came to welcome us and
brought food and so forth. At that time, although he said that I needed to put my
sleeping quarters a bit close to Sotrül’s, everyone from the outside and inside had
wrong thoughts about this and so we didn’t do it. I thought that it seemed that I
wouldn’t have the opportunity to stay there for long.

Because of all the people’s opinions, Sera Khandro suspects that she would soon be
unwelcome at Sera Monastery as well. Fortunately, Sera Khandro is wrong, and Sera
Monastery ends up being her home for much of the latter part of her life.
These small hints and mentions of the social difficulties Sera Khandro faced as a non-celibate religious woman demonstrate that being a female, a Treasure revealer, and a non-celibate religious adept was a combination unusual and problematic in Sera Khandro’s communities. Based on the long list of social problems and tensions she enumerates, it appears that Sera Khandro disturbed many people she encountered, ranging from humble nuns to haughty female consorts to overly lustful monks to communities seeking to guard their monastic clergy’s celibacy vows. In this, too, Sera Khandro is not alone, for Yeshé Tsogyal’s biography includes similar woes. In the following passage, Yeshé Tsogyal laments to Padmasambhava her deplorable situation:

> For I am a timid woman of scant ability; of lowly condition, the butt of everyone. If I go for alms, I am set upon by dogs; if food and riches come my way, I am the prey of thieves; since I am beautiful, I am the quarry of every lecherous knave; if I am busy with much to do, the country folk accuse me; if I don’t do what they think I should, the people criticize; if I put a foot wrong, everyone detests me. I have to worry about everything I do. That is what it is like to be a woman! How can a woman possibly gain accomplishment in Dharma? Just managing to survive is already hard enough.⁶²⁶

Despite Sera Khandro’s unusual status in her own communities, she has a model and a source of inspiration to draw from in Yeshé Tsogyal, a divine woman who prevailed over the social pressures and criticism she faced at every turn and who, like Sera Khandro, survived the vicissitudes of life as a female Treasure revealer, as a female consort, and a woman who had her own male consorts. It is fortunate for Sera Khandro that she found a model in Yeshé Tsogyal, for if her biographical writings can serve as an example, consort practices played a controversial role in both non-celibate Tantric communities as well as occasionally (and secretly) monasteries, but their position within both of these contexts was often fraught with social tensions, ambiguities, and secrecy.⁶²⁷
Conclusion: Consorts as agents or objects?

The question of the status of women in Tantric Buddhism has attracted the interest of numerous Western Buddhist Studies scholars. The enormous number of iconographic representations of female Tantric deities as well as the centrality of female consorts in sexual rituals leads some scholars to conclude that women in Tantra hold an exalted status. At one extreme, Miranda Shaw suggests that Tantric gender ideology is gynocentric, emphasizing the divinity of females more than males in reaction to the misogynist history of Buddhism in India. Shaw suggests that,

In the place of Mahāyāna neutrality in regard to gender dualism, Tantra highlights gender polarities. In this gendered discourse, the female pole receives more emphasis than the male.\(^{628}\)

On the other hand, Serenity Young takes a strongly critical position of the role of women in Tantra, concluding that, "Tantra is a practice in which men sexually utilize women for their own spiritual benefit."\(^{629}\) Young argues:

The male practitioner requires a female, any female, to complete his spiritual training or to speed it up. He takes her bodily fluids and the powers attributed to them into himself, for his own benefit, not hers . . . Most important, the emphasis on using the penis to extract women's sexual fluids makes men the primary subjects and presents women as objects for their utilization.\(^{630}\)

Sera Khandro’s representation of consort practices is an exception to this rule of male subjectivity. In contrast to both of these Western perspectives on the role of women in Tantra, Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings depict a view of consort practices that is neither gynocentric nor misogynist; her writings present a complex gendered world in which both men and women acted as agents and aides to each other on the spiritual path. In contrast to Young’s appraisal above, Sera Khandro’s writings explicitly represent the practice of sexual yoga from the perspective of a female subject gaining spiritual
realization for herself through the use of male consorts. For example, the vision she recounts in which Kukurepa gives her teachings on channel and wind practices involving the female sucking up male *bodhicitta*, i.e., semen, into her body as a way of engendering spiritual realization is a process that occurs entirely within a female subject. Given the emphasis on seminal retention in Buddhist practices involving sexual yoga, one could even conclude that Sera Khandro’s description of sexual practices is oppressive to men because it takes their vitality in service of the woman’s spiritual realization. Yet Sera Khandro’s reversal of the typical Tantric paradigm in which women are objects for men’s spiritual path has clear precedence in Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography. In fact, much of Sera Khandro’s description of consort practices resembles that of Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography. Yeshé Tsogyal is abused, disrespected, and misunderstood by her society; she has multiple male consorts with whom she practices sexual yoga for her own benefit, but, ultimately, she has one primary consort who is her guru and the object of her spiritual devotion.

On the other hand, Sera Khandro’s writings also portray a twentieth-century nomadic Eastern Tibetan social world in which Sera Khandro was exchanged between men at times against her will to act as a consort serving men’s spiritual needs. A lucid example of this is her visit to Adzom Rinpoche forced upon her by Drimé Özer. Sera Khandro’s life as a non-celibate female Tantric religious adept and Treasure revealer was not one of carefree independence; although she was beholden to neither nunnery nor lay marriage, she was tied down with the burdens of raising children and being stuck in a bitterly discordant marriage to Gyalsé. Her social world was hardly gynocentric — she was plagued by problems relating to the bitter jealousy of other female consorts with
whom she competed for the attention of powerful male religious figures such as Gara Tertön and Drimé Özer.

Beyond this, she portrays a world in which she was repeatedly beleaguered by negative talk and the fear of it each time she entered monastic contexts. I suggest this negative talk is indicative of larger tensions within Sera Khandro’s early twentieth-century religious communities between monastic and non-celibate Tantric interpretations of ideal Vajrayāna conduct, tensions that female consorts such as Sera Khandro had to negotiate with care. Sera Khandro repeatedly found herself rebuffing the advances of lust-filled monks, but at the same time she was summoned to act as the secret consort to monastic hierarchs. This double standard reflects the controversial position of sexuality in Nyingma Buddhism. Does sexuality controvert monastic vows if done without lust for the purpose of transmuting desire? In practice, the answer to that question seems to correspond more closely to a monk’s ecclesiastical rank than his internal spiritual accomplishments. In any case, the religious purposes for sexuality in Sera Khandro’s narrative go far beyond the soteriological goals of transmuting desire into enlightened energy. The most common reason monks and non-celibate Tantric religious figures request Sera Khandro’s consort services is to dispel obstacles to their longevity and to increase their physical health. In this sense, auto/biographical literature such as that of Sera Khandro emphasizes the strongly pragmatic element of the sexual practices that prescriptive literature tends to hypostatize into esoteric techniques leading to spiritual liberation. However, perhaps Longchenpa’s placement of sexual practices involving the manipulation of channels and winds into a lower category of “conventional seminal nuclei,” beneath Great Perfection contemplation practices, reflects their pragmatic
associations. Given the multi-layered roles sexuality plays in Nyingma religious practice, Sera Khandro’s repeated accounts of the divine visionary voices who constantly cajoled her into pursuing consort relationships is one strategy she uses to present herself as morally irreprehensible (with divine backing) in light of these tensions between celibate and non-celibate interpretations of proper religious conduct.

Sera Khandro’s position as a Treasure revealer and as a woman empowered to have male consorts was highly unusual in her social context. She does not mention meeting or knowing of any other female Treasure revealer aside from the hagiographic figures Künga Buma and Jomo Menmo. She mentions knowing only three other female religious specialists in her lengthy Autobiography: one nun (a ne), one đäkinī (mkha’ ‘gro), and one married Tantric priestess (sngags btsun). Given her extraordinary status, I cannot suggest that her auto/biographical perspectives are representative of women’s experience in Tantric communities. However, Sera Khandro’s portrayal of consort practices suggests that at least some women did participate in mutually beneficial ways in Tantric practices involving sexuality. Sera Khandro’s works may be one of the few sources that document women’s active involvement in consort practices for their own gain and not only as vehicles for men’s spiritual realization, but I suggest that the rarity of Sera Khandro’s perspective is a product of the dearth of female-authored sources and not an indication that women were not agents within spheres of Tantric practice.
Chapter Five: The Divine Couple

In the Buddhist context, love is more often associated with attachment to the suffering of cyclic existence than with spiritual realization. From its Indian origins, Buddhism has been a tradition ideologically centered on renouncing householder society, whether it be in the form of the forest asceticism of early Indian Buddhism or the large institutional monasticism that developed in later centuries in India and then in Tibet. Perhaps this renunciate history is the reason why Buddhism never developed a strong tradition of devotionalism based on metaphors of love between a man and a woman, or bhakti, that became so popular in other Indian traditions.631 Steven Beyer drew attention to this point in his essay comparing the Buddhist Perfection of Wisdom literature (Prajñāpāramitā, beginning first century C.E.) with Indian texts such as the Bhagavad-Gītā (fifth to second century B.C.E.). He concludes that,

The [Buddhist] Pure Land texts manage to divorce visualization from devotion: the saving Lord remains impersonal and distant, a power to be tapped by vision and recitation, in a cool and dazzling ecstasy rather than in a genuine encounter of the human with a divine other.632

Beyer suggests that just as Indian Buddhism did not incorporate bhakti elements, in the later Tibetan tradition, bhakti devotionalism never developed.633

Tibetan Buddhism may not have put a strong emphasis on bhakti-like metaphors in its forms of devotion, but there are contexts in which a practitioner cultivates strong emotive states of devotion for their guru. Perhaps the closest thing to bhakti in Tibetan Buddhism is the practice of guru yoga (bla ma'i rnal 'byor), the development of intensive devotion for one’s root guru through visualization and mantra recitation practices that are an important part of preliminary practices (sngon 'gro) conducted before the main tantric
forms of contemplation. However, even in guru yoga, the cultivation of great love and devotion for one’s guru is generally not described through metaphors of love between a man and a woman, but rather through metaphors of devotion for one’s superior, such as for a loving parent. For example, the famous twentieth-century Nyingma teacher Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche used the following metaphors to describe the qualities of the guru to whom one should cultivate intensive devotion:

He is like a great ship for beings to cross the perilous ocean of existence, an unerring captain who guides them to the dry land of liberation, a rain that extinguishes the fire of the passions, a bright sun and moon that dispel the darkness of ignorance, a firm ground that can bear the weight of both good and bad, a wish-fulfilling tree that bestows temporal happiness and ultimate bliss, a treasury of vast and deep instructions, a wish-fulfilling jewel granting all the qualities of realization, a father and a mother giving their love equally to all sentient beings, a great river of compassion, a mountain rising above worldly concerns unshaken by the winds of emotions, and a great cloud filled with rain to soothe the torments of the passions. In brief, he is the equal of all the Buddhas.634

Nowhere in these evocative metaphors is there a hint of a sentiment of love between a man and a woman. Dilgo Khyentsé’s guru is a guru who extinguishes the fire of the passions; he is unshaken by the winds of emotions and ready to soothe the torment of the passions. Thus, despite the strongly devotional quality of guru yoga, it too supports Beyer’s point that bhakti devotionalism did not translate from the Indian religious world into Tibetan Buddhism.

Beyond the powerful devotion to one’s guru that all Tibetan Buddhists cultivate through practices such as guru yoga, another far more arcane arena within Tibetan Buddhism that would appear to lend itself to love metaphors is sexual yoga. Yet these practices are described in very technical terms, with complex manipulations of internal channels, winds, and seminal nuclei. In the literature describing sexual practices, they do not appear to involve themes of love. Janet Gyatso states,
But fulfillment yoga [involving consort practices] is also practiced by couples. When they do so, however, there is no talk of love, nor any celebration of the union of the sexes. We do not even find the kind of normative prescriptions for coupling that we might expect, given the pervasive Tantric symbolism of gender complementarity and male and female aspects of enlightened states. Sexual union in the context of fulfillment yoga is not a sacralization of the love act. When yogins such as Jigme Lingpa engage in fulfillment-phase sexual union, they do so for other reasons. 535

Gyatso’s conclusion that sexual yoga has nothing to do with talk of love or the sacralization of sexuality is based on her detailed examination of the writings of Jikmé Lingpa and many other figures. Yet I suggest that Sera Khandro’s biographical writings are an exception to the rule. Sera Khandro’s writings sacralize sexuality in the sense that they portray a love story between a woman and a man who was the love of her life and also her most important partner in sexual yoga. Thus, Sera Khandro’s writings broaden our understanding of consort practices from the technicalities of physical exchanges to their interpersonal contexts involving sentiment and emotion between the partners. Because the object of Sera Khandro’s love is also her guru, her version of guru yoga in the form of her devotion to Drimé Özer takes on an amorous tone similar to elements of bhakti devotionalism. Love and sentimental attachment are no longer ties binding Sera Khandro to the sufferings of cyclic existence as they often are within Buddhist frameworks. Instead, Sera Khandro’s love for Drimé Özer constitutes both her spiritual path and its goal of liberation.

Sera Khandro draws from what Gyatso describes above as “the pervasive Tantric symbolism of gender complementarity” to portray her love for Drimé Özer using expressions that double as both sentimental love and religious terminology. In particular, she understands herself and her consort through the religious terminology of the union of method and wisdom personified as the union of male and female. This duality dates back
to early Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom literature and is the standard Tantric nomenclature for describing male and female Tantric partners in sexual relationship. In Mahāyāna discourse, method, or skillfulness in means, (thabs shes, upāya-kauśalya) and wisdom (shes rab, prajñā) are a pair of qualities necessary for bodhisattvas that pervade the other six perfections including generosity, morality, patience, discipline, meditation, and wisdom. In later Indian Tantric interpretations such as those found in the Hevajra Tantra, the union of male method and female wisdom produces the bliss that the Tantric yogin needs to engender spiritual realization. As I have previously discussed, in the Tibetan Treasure tradition, this bliss is also necessary to aid the Treasure revealer (gter ston) in producing and decoding his or her Treasures. For this reason, Sera Khandro’s visionary encounters with dākinīs and other celestial characters repeatedly remind her not to ignore the importance of gathering the requisite auspicious connections (rten ’brel) of uniting method and wisdom, or, in other words, of engaging in sexual yoga with a divinely prophesized consort. In Sera Khandro’s writings, the dyad of method and wisdom takes parallel importance for both male and female Treasure revealers; she represents Drimé Özer and herself as mutually reliant upon each other for their ability to reveal Treasures. Thus, the traditional dyad of method and wisdom becomes an important way in which Sera Khandro articulates a vision of gender relations in the context of Treasure revelation that has a strongly egalitarian tone that is built on a premise of mutual necessity as much as she mitigates this with self-humbling rhetoric. In another sense, her entire biographical writing project reflects the inseparability of the dyad of male method and female wisdom in that she wrote two biographies, one about method, Drimé Özer’s Biography (248 pages), and one about wisdom (her own, 407 pages). She may
have been only a humble woman, but she certainly had a great deal to say about herself! Sera Khandro’s choice to write both her husband’s life story and her own is not happenstance; as one of the contemporary incarnations of Drimé Özer in Golok today named Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok informed me, Sera Khandro’s two biographical works are meant to be read together and cannot be analyzed separately because they embody male and female, method and wisdom.\(^{639}\) This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of a couple as the basic unit of operation in the Treasure tradition, as opposed to the emphasis on the individual as an independent actor within celibate monastic Tibetan Buddhism.

Consort practices may or may not have generally been linked with love, but in Sera Khandro’s writings, the union of method and wisdom is a spiritual union that embodies both her life’s religious purpose and the mainstay of her emotional sustenance. Beyond the technical elements of sexual yoga as a method to manipulate the flow of seminal nuclei through the body’s channels, Sera Khandro’s biographical writings depict her life with (and without) her consort as an epic drama pervaded by her emotional attachment to him. From the time that Sera Khandro’s life partner Gara Gyalsé gives her to her prophesized consort Drimé Özer until the time she finally goes to live with him permanently, six years of Sera Khandro’s life, including several visits back and forth, transpire over hundreds of Tibetan folio pages in both the *Autobiography* and the *Biography*. Sera Khandro’s account of these long years of separation interspersed with joyful reunions is reminiscent of medieval troubadours’ devotional poetry in which they analogized “love in separation” with the proper attitude of the worshipper towards God. As Edward Dimock, Jr. has compared troubadours’ love poetry to that of the Indian Vaiṣṇava tradition, we too may borrow this concept of “love in separation” to describe
Sera Khandro’s poetic expression of her love for her often inaccessible guru. After hundreds of pages of suspense in which she vacillates between responsibility to Gyalsé and love for Drimé Özer, Sera Khandro’s narrative culminates in their long-anticipated reunion. This climax is not only the apex of their love relationship and the cure to their near-fatal illnesses, but it is the moment of Sera Khandro’s spiritual enlightenment, her union with the divine in the form of her lover Drimé Özer.

Tragically, only four years after Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer begin their life together, their connubial bliss is cut short with Drimé Özer’s death. Nevertheless, their love continues through the veil of death. As Padmasambhava lives on eternally in his Southwestern Buddhafield, so too does Drimé Özer. Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer repeatedly vow to each other to remain together forever in all their future incarnations and in the Buddhafields. Thus, their unending love becomes Sera Khandro’s primary metaphor for the permanent state of Buddhahood that both of them attain inseparably from each other. Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s love story lives on in a reincarnational sense as well in contemporary Golok; the Treasure revealer Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok (b. 1944) and his late consort Taré Lhamo (1938-2002) describe themselves as incarnations of the divine couple Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro. Like Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro, Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok and Taré Lhamo are a Treasure revelation couple, following in the footsteps of their early twentieth-century counterparts and before them, the divine progenitors of the Treasure tradition Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal.
Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer's Love Story

Beginnings

From the first moment the fifteen-year-old Sera Khandro laid eyes on Drimé Özer from the distant window of her brother's home, she records that her perception transformed and she became fascinated by him:

Then in the tenth month, some people from Kham came to visit Central Tibet. Among those of the central encampment there was one who was said to be the incarnation of Dzokchen Palge from Dzagyal Monastery. As he asked my older brother to give him lodging, [my brother] gave him lodging and the guests arrived.

Watching from the sun-viewing glass window, I looked at the guests. Among them there was one lama with hair on his head. As soon as I saw him, my perception transformed. Thinking that he was really the one called Künkyen Longchen Rabjam, tears flowed from my eyes. On account of the goose bumps on my body, I put my palms together and prayed, “Don’t lessen your compassion – in all my lifetimes may I never separate from you.”

Sera Khandro’s spontaneous devotion for the traveling Golok lama did not go unnoticed by others in her family. As they stood watching the new arrivals from a window in Sera Khandro’s brother’s house in Lhasa, her brother’s wife Drönkar chastised her for expressing so much amorous devotion for a man other than the young Chinese political leader to whom she was already betrothed. Sera Khandro writes:

My brother’s wife Drönkar said the following: “Ho ho! It seems as if you are not one who has no thought of loving a man! You do have a man who you love – when you see that lama over there, lust arises in you and you say ‘May we never part.’ Not remembering the young Kidröng leader who is [handsome] like the full moon, what is the meaning of your becoming infatuated with this man from Kham with a long black beard?”

Singing a song, I said the following words:

“Listen, wife of my elder brother!

I am not one with a great love for a man.
[Since] it seems he is a holy man, a yogi,
Involuntarily faith arose in me.
I prayed that in this life and in the future we will be inseparable.

I am not one in whom lust for a man arises.
I am a nun who is without desire.
I will not do negative libidinous acts.

I will not fall under the influence of that negative companion,
The young leader with a magnificent complexion [like] the moon.
In the end, I pray that my actions will be to practice the Dharma.

I am like a flower of the fall and winter;
Although I am here today, I am gone tomorrow.
Sister, I don’t know what will happen.”

She said,

“Ho, ho, listen Kūnga!
The inclination of a she-goat not to obey the shepherd
Results in her killing herself.
The inclination of this girl not to obey her parents
Is the basis for dispute.

Expel this thought from the depth of your mind.
There are many different songs;

There are several words that cause mental doubt –
Don’t say unnecessary things like this!”

Hence, from the very beginning of Sera Khandro’s perceptions of Drimé Özer, others around her pick up on the multivalent tone of her devotion for him that is both sentimental and religious. After Drönkar gives her this warning, Sera Khandro pretends that her song’s insinuations about being infatuated with the wild-looking lama from Golok were all in jest.

After Sera Khandro escapes from her brother’s home and joins Drimé Özer’s entourage of traveling pilgrims, her amorous devotion for Drimé Özer and his growing
interest in her do not escape the notice of her new community. Perhaps influenced by her youth and beauty, some members of Drimé Özer’s community immediately perceive her to be a potential consort for Drimé Özer. Reacting against that, they try to bar her access to Drimé Özer. Reasons for the strong feelings some felt against Sera Khandro include allegiance to his other consort Akyongza, jealousy, and perhaps racial prejudice (because Sera Khandro was half-Mongolian and from Central Tibet). For these and other reasons, this early phase of Sera Khandro’s life in Golok was characterized by her largely unrequited love for him; she always desired to be near him but he was unavailable. That others in Sera Khandro’s community perceived her love interest in Drimé Özer is evident in the following interaction she had with her nun friend Ané Zangmo. After Gara Tertön’s funeral when Sera Khandro was nineteen years old, she realized that she had a Treasure to reveal. She writes,

Thinking that my Treasure site was just there and that it seemed I needed a material substance as an auspicious connection, I went to Zangmo’s place and said, “Ané Zangmo, do you have any of Trülku Drimé’s hair or clothing to give me?”

She replied, “I have a bit. Why do you need it?”

I said, “I have a need for it.”

She said jokingly, “Isn’t it that you have a need for the actual Trülku? If it is sufficient to only have his hair, I’ll give it to you.”

Not only did Sera Khandro yearn to be near Drimé Özer, but others in her community joked about her need to have him “in the flesh” beyond the symbolic tokens of him that she was able to garner.

During the following phase of Sera Khandro’s life when she lived with Gara Tertön’s son Gara Gyalsé from the age of twenty to thirty, her devotion to Drimé Özer
never diminished. When she was twenty-three years old living with Gyalsé at Banak Monastery before Gyalsé gave her to Drimé Özer, she recounts feeling intense craving to see him again:

Then, during that year in the ninth month, the Omniscient Lord of Refuge, the Wish-fulfilling Jewel himself was taking out Treasures in the lower Mar region including places such as Chakri Öbar, Tashi Gomang, Troma and so forth. While doing that, he went to beg for grain and hence he came near my place. When I heard that he had come near, although I desired to meet him as a person tormented by thirst wants water, I didn't dare tell Gyalsé.

When I was there [trying to] let it go, according to my hopes, the Lord himself together with some attendants came to see Gyalsé. They made a religious connection by giving each other empowerments and reading transmissions. At that time, the Lord himself gave me five pieces of turquoise and coral as precious substances together with a stainless scarf and gave me advice regarding worldly and spiritual matters. I incited a new profound Treasure to come that had great blessings and [caused] signs of accomplishment to come quickly. According to my hopes, because the Lord himself gave me instructions regarding profound Dharma, he nurtured my capacity to write and reveal profound Treasure.645

As a thirsty person wants water, Sera Khandro desired to see Drimé Özer, who had the power to nurture the requisite auspicious connections that enabled her to reveal her Treasures. Yet circumstances such as living with Gyalsé and looking after her daughter kept her based in Banak Monastery with Gyalsé for many more years.

When Sera Khandro was twenty-four years old, her life partner Gyalsé gave her away to Drimé Özer. For the six years between the ages of twenty-four and thirty, Sera Khandro was in limbo, both desiring Drimé Özer and fearing expulsion from Gyalsé’s community. Her description of her limbo state during this long period of her life creates a suspense-filled narrative inspiring the reader to develop a stronger and stronger sense of anticipation waiting for the day in which she will be reunited with the man who holds the key to her spiritual realization and her worldly happiness.
Back and Forth

During this uncomfortable phase of her life with Gyalsé at Banak Monastery after he had already agreed to give her away to Drimé Özer, Sera Khandro and company traveled to see Drimé Özer on four different occasions. These trips included her children and her disciples Tupzang and Tsültrim Dorjé and at times also Gyalsé. Sera Khandro describes the momentous dialogues, religious exchanges, and love that they shared during each visit with tenderness in both Drimé Özer's Biography and her Autobiography. The first visit Sera Khandro recounts occurred when she was twenty-seven and Drimé Özer was thirty-eight, most likely in the year 1919. Although she describes the visit a bit differently in the two biographical texts, both texts express Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s identity as prophesized consorts, Drimé Özer’s dilemma regarding monastic life and life as a mantrin, and Sera Khandro’s marital problems with Gyalsé. In her Autobiography, just after recounting the tragic events of her second pregnancy in which she gave birth to a stillborn son and endured her mother-in-law Yakza’s cruel accusations of infanticide, she records:

At that time, from a household within the Gar [family] camp at Karnang Gabma, there was a man named Lama Lochö that was from near my land. He came to invite me to his house. When I went together with my child and Tupzang, not far and not close by the Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Drimé Özer] was in retreat in a place called Naidro Dorjé Dzong. Based on the exhortation of the dākinī prophecies and the words that Gotrül had spoken earlier [urging Sera Khandro to go to Drimé Özer], I wondered if a meaningful auspicious connection could arise.

Lochö showed me the way and my child and I went there [to Naidro Dorjé Dzong]. At first I met Khyentrül Rinpoché’s son Trülku Rikzin Kunzang Nyima and asked him if I could visit him [Drimé Özer]. He said, “Although no one else is allowed to go, of course you and your attendants are allowed to go. Now after his practice session is complete, I will come to give you a sign.”
We prepared to stay on the other side [of the hill] next to a spring. While Lochö and Tupzang were raising our tent, I went with my daughter to a place where many flowers were growing. When I was there, because an evil land deity of that place caused hail to rain down on me, I visualized the form of the mantra Dorjé Dujom. When the divine pride of the tutelary deity bound the land deity under his power, obstacles naturally dissipated.

At that time, the Lord himself's speech [practice] session finished, and someone came to call us. When we went with him and met [Drimé Özer], I offered him a prophecy regarding his life from a [revelation] cycle from my visionary experience. In that prophecy it said that on account of his consorts and local conditions, he had turned away from his inclinations [to be a mantra]. Since he thought he would live in the guise of being a monastic, the ḍākinīs' prophecies were extremely harsh. Despite this, not thinking, he let [the ḍākinī prophecies] go. We spoke in detail about other religious and worldly affairs.

Then, I also said this: "Wish-fulfilling Incarnate, direct your attention towards me and offer me refuge. In particular, you who have profound instructions and explanations, may we be inseparable in all of this life, the next, and the intermediate states. Don't lessen your kindness to take care of me compassionately! From the time I was young until now, although I desired and wondered if I could accomplish a bit of the Guru and Consort's [Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal's] aspirations, consorts endowed with [the Guru's] aspiration prayers that I desired didn't desire me. A consort that I didn't desire [i.e., Gyalsé] of bad ancestry with small karmic residue pertaining to Secret Mantra desired me. He seduced me by means of various methods including [giving me] rare and difficult to come by material wealth. In this way, my actions became contradictory [to Dharma]. Perhaps the cause is that I did not rely on auspicious connections the way they were intended to be. Although [until] now I haven't been able to wander in an unknown place, not needing the anger of all the outer and inner [people], I have decided that this is my desire. Please pay attention to me, protect me, and don't lessen your kindness towards me!"

The Wish-fulfilling Jewel said, "Don't think like this. It is certain that benefit for beings will gradually come about. For the sake of expanding the scope of your beneficial deeds, I invoke the protectors of the three roots and also during the two important times [Guru Rinpoché day and ḍākinī day], of course I think of you during the feast offering. Like your earlier request to think of you, in many of my Treasure registries, your Vajra prophecies are clear. Despite this, from one perspective, you were with Gyalsé. From another perspective, because your conduct was extremely virtuous, I didn't dare say whatever I thought. In particular, it was extremely difficult to maintain the consorts in my entourage. Because I was greatly irritated, I didn't follow through on all my actions. Not relying on prophecies, I let them go."
Again, I said, “Sir, I am not a person who thought I was good and acted virtuously out of arrogance. If I don’t have what is necessary, it is extremely difficult to maintain the commitments of Secret Mantra. Hence, I disciplined my three doors [body, speech, and mind]. Now also, from whatever worldly or religious perspective, I don’t have the thought to accomplish my own selfish interests. Having incited the prophecies of the mother ḍākinī, I have no freedom [regarding] the future. From a human perspective, my life partner having a mistaken intellect, he didn’t want [me]. On the basis that [my coming to you] was in accordance with your thoughts, Gotrub Rinpoche also said, “Now you need to go,” so I came. Now if it seems that we won’t meet each other besides this time, Wish-fulfilling Jewel incarnate, [please] give me an extremely profound esoteric instruction of few words with condensed meaning. Although I don’t know anything, as an auspicious connection, I will offer you an extraordinary esoteric instruction hidden in my mind.”

When I said this, the Lord himself replied, “Of course we will meet each other again. Not staying with Gara Trulku, you could go however far away [you want]. Nevertheless, since your daughter is young, how could you find a way to abandon her? Since Gyalse’s behavior is like one who has attained accomplishment, if for whatever reason you are not happy, stay in retreat in a comfortable dwelling place. I will provide whatever amount of provisions such as food and clothes that I can.”

Then, in accordance with the Lord’s desire, without keeping anything hidden or secret, as a cherished jewel I offered the esoteric instruction called *Drinking the Vajra Water* that is the innermost essence of the Secret Quintessence Mother Tantra. In particular, having relied on the mandala of great bliss of the unfabricated secret space, together with the four meaning empowerments and an introduction to the great co-emergent Truth Body, I gave my secret consort the Wish-fulfilling Jewel all the esoteric instructions as if they were precious gems that came to my mind. I kept nothing hidden or secret such as the direct instruction on the essential teaching of the dimension of union and liberation that manifestly discloses that which is hidden and so forth . . .

[Sera Khandro recounts a dream she had in which a ḍākinī comes to her] . . .

Then, our minds in mutual accord, the Lord having loved me untiringly, we returned home.648

Sera Khandro’s description of her much anticipated visit with Drimé Özer expresses her devotion to him in a strongly religious tone, portraying their love through the religious discourse of auspicious connections, prophecy, and religious instructions. For Drimé Özer, prophecy decrees that despite his yearnings to escape the annoyances of
maintaining multiple consorts, he is not free to live and practice as a monk. For Sera Khandro, it means that despite the difficulties she faces coming to see Drimé Özer, the decision to pursue a consort relationship with him is out of her hands; it is divinely ordained. Yet Sera Khandro weaves religious prophecy with more conventional interests in her explanation of her choices. When Sera Khandro describes how she went astray and got caught up with Gyalsé, a man of bad ancestry with only a slight connection to the Dharma, she offers one compelling reason for her perplexing choice to settle with him: he seduced her by means of offering her material wealth that was difficult to come by. Perhaps this comment indicates that in her early years in Golok as a single young woman with no relatives to support her, Sera Khandro’s poverty was one factor that motivated her to cultivate a relationship with Gyalsé even though he was not her prophesized partner and was the son of a woman who hated her from the very beginning. Drimé Özer also provides his own very practical reasons for why he did not comply with the dākinī prophecies exhorting him to pursue Sera Khandro as his consort: 1) she was with Gyalsé, 2) her conduct was virtuous, and 3) he already had enough trouble maintaining his consorts. His words thus add a pragmatic tone to the more standard esoteric and divine tenor of descriptions of consort practices.

Sera Khandro recounts the same visit to see Drimé Özer in his Biography. The following passage is focused more on introducing Sera Khandro as a religious figure and explaining her background, but in general the passages are recognizably similar:

Then, one day the Lord went out to the road. When he looked, in front of him sitting inside a tent there was a mantrin (sngags pa) whom he had never seen before. She was wearing a black hat and a cloak sitting in a dignified manner with a mirror and an arrow with silk on it in her two hands. The Lord thought that perhaps it was a magical emanation of Tseringma. He wondered what other dākinī
would emanate as one dressed as a mantrin? After her practice session was finished, he thought it was truly amazing that it was Dewé Dorjé [Sera Khandro].

When he went before the woman Dewé Dorjé, she prayed again and again, “Since I have a ḍākinī prophecy, I came before you. Hence, still for the sake of the teachings and sentient beings, you need to preserve your life.”

The Lord said, “Since I am not someone who has attained freedom over death, it is not certain when I will die.”

Dewé Dorjé put the ḍākinī prophecy in the Lord’s hands and said, “Sir, this is the sign of the truth of my words which lack any lies or deceit.”

The Lord looked at it. Thinking that it appeared that it wasn’t acceptable for him to reside in the clothing of a monastic, he smiled slightly. Other than that, he didn’t say anything.

Again, Dewé Dorjé said, “Although you know the meaning of this prophecy and I don’t have to tell you, firstly, I fell under the power of another. On account of not knowing if your consorts would be agreeable and being a powerless person from a remote land and so forth, I wasn’t able to find a way to come before you. Otherwise, from the time I was fifteen years old, I abandoned all my relatives in the manner of a renunciate and I prayed to you alone. Although I wondered if I would be able to accomplish the holy divine Dharma, because I am one with a negative body [i.e., a woman] with negative karma, I abandoned a great retinue [her aristocratic Lhasa family] and became distracted day and night by a small retinue [Gyalsé and company]. Now, without separation in this life, the next, and the intermediate state don’t lessen your kindness to pay attention to me, offer me refuge, and give me instructional explanations.” They also had many other discussions about Dharma and sentient beings.

Again, the Lord asked, “Because you are one who is empowered in profound Treasure, it is easy for me to teach you instructional explanations. Who was your first lama? In what oral instructions did you train? Who taught you how to read? When did you take out a Treasure registry? Tell me well without hiding or keeping anything secret – who are your Treasure consorts and doctrine holders?”

Dewé Dorjé said, “Since I was young, I had devotion for the Dharma but my parents didn’t give me permission [to practice Dharma] and they showed me the way to stay [at home]. Then, when I was twelve years old, in my dream an appearance saying he was the Great Accomplished One Sarahapa trained me in the yogic postures of channel and wind [practices] and said it was the dharma cycle of the formless ḍākinīs. Also, all the other esoteric instructions pertaining to the lower door of great bliss came from him. When I was thirteen, a ḍākinī’s prophetic registry came. Although all the locations of the consorts, Treasure sites, and doctrine holders were there, because I didn’t know how to write, I
temporarily let it go. At that time, Tseringma helped me and wrote down the registry [that the dākini] spoke. When I was sixteen, although I wanted to go [home], when I was fifteen I prayed to you and came to the lower area [of Eastern Tibet]. When I was seventeen, although I had a prophecy about Gara Terchen, the auspicious connections went away due to other things. Then, when I was eighteen years old, when you went to Kargab because a leader died, Tongpön Zangmo and I both offered you tea at the upper mouth of the Do River. Although we requested you to stay there, powerful monks didn’t let you stay. At that time because you gave me a material substance and you gave me advice and prayers and so forth, in Magyal I found the symbolic registry for three cycles of profound Treasure together with a Tsogyal Accomplishment Practice Dharma Cycle. When I was nineteen, on account of an illusory dream, when I awoke from sleep I knew how to read and write without needing to exert myself [in studying]. Otherwise, I didn’t request the unsurpassed supreme Dharma that is the fruit of the clear light Great Perfection from anyone. Although I saw the teaching of incorporating appearances onto the path, since I was of inferior intelligence, I thought of the difficulty of it and wasn’t able to request it.”

The Lord asked, “Then, if you were not able to incorporate your perceptions into the path, what is the nature of the realization that you attained?”

Dewé Dorjé replied, “Sir, from the time I was thirteen until now, I never found a way to say that this was my practice. Perceptions of the outer objective sphere are undifferentiated and extremely clear. Inner intellect is unconstrained emptiness. In-between, the causal factor of conceptual thoughts cannot be changed – is this unimpededly open consciousness what is called mind? As the foundation of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, it is not non-existent. Being inexpressible and abiding like the all-pervasive sky, it is also not existent. That which does not fall to either extreme of existence or non-existence, that which is primordially liberated and greatly inconceivable, I think this is the essence of awareness.”

The Lord said, “Primordial wisdom that is non-dual clarity and emptiness is called awareness. It is okay if you practice this essence that is inseparable from natural expression.”

They spoke much about Great Perfection Dharma. In particular, Dewé Dorjé offered the Lord without hiding or keeping anything secret the esoteric instruction on *Drinking the Vajra Water*, Treasure registries, [descriptions of] the origin of [her being] a Treasure revealer, and so forth.

The Lord said, “Although you appeared earlier in all of my registries and prophetic guides, the auspicious connections were not convenient. Despite this, since Gara Trülku has excellently given his permission, you need someone with the [karmic] connection of auspicious circumstances. Am I in your registry?”
Dewé Dorjé said, “I don’t know.” Although the Lord himself was displayed [in her registry] as her main consort, thinking that his other consorts wouldn’t like it, she let it go.

Then, the Lord said, “Because next year is my brother Kyentrül’s obstacle year, please direct your attention towards him. I am not afraid of death. In particular, since we have become lama and disciple, no matter what you will not break my command. Of course I desire to stay here, but my household says that I have to go quickly to tame disciples and so forth. Hence, when they say I have to do that, I cannot say that I will stay here.”

Again Dewé Dorjé said, “It is not acceptable for you to speak like this. Of course you can discuss this with the household. I beseech you to remain here for the benefit of the teachings and sentient beings.”

The Lord promised to stay there and then said, “Sometime next year bring your entire religious teachings here.” They each acted as each other’s consort. Having prayed that method and wisdom would be inseparable, they aroused reverence [for each other] as if their minds had become one.

Divine prophecies may be the impetus decreeing the pattern of their life and love, but it is clear that Sera Khandro’s first journey to visit Drimé Özer was one in which she was offering herself to him as a consort. She is modest about this, phrasing everything via divine prophecy and explaining why she couldn’t comply with the prophecies earlier. But at the same time, her action of appearing before him is powerful and her voice is firm, demanding that he not live as a monk and that he not stray too far from home on his expeditions. The import of her words is not lost on Drimé Özer; he smiles slightly after she presents him the ḍākinī prophecy, realizing that she has come to be his consort. In this version of the story from Drimé Özer’s Biography, he comes to her tent instead of vice versa, but other than these points, the key aspects of their dialogue and religious exchanges are parallel. In both passages, Sera Khandro displays her profound level of insight into the philosophical view regarding the nature of mind according to Great Perfection teachings.
In her *Autobiography*, Sera Khandro records that the following year, when she was twenty-eight years old, Drimé Özer sent Gyaltsé a letter requesting Sera Khandro’s presence as an aide for his brother Kyentrül Rinpoché who was undergoing his obstacle year. Gyaltsé accepted the invitation and traveled with Sera Khandro to Drimé Özer’s residence for her second visit to see him after the two had already exchanged her. In her *Autobiography*, Sera Khandro writes,

Then I [along with our] group went to Drongkor. Gradually, we arrived before the Wish-fulfilling One. Having met with him, we stayed there for a few days. The Trülkus [Drimé Özer and Gyaltsé] exchanged empowerments and reading transmissions. In particular, the Lord himself established me in ripening and liberation [practices] and he gave me a name. Not being able to resist the Lord’s command, at that time I gave him the registry of my Treasure titled *Secret Treasury of Reality Dakinis* and we nurtured many amazing auspicious connections. The Lord knew the meaning of a symbolic dakini script that I had difficulty decoding. I elucidate this meaning in my Treasure scripture.

At that time, I told [Drimé Özer], “Gotrül told me that this year it would be good if you protect my child and me. Since he told me that otherwise it would be difficult for anyone else to help us, don’t discard his opinion from your heart.”

The Lord himself gave my child a protection cord and he performed longevity and life summoning rituals. Each one of us having relied on the other [as a consort], the obstacles to our live forces were dispelled.

Then, the Lord gave Gyaltsé very expensive items and a rug adorned with auspicious things on it together with a nice offering scarf. He [Gyaltsé] was extremely pleased and they restored their mutual agreement. He also took care of me with great love as if I were his main consort. In particular, he promised not to be irritated by regional and temporal conditions and to find ways to support his life force and so forth. I too said that no matter what, I wouldn’t go to unknown places. By our minds becoming as if they were one, we made aspirational prayers for method and wisdom to be inseparable. Having done this, we returned home.651

This passage depicts the ways that male religious figures shared consorts in Sera Khandro’s social world. Drimé Özer seems to be requesting Sera Khandro’s presence as a consort for his brother Kyentrül Rinpoché during his obstacle year, although once she arrives she only mentions her interactions with Drimé Özer. After Drimé Özer sends
Gyalsé a letter requesting their presence, Gyalsé acquiesces to the visit knowing that Drimé Özer wants Sera Khandro to be his temporary consort. In this above passage from the *Autobiography*, Sera Khandro emphasizes the friendly relations that both men cultivated through giving religious teachings to each other. Yet, their friendly relations involve a transaction in which Gyalsé exchanges Sera Khandro’s consort services for Drimé Özer’s expensive gifts. Although she describes the mutual accord between Gyalsé and Drimé Özer here, it is not to last. As Sera Khandro repeatedly prays when she is about to part from Drimé Özer, there are only two necessary facets of the spiritual path – method and wisdom. Drimé Özer is the one who can provide Sera Khandro with what she lacks. He is the man from whom she prays never to part even as she prepares to do just that yet again.

Interestingly, in Drimé Özer’s *Biography*, Sera Khandro portrays quite a different dynamic between Drimé Özer and Gyalsé when describing the same visit. Although the chronology and many facets of the second visit scene are parallel, the theme of pleasant exchange between Gyalsé, Drimé Özer, and Sera Khandro is decidedly different in her first literary rendition of this visit (she wrote the *Biography* several years earlier than her *Autobiography*). In Drimé Özer’s *Biography*, she writes that Drimé Özer sent Gyalsé a letter requesting the services of Sera Khandro as a consort to provide auspicious connections to help cure him of his illness. Via letters, the two men revisit their previous exchange discussion and Gyalsé reaffirms his willingness to give Sera Khandro to him. After this correspondence, Gyalsé, Sera Khandro, and company make the trip to Drimé Özer’s place:

Then, after a few days, Gyalsé and his group all came. The Lord said, “Although the prophecies of the deities and lamas are like this [indicate that Gyalsé should
give him Sera Khandro], if you are not agreeable, it is as I said before [you don’t have to give her to me].”

Gyalsé said, “Since this year her astrological chart is extremely disturbed, if you two act as consorts for each other and benefit arises, that is good. I stand by my earlier words, hence you are her husband (bdag po). Despite this, it is important that your household is in agreement with this.”

The Lord said, “We male and female partners (yab yum) living together is in accordance with their [my consorts’] desires. For me also, from whatever worldly or religious perspective, I maintain [a situation in which] we all live together well in a mutually agreeable fashion. In particular, bearing in mind the commitment vows of the female consorts, we are all in agreement. Aside from this, although there will be no negative words regarding the suitability of the dākinī living at my place, because I am growing old [he is 39!], no matter what, I hope not to [need to] do a lot of work.”

Then, the Lord said, “Dākinī Dewé Dorjé, bring me your religious scriptures.”

According to the Lord’s order, Dewé Dorjé brought the texts but keeping the registry secret, she didn’t bring it. Hence, the Lord said, “Where is your first registry from when you were thirteen? Without hiding or keeping secrets, bring it to me.”

If Dewé Dorjé said she didn’t have a registry, it would be a lie. If she visibly offered it, since the Lord himself was clearly written in the registry, she wondered, “What will he think about an inferior person like me indicating that he is my consort?” In particular, she wondered, “Because I have not received permission from Gara Trülku [Gyalsé] to receive and write down Treasure texts, if he sees [my registry] now, I wonder if he will scold me and slap me?” Thinking this, she stayed there not saying anything. Despite this, because the Lord again commanded her, she gave the Lord all of her registry.

Hence, he said, “She is certainly a Treasure revealer. She has an amazing registry!”

Gartrül said, “We also have registries and prophetic registries like mine⁶⁵² and so forth. Is there anything amazing about this?”

The Lord replied, “We have lived in our own place and our own land and have found only rough [registries prophesizing] all our consorts and doctrine holders. Since the dākinī’s homeland is far away in Central Tibet, it is amazing that she has [a registry in which] all the doctrine holders and consorts from our land are clear.”
At that time the Lord having looked at a symbolic registry of the dākinīs in which it said in a prophecy “Bird Dharma small bird Dharma,” he asked, “What is this term ‘bird Dharma’?”

Dewé Dorjé answered, “Sir, “bird Dharma” is a metaphor that others made. Hence, I also wrote it in accordance with this.

The Lord said, “It is a symbol that you will disappear into a Buddhahfield.”

The male and female partners both acted as each other’s consort. Although there were many ways that they dispelled obstacles to their life forces, since they are elucidated in my Treasure scripture, fearing [too many] words, I didn’t write them here. Then, having relied on the mandala of the dākinīs, the Lord gave Dewé Dorjé a detailed teaching on ripening and liberation. Since her flower landed in the middle, he gave her the name Künzang Dekyong Chönyi Wangmo (Queen of the All Good Bliss-Sustaining Nature of Reality). Then, Dewé Dorjé offered the reading transmission of her Tsogyal Dharma cycles from her Treasures. The Lord said, “You must confer empowerment on me,” but Dewé Dorjé thought that first she needed to offer the Lord the empowerment and reading transmission for the Dharma cycle of Vajravārāhī that had come as an earth Treasure. Because this was a single lineage empowerment, she said that she would offer this to the Lord. Then, Dewé Dorjé [gave the text] without all of the symbols and Treasure signs of Treasure texts as if it were a composed Dharma scripture.

Hence, the Lord said, “Aside from writing it as it is in your Treasure text with all of the symbolic letters and so forth, don’t modify it. In particular, don’t forget to find a way for earth Treasures to come.”

Dewé Dorjé [Sera Khandro] replied, “Because I am a female beggar, it is as the Lord Milarepa said – although I was empowered in many earth Treasures, because I didn’t rely on a consort, I didn’t take out any earth Treasures aside from just three. [Now] it will be all right for them to come to me. Now, we male and female partners having awakened the power of the Guru’s prayers, we have met. Despite this, since I was lost under the domination of another person, I wasn’t able to come to you as I have told you before. In general, for the sake of the Buddhist teachings, especially for the writing and propagating of profound Treasures as a way to complete the intentions of the Lama Treasure Revealer [Dujom Lingpa] and so forth, and in particular, for the sake of not throwing me out of your mind, please don’t forget to find a way to preserve your life!” Having said this, she put the crown of her head on his feet and made aspiration prayers.

Gyalsé together with the dākinī prepared to go back [home]. The Lord himself treated her lovingly as if she were his main consort. Because the dākinī had a son, he gave him a protection [prayer] wheel and so forth. All the disciples gathered there having been delighted by both [the Lord’s] worldly and religious deeds, Gyalsé and his whole group left.²⁵³
This representation of the second visit in Drimé Özer’s *Biography* is a far more expanded version of the account in the *Autobiography*. The passage in her *Autobiography* reads as if it is a short summary of the events she had already recorded in the *Biography* in greater detail. The two passages share a great deal in content: Sera Khandro receives ripening and liberation teachings from Drimé Özer as well as a name, and she offers him her Treasure registry in return. Drimé Özer gives Sera Khandro’s son things to protect him from inauspicious occurrences. They act as consorts for each other and nurture auspicious connections and he and Gyalsé have discussions. Yet, in contrast to the *Autobiography* passage, in the *Biography* passage Gyalsé and Drimé Özer are still negotiating their friendship. Drimé Özer treads lightly on the subject of having Sera Khandro as his consort, offering Gyalsé a way out of his prior agreement. In return, Gyalsé reminds Drimé Özer that it is important not only for him to want Sera Khandro, but to have agreement from his household for her to live with him. Drimé Özer’s words convincing Gyalsé that all in his household will be agreeable to Sera Khandro’s presence there read like “famous last words” in light of the magnitude of difficulties that later arise. In the *Biography*, Sera Khandro adds more detail about the uncomfortable dynamics of being with both Gyalsé and Drimé Özer at the same time, two men who related to her Treasure revelation activities in radically different ways. On the one hand, she wanted to give Drimé Özer her Treasure registry, but on the other she recounts fearing Gyalsé’s disapproval. Instead of the amicable friendship she portrays between the two men in her *Autobiography*, in the *Biography* Sera Khandro depicts Gyalsé as being almost childishly petty in asking Drimé Özer what is so special about Sera Khandro’s Treasure registry. In response, Drimé Özer highlights Sera Khandro’s amazing ability to prophesize about
events in a distant land that she had yet to inhabit when she wrote the dākinī prophecies at the age of thirteen. One reason for these tonal differences in Sera Khandro’s two works could be that the tensions between the two men were fresher in her mind when she was writing the first account in Drimé Özer’s Biography, only a few years after the events transpired.

In the following passage from her Autobiography, Sera Khandro explains that the reason for her third visit to Drimé Özer was her son’s ill health. When the child becomes ill, Gyalsé’s community recalls the prophecy Gotrül Rinpoché had earlier spoken that Sera Khandro’s son (who is his “consciousness”) could only be protected from adversity by Drimé Özer. In the following passage from her Autobiography, Gyalsé, Sera Khandro, and others argue about her son’s proper care when she is twenty-nine, just one year before she would make the final move out of Gyalsé’s community:

[Sera Khandro speaking] “Earlier, Gotrül Rinpoché said, ‘Remember this accordingly: other than Trülku Drimé as a source of protection, it will be difficult for others to do rituals to protect him.’ Nevertheless, now whatever the reason is for Gyalsé’s displeasure, it seems that it is not helping my son.”

Jikmé Kônchok [Gyalsé’s brother] and Trala Nyendrak told this to Gyalsé and they had a discussion. They said that I and my child needed to go to the Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Drimé Özer] to request protection.

I said, “I won’t go. Yesterday Saldrön [Gyalsé’s new wife] told me that everybody is saying that I am preparing to go be the Treasure Revealer Trülku’s [Drimé Özer’s] consort. Because [Saldrön and everybody] told this to Gyalsé, still now I experience marital disputes like this. If I go there with my child, since various undesirable things such as not being permitted to come back and so forth are close at hand, I certainly won’t go.

When I gave up [on going], my little son’s sickness was extremely serious. They couldn’t handle it and without harming the household, they got a horse and food. After they gathered the necessities together, I, mother and two children, together with my disciple Tupzang went to Chakok Naringma where the Lord himself had settled the religious encampment.
At that time I remembered an earlier dream and said the following to Tupzang, "Although we are going to see him, I am not sure if he will be there."

Tupzang said, "If he isn’t there, where would he have gone? He won’t go to tame disciples."

Again I said, "If he goes to tame disciples we will definitely have a way to see him. I wonder if he has gone far away to Kangri Tökar on account of our family’s marital disputes?"

Tupzang replied, "Is there a prophecy that says that?"

"Although I don’t know the prophecies that have not been displayed and so forth, in an erroneous appearance in my dream, I dreamed that meeting him was not as it had been before, which inspired me to feel extremely sad. I was not able to meet with him and I felt extreme suffering as if I had to separate from the inside of my heart. When I wondered if the Lord himself was going to the Buddhahfield, a jākini came and said, ‘Girlfriend, you don’t need to think like this. Although your hero isn’t going to the Buddhahfields, on account of a bad consort, he wants to go to Kangri Tökar. Despite this, until he meets with you, it seems he won’t go.’ Because I dreamt this for a while, I wonder if it’s true?"

Tupzang said, "It is certain that he will stay until you’ve arrived. Now he certainly is there. Although I don’t know what will happen from now on, if you speak to him with important [words], you two will be in agreement. Otherwise, from whatever perspective, since you have a greatly vast mind, [I] won’t criticize whatever you say."

Then we arrived in Naringma. The Lord himself’s attendants Tsültrim Dorjé and Öbar came to welcome us. Having gradually met them, we went to see the Wish-fulfilling Jewel. He cared for us with great loving compassion. He offered my little boy expansive protection and so forth and he recovered from his illness. At that time, based on my earlier dream, I explained in detail the way I had suffered. Hence, he spoke about what he had wanted to do without hiding or keeping anything secret.

I also said again and again, "In particular, holding our speech pertaining to both [worldly and religious] affairs and our male and female partner (yab yum) commitments and desires as a witness, forget about going to the Buddhahfields! It is unacceptable if you go to a far away place." The Lord couldn’t resist and promised to act in accordance with what I had asked.

Then, I gave the Lord himself a profound empowerment in my Vajravārabhi Treasure as a single lineage and nurtured his happiness. The Lord bestowed a profound Tsogyal empowerment from his Treasures on my children and me. When the sign came that he should bless my small son, he asked, "Who is the
father of this small boy and what is his lineage?” When I told everything about his story without hiding or keeping anything secret, the Lord said, “Earlier, it is as if I gave him the name Rikzin Gyurmé Dorjé. Since it is certain that he will be a Knowledge Holder, you need to be careful regarding contamination of his food and clothes and so forth.”

Then, to prevent demonic obstructions from affecting the male and female partners [Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer], I had a Treasure [to reveal called] Profound Pages of a Drolo Victory Over Demons that was hidden separately in a reddish black vessel in a place called Dongtrom. Although the Treasure entrance and [revelation] time was clear to me, for the sake of auspicious connections, the opportunity to reveal the Treasure came to the Lord himself. The Lord having decided [upon revealing that Treasure], he nurtured the auspicious connections of method and wisdom. The male partner was empowered in the female partner’s Treasure and the female partner was empowered in the male partner’s Treasure and their intentions became one. At that time, the Lord cared for me with love. As supports for the inseparability of method and wisdom, he gave me a five-pointed vajra that came to him as a Treasure, a vajra and a bell, a vase for the sake of gathering disciples together with flowers, cloth for the eyes [for empowerments], clothing, a metal top, and a feather top for the vase, paper and ink as provisions for writing and propagating profound Treasure, and also many other expensive things as supports for outer, inner, and secret empowerments. By this, he made aspiration prayers that we, male and female partners, would be without separation for even an instant until we attained Buddhahood. We returned home.657

Sera Khandro’s ambivalence between going to live with Drimé Özer or staying with Gyalsé comes through again in this passage. On the one hand, she bristles at Saldrön’s action of telling everybody she was going to be Drimé Özer’s consort, fearing that Gyalsé will expel her forever from his community if she leaves. But on the other hand, when she is alone with Tupzang, she describes her dream in which not seeing Drimé Özer felt like her heart being ripped out. From this, one could interpret that she was attempting to maintain a certain image in Gyalsé’s community while at the same time secretly yearning to find a way to go to Drimé. In the case of this visit, her son’s illness provides the perfect impetus for the journey, mitigating Gyalsé’s quarrelsome attitude with the necessity of preserving the life of Sera Khandro’s son. In this passage, Sera Khandro also describes the level of mutual involvement she and Drimé Özer had regarding each other’s
Treasure revelations. Drimé Özer received Sera Khandro’s Treasures and vice versa; they were a Treasure revelation couple in a sense of being not only consorts for each other, but also revealing and writing down each other’s Treasures. This is a symbiosis also reflected in their more recent incarnations, the Treasure revelation couple Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok and Taré Lhamo.

In her accounts of the third visit to see Drimé Özer, Sera Khandro’s two renditions of the visit in her *Autobiography* and *Biography* are consistent. Their main divergence is that instead of emphasizing her son’s illness and the dispute she had with Gyalsé over his treatment, in Drimé Özer’s *Biography* she accentuates her dismayed reaction to his surreptitious plan to go to Kangri Tökar as well as her love and devotion to him. Sera Khandro documents in Drimé Özer’s *Biography* that in his fortieth year,

... all of a sudden Dewé Dorjé arrived. Hence, the Lord thought that perhaps she received a dākinī prophecy and thought that he needed to keep his departure [to Kangri Tökar] secret from her. Then, gradually when Dekyong Wangmo [Sera Khandro] did prostrations and came before the Lord, she said, “How are you?”

The Lord also said, “Are you not tired?”

She answered, “I am not tired. I felt great suffering wondering if I would see you.”

The Lord replied, “Aside from you not coming here, I am not going anywhere else and am just staying here. I am in strict retreat.”

She said, “I didn’t think you were going to tame disciples. Of course you are in retreat. Thinking you were preparing to go to an uncertain far away place, I felt great suffering as if I had no way to remain here [in this world]. If you are not going away, I am not sure, but it seems that I have received signs that I will die.”

Then, since the Lord certainly couldn’t keep the secret hidden [that he was leaving], he thought that if he told her the story in detail, since she wasn’t living at his place, she wouldn’t ask him to delay. He told her the complete story including the beginning, middle, and end.
She said, "Of course the Treasure revealer’s household isn’t going to stop you [from leaving], but in general the happiness of the Buddha’s teaching and sentient beings depends on you. In particular holding, maintaining, and propagating the Lord Lama’s [Dujom Lingpa’s] profound Treasure depends on you. Specifically, for all the people of the lands of Washül Serta, the three districts of Akyong, the seven districts of Pemabûm, and so forth, you are the place the dead direct their consciousness. For the living, you are the source of refuge and the object of hope for this life and the next. The inner specific reason is that for this life, the next, and the intermediate state I have no other refuge but you alone, Trülku Wish-fulfilling Jewel. Don’t go to a faraway land! Stay here however you can happily. Tell your disciples without hiding anything or keeping anything secret what actions they can do to preserve your life. When you don’t find a way to preserve your life, you don’t care enough about our religious commitment as male and female partners and about all our desires.” Saying this again and again, she sobbed.

The Lord couldn’t bear it and said, “Don’t do this! We can talk about this.” Having said this, both male and female partners abided by their mutual commitment and [Drimé Özer] didn’t go far away. He said he wouldn’t let his life go away due to other [negative] influences.

Dewé Dorjé offered the Lord empowerment and reading transmission in her profound Treasure Vajravrâhî’s Dharma Cycle as a single lineage. In particular, as supports for his life force she offered her Treasure substances including a seal made of a ḍâkini’s life rock, Tsogyal’s blood, and seminal essence of the Guru taken from the Yutsé Chi Lake. The Lord also bestowed upon Dewé Dorjé the complete empowerment and reading transmission for his Treasure the Tsogyal Accomplishment Practice of Realizing the Glorious Mountain. After that, as supports for male and female partners not to separate, he gave her many very expensive material substances such as a five-pronged vajra that came as a Treasure, a vajra and a bell, a vase, medicine and blood [a ritual substances, sman rak] and so forth. In particular, because her son had worms (ya ma), he gave him a protection cord and gave him refuge . . .

This version of the third visit from Drimé Özer’s Biography is less about Sera Khandro’s son’s illness and more about Drimé Özer’s imminent departure. Sera Khandro detests Drimé Özer’s desire to go far away because it contradicts their religious commitment vows to be inseparable as male and female partners. Thus, not only monastics have vows to maintain, but also couples who are promised to each other in spiritual union have vows to each other. For them, separating, even due to illness or death, constitutes a
reprehensible breach of their promise to support each other’s longevity and spiritual awakening. The strongly sentimental tone of Sera Khandro’s writing about Drimé Özer is manifest in such passages as this when she despairs at the thought of Drimé Özer’s departure and both of them insist with great ardor that they will not let each other slip away.

One year later, when Sera Khandro was thirty years old, her situation had reached a breaking point. Her recurring arthritis worsened, tensions with Gyalsé intensified, and battles with the invading Chinese forces caused the religious encampments (both Gyalsé’s and Drimé Özer’s) to repeatedly move. Sera Khandro writes that because the disciples who cared deeply about her knew that her life with Gyalsé was literally killing her and that Drimé Özer was the antidote to her illness and the catalyst for her revelations, they encouraged her to travel to him. On Drimé Özer’s side as well, Sera Khandro indicates that he also suffered from serious illness and needed her to restore his health. In Drimé Özer’s Biography, she summarizes this fourth and last visit that occurred when he was forty-one and she was thirty in approximately 1922:

Then, a few days later Dewé Dorjé suddenly became ill with a terrible illness. On the way back from Drongkor, she came before the Lord. Both male and female partners were overjoyed as if meeting a person raised from the dead.

Then, the Lord said to Dewé Dorjé, “Why are you ill?”

She answered, “Because of someone with broken commitment vows, in accordance with a prophecy, all of a sudden I became ill. I received a prophecy that at best, before the twenty-fifth of the Tiger month [the first month] I should come to see you and otherwise I needed to go to Drongdün. However, I thought that Gyalsé wouldn’t agree so I let it go. At that time, on the eighteenth, I got really sick. My monk Tupzang, Gyalsé’s brother Jikmé Kőnchok, and the man who became my doctrine holder named Trala Nyendrak did not allow me to stay and prepared provisions such as food for the road, pack horses, and so forth. On the nineteenth, Nyendrak escorted me up to the Mongolian Kőnchok Tsering’s place. He lent me a good male horse and on the twenty-fifth I arrived at
Drongdün. On that day although I was on the verge of death and felt great suffering, a monk arrived and said, “I have been sent by Trülku Ledrel [Drímé Özer]. You need to abide by your male and female partner commitment vows. As he said this, a red light pervaded my perception and on account of this, I was revived from being [nearly] dead.”

The Lord said, “Why did you do this? Earlier at Narangma didn’t we promise not to let our lives go due to other factors?”

Having said, “It is as if neither of us adhered to those earlier promises,” Dewé Dorjé stayed there crying.

Although the Lord thought that it seemed she knew that he had desired to go to the Buddhasfields, pretending he hadn’t, he said, “Why are you anxious? If you think that we are far away [from each other], if Gyalsé is agreeable, the household will be delighted if you can stay for one or two years or otherwise if you stay here permanently. Aside from this, since they have made big promises that they won’t oppose you by even a hair’s breadth, you need to keep this in mind.”

Dewé Dorjé said, “I am not thinking about that. I think it seems that you constantly direct your aspirations to [going to] the Buddhasfields. You don’t consider all of us disciples and you consider letting yourself pass on due to other factors. Hence, I feel great suffering. In particular, from my perspective, I know what the household says.” She clearly told him all the earlier conditions.

The Lord asked, “Who told you this?”

Dewé Dorjé replied, “It certainly wasn’t a worldly human, or was it?” Then, both male and female partners gave each other much advice regarding worldly and spiritual matters.

The Lord also said, “According to our earlier commitment vow, I will not aspire to [go to] the Buddhasfields. At that time, Dewé Dorjé had a Treasure that she had taken out from Drongdün that was a Treasure vessel made out of Chema Akyong. She offered it to the Lord and they performed continuous auspicious connections and she stayed there for a few days.

Then, everybody was fighting. When they suggested that they needed to move the encampment base, the Lord said, “It seems there won’t be a problem but it is okay if we move it according to their suggestions.” In a däkiní prophecy it said that there was a hidden land to the west of Ser Drongri (Golden Wild Yak Mountain) under the power of a protector named Nyenchen Yusé. The encampment base relocated there and profound Treasures newly came to both male and female partners. They gave empowerments, reading transmissions, and so forth.
In particular, Dewé Dorjé told the Lord, “Don’t lessen your kindness to write
down your Treasure, the profound Dharma Cycle of Guru Hayagrīva and
Vajrārāhi.” Since she said this and prayed to him, the Lord promised to let it
come [to him] and they had long, detailed conversations with each other.

Specifically, Dewé Dorjé prayed, “Because of the great power of being one with
an inferior [female] body, it seems that it is uncertain what will happen. Wish-
fulfilling Jewel – don’t ignore finding a way to sustain your life. Your main
disciple Sotrül Natso Rangdröl and his disciples have served you with the three
kindesses.662 They are all ones who understand religious commitments – this is
truly amazing! Aside from this, it is extremely rare for beings in this degenerate
age to understand the good qualities of the Dharma and the lama’s kindness.” She
offered various words about present and future occurrences in the manner of
giving advice. She said, “In this life and in all my future lives, may I be
inseparable from you, Wish-fulfilling Jewel. Having excellently practiced the
profound Treasure Dharma, may the union of method and wisdom manifest as an
Awareness Body.” After saying this, she put the crown of her head on his feet and
acted with humility.

When she did this, the Lord wondered if it was true that Gartrül [Gyalsé] had no
pity for her. He said, “Since I heard that it is like this, is it true?”

Thinking that they would develop animosity towards each other, although Gartrül
had taken up a Golok lady named Saldrön as his wife and was getting ready to
expel Dewé Dorjé, she said, “It isn’t like that,” and kept it secret. She said, “I
want to go to an unknown place – please focus your mind and do rituals [for
me].”

When she requested this, the Lord said, “According to my čākinī prophecies and
so forth, you are my means to dispel obstacles to my life’s Dharma. So, don’t go
far away. In particular, don’t forget to find a way to spend just a few years here at
this encampment. It is certain that my household will not oppose to you.”

Dewé Dorjé replied, “Although I pray,663 that in this life and all my future
incarnations I will be without separation from you, it is difficult to find a way to
be with you. From one perspective, there is Gartrül and from another, I don’t
know if your retinue will stick to their word [regarding not opposing me]. I don’t
need this. We male and female partners get along really well and from the time I
was fifteen years old I prayed to you and held you as my crown jewel. Still also as
in this life, the next, and the intermediate state I have no other refuge but you,
don’t lessen your kindness not to expel me from your heart!” The homage she
offered to the Lord’s body and the prayers she made and so forth are elucidated in
[her] Treasure scripture. Then, Dewé Dorjé asked the Lord not to lessen his
kindness to let profound Treasures come to him and she returned to her home.664
Life, death, the perpetual threat of illness, and the healing power of love are the consistent themes of this and most other passages in which Sera Khandro describes her relationship with Drimé Özer. On one level, Sera Khandro is describing technical religious commitments, ritual interactions, and the saving power of her lama amidst the tumultuous circumstances of their saṃsāric lives. But on another level, these passages depict the story of Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro’s dramatic love affair. Being sick, dying, or traveling far away are all threats to the commitment vows that they have made to stay together as a couple. Theirs is a love so powerful that its fulfillment results in their manifestation as an Awareness Body, as inseparable and enlightened beings. Love for Drimé Özer and religious devotion to him are one and the same for Sera Khandro; she describes her love for him in the terminology of Secret Mantra in the following passage from the Autobiography’s version of the fourth visit:

You look after me with great love (brtse ba chen po), taking me out of the rank of humans and establishing me in the rank of deities. You are the pillar who upholds my life force, my secret consort traversing the quick path, my hero who expansively tames beings with profound Treasure. You are the holy origin of all worldly and religious deeds. Before, I never found someone like you. Later I can forget about finding someone [like you] . . . 665

Thus, just as her brother’s wife teased her those many years ago about falling in love with a ruffian from Golok as they observed him from behind the window of their palatial estate, Sera Khandro feels great love for her lama and consort Drimé Özer.

And yet, as always, there is trouble in paradise. The repeated promise Drimé Özer makes that his household will not oppose Sera Khandro’s presence foreshadows the problems that lie ahead. Because of the combined problems of Drimé Özer’s other consorts and the marital disputes she is embroiled in with Gyalsé, Sera Khandro still doubts whether she should actually move in to his encampment as he repeatedly invites
her to do. Despite all the prophecies and despite her feelings of devotion and love for him, Sera Khandro seems to have difficulty making the final break with Gyalsé. With each of her visits, it seems as if the moment of Sera Khandro’s transition between the two men has finally come. But just after Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro renew their spiritual connection, she almost inexplicably departs again with Gyalsé, further delaying their final reunion. This vacillation Sera Khandro makes between Drimé Özer and Gyalsé seems almost like the behavior of a woman who wants a divorce but hesitates between plunging into an uncertain future or resigning herself to a miserable present. In these social dynamics, Sera Khandro is more than a sexual commodity exchanged back and forth between powerful men; as she represents it, both men in her life have opened up the opportunity for her to pursue the life of her dreams with Drimé Özer, but still she hangs back in the realm of her familiar but unhappy relationship with Gyalsé. As if to jar her from her indecision, after Sera Khandro’s fourth visit with Drimé Özer when she is returning back home to Gyalsé, she has a dream in which a ḍākinī definitively pronounces that her time with Gyalsé is over:

Then, when we were coming back home, on the evening we reached a place called Rizap (Ri zab), in my dream a terrifying spontaneously-born woman came and said the following: “Why are you going towards those with deteriorated commitment vows? It is as if you have mistaken brass for gold, water for wine. You throw away your destined bodhisattva as unnecessary. You toss behind you [the responsibility of] maintaining your profound Treasure. You are distracted holding on to cyclic existence. From the time you were young until now, I have given you honest advice. I have given you the quintessence of the profound Dharma Treasures. Although I have reared you like a mother who loves her child, repelling negative conditions, outer and inner obstacles and so forth, still you are unable to be independent and you must fall only to other powers. What is the meaning of this?”

I replied, “Having thought a lot, I am not mistaken regarding who is my consort and who is not. Since I was unable to disobey the words of the deities and lamas, I abandoned my own purpose. Wondering if I could maintain Düdül Wangchuk
Lingpa’s [Gara Tertön’s] profound Treasure, I have directed my mind towards that aspiration and so forth. Up until now, I have not accomplished my own purpose, In particular, my method consorts and Dharma holders have only gone away by others’ influence. Since I am one with an inferior [female] body, I didn’t find a way to meet them. Now, at this time, my response is that I have no power not to go [back to Gyalsé].”

When I said this, she responded, “Thinking that since you were of bad ancestry you needed to do all sorts of work without being selective, up until now you were left at Gara’s side. From this year forward, you belong to us. The time for you to live with Gara is finished. Despite this, still, having aroused the minds of men with perverse aspiration prayers, I don’t know what will happen to your life’s Dharma and your disciples. As wind is to butter lamps, fire is to water, iron is to rock, you need to be careful.” Together with this, I awoke from sleep.666

In response to the terrifying apparitional woman, Sera Khandro points out that she felt compelled to stay with Gyalsé because she was following her orders to maintain Gara Tertön’s Treasures. Regardless, the ḍākinī straightens out her priorities and clarifies the direction in which she must go. The ḍākinī’s words are indelibly clear: without doubt the time has come for Sera Khandro to leave Gyalsé and to live with Drimé Özer.

**The Grand Union**

Despite these clear auguries, Sera Khandro still resists the increasingly strong signs that her life is not meant to be lived with Gyalsé. It is only near-death illness and the insistence of her disciples that forces her to comply with the ḍākinīs’ prophecies. The following passage describing Sera Khandro’s union with Drimé Özer is the climax of Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography*, around which the entire narrative is structured. It describes not only the fulfillment of her love for Drimé Özer, but also her spiritual enlightenment. Her spiritual liberation is not about herself as an individual gaining enlightenment as it is most often perceived in Buddhist contexts, but rather about her and her consort Drimé Özer’s joint enlightenment. After exhaustive build-up, Sera Khandro
describes the momentous events that transpired when she was thirty years old and Drimé Özer was forty-one:

Then, one day I went to shepherd the livestock in a place with extremely thick forest and trees with a great deal of dew on them. Since I didn't have rain clothes, I was tormented by snow and rain from above and I got wet inside and outside as if I had been sunk into water. On account of this, the next morning, when I stretched the muscles of my legs, I couldn't walk. Although Nyendrak and Gyalsé's aunt Samkhyi and so forth said that he [Gyalsé] needed to call a doctor, he did not agree so they let it go. I too exerted myself, milking the livestock and doing all of whatever housework needed to be done as I had done before. At that time also I told Gyalsé's brother Jikmé Köncchok the detailed story about how we needed to go to Dzongné. I said, "You need to say this to Gyalsé again and again." Although he said this [to Gyalsé] many times, he didn't find a way for us to go.

We arrived at a place called Nyimda Nyimalung (Gnyi mda’ nyi ma lung). That day, on account of riding on horseback, my two legs became paralyzed and although I fell onto my bed, still I exerted myself. When I was there sewing all the fine clothing for Gyalsé's brother, my illness worsened. Although I was nearing death, [Gyalsé] neglected to do a healing ritual for me. Tupzang and Jikmé Köncchok both attended to me, but when [Gyalsé] appeared as if he were unhappy with this, I told the two of them the following: "If I get better from this illness, I certainly won't live at the Gara household. From the time I was twenty years old until twenty-nine, with my forearms I have heaped together ashes and patted them with my hands. My whole life has been exhausted working as a servant. Now, although I am on the verge of death, he neglects doing healing rituals. Everyone from outside and inside the encampment circle and in particular Gyalsé thinks that I am faking illness. As it is clear to you two, I don't need to say it. Because Gara Lhachok is a doctor, we need to call him and ask him to do a medical evaluation [to see whether] my illness is fake or not.

At that time, the stewards of the Treasure revealer's household [Drimé Özer's household] Öbar and Jikmé Zangpo both returned from doing business. [They brought] a high quality handwritten scripture given to me by the Wish-fulfilling Jewel that I had requested earlier that was the complete generation and perfection stages of Guru Hayagrīva and Vajrārāhi tied together with wooden boards. Together with that, there were also a variety of prophecies from Dujom Dorjé and also other dākinīs of the three realms and so forth foretelling that the Lord himself would not live longer than his forty-second year. He sent a letter saying, "When I have to go to the Glorious Mountain, you don't need to feel misery. We two male and female partners are without separation for even an instant." Because of this, I didn't know what to do. On the outside being oppressed with illness and mentally being tormented with suffering, I sent a letter with sad words of lamentation and prayers [requesting] he remain as my protector.
Then one day, Tupzang’s countrymen arrived. When they saw me, all of them cried and said, "Oh no! Now you are certainly dying. What did the doctor and the divinations say?"

I replied, "I have been suffering from this illness for about three years. It has gotten worse and for about a month I haven’t been able to care for myself. At this time I haven’t had a single dose of medicine or an ablution ritual. Jikmé Könchok and Tupzang [know this] clearly."

They discussed this and went to call Gara Lhachok. When he examined my pulse and urine, he said it was arthritis (chu ’bam) and since I had been sick for a long time, it was close to rising to the upper [part of my body]. At that time, although everyone believed me [that I was sick], the medicine didn’t help. When I was nearing death, Lhapel and Gyalsé and his brothers had a discussion and said that they needed to escort my children and me to [Drimé Özer’s] Treasure encampment.

I said, "You don’t need to take me to a cemetery for human corpses. Why would you bring us, mother and children, to the Treasure revealer’s household? In the early part of my life when I had [working] legs, you [said] I should be the servant of Gara [Gyalsé]. Now that I am about to die, there is no meaning in your telling me I need to go to someone else’s place. If we mother and children harm you, it is okay if we go to Dzongné or Drongdün. Otherwise, when you took me to see the Treasure revealer Trülku, before what did you, Gara [Gyalsé], say? What speculations did you have? It is whatever one has in one’s mind. You didn’t pour water on top of me. You didn’t burn fire under me. Other than that, however you view it, of course you know what you did to me."

Lhapel and Gyalsé both said, "Because in Drongdün and Dzongné there are no groups from our encampment circle, we must go to the Treasure encampment." [Gyalsé] sent Jikmé Könchok and his attendant both as escorts. In the eighth month on the third day of the iron bird year [1921] I, mother and children, together with Tupzang set out on the road. At that time, Gyalsé acted humbly and escorted us up to the lower part of the valley. Many uncertain signs arose such as a vulture landing on the tent I was staying in and a great gust of wind cutting a big rope that secured the tent. All the escorts felt miserable as if I were going to die. Then, Gara Lhapel escorted me up to the road for a while. Gyalsé and the others in his group returned home.

At that time, thinking that Gyalsé and I certainly wouldn’t meet [again] in this life, I said the following to Lhapel and Jikmé Könchog: "Because of the severity of the illness that I have, it seems that I am dying and there is no cure. You two don’t forget Gyalsé. Since Saldrön’s way of speaking is harsh and Gyalsé has a bad character, I am not sure what will happen to them later on. You need to act
accordingly.” The two of them promised to do that. After we spoke in detail about happy and sad things and good and evil things and so forth, Lhapel went home.

Then, having gone onto the road, although I experienced great hardship, I exerted myself and went. The Lord himself was residing in the Kargab family place called Nyimalung. Having arrived there, at first we met the Lord’s direct disciple Sotrül Natsok Rangdröl. Then, when we proceeded to see [Drimé Özer], although I exerted myself, my body’s energy was exhausted and I wasn’t able to say anything aside from one or two words. The Lord couldn’t bear it and asked Jikmé Könchok, “Even though your ḍākinī was suffering with such a serious illness, why didn’t you care for her?”

He told the whole story. I gave him a sign but I didn’t dare say anything. Then, I spoke a few words without [intending] benefit or harm. The Lord himself did the requisite healing rituals and I gradually got better. At that time, [I remembered] Gotrül Rinpoche’s advice saying, “When you are thirty years old, you will need to eat meat. At that time, you don’t need to have doubt. The sentient beings that your mouth touches will certainly receive great benefit.” Accordingly, the Lord himself said I needed to eat meat. Having blessed the meat, he gave it to me. I didn’t have the energy to disobey his order and for the sake of my illness, I enjoyed a bit of the necessary food. The wind [in my body] that had earlier waxed and waned was restored. My channels and winds having improved, it caused them to become pliant.

Also, according the Lord’s command, when I was staying in a strict one-hundred day retreat, the deity of that land emanated in the various forms of continuously existing non-humans to harm me. I bound some with meditation, liberated some with compassion, and swore some to oaths. Thenceforth I rendered them unable to harm any being . . .

[a discussion with a harmful demon that she tames] . . .

Then, for three months, male and female partners together practiced the end of the esoteric instructions on Drinking Vajra Water that [I had] spoken earlier to the Lord himself. At that time, the signs in the outer environment were that day and night the mountains spoke, the earth quaked, a roaring was heard, the sound of a flute and cymbals came forth, a fragrant smell spread, and so forth. All the group of fortunate disciples actually saw this.

The inner signs of the domains of the channels, winds, and seminal essence becoming purified were that the knots of the head and throat became liberated. Not needing to train in and traverse the path, I understood all the Dharma vehicles completely. The essential meaning of the symbols of all the teachings in accordance with the disposition and devotion of beings from the hidden vessel of the intention of the profound Treasures became self-liberated. The ten winds became pliant and our bodies had youthful flesh and were light like cotton-wool.
When I spoke spontaneously-uttered hymns of vajra words, the seeds of the first concentration were planted in the mind-streams of those who heard them. By many small deeds such as this, benefit for sentient beings arose. In particular, the inexpressible understanding of awareness and emptiness that is the primordial wisdom of great bliss and emptiness without elaboration and endowed with the three liberations manifested [in me]. The two, method and wisdom, manifestly merged as one taste.

Having arrived in the feast row of the dākinīs of the three Bodies, during a pure vision, the Lord actually saw the extraordinary emanation of Shiwa Dorjé Tso herself. I saw the Omniscient Queens. There was an inconceivable celebration feast for completing the greatly secret quick path. In particular, there were enjoyments suitable to all in the three realms such as pleasant things that were non-dual, unfabricated, fabricated, and so forth. Within this, there were two gatherings: the joyous gathering of the knowledge holders and the youthful gathering of the dākinīs. The Lord said that [this was] the youthful dākinīs’ gathering. I thought that it was a gathering of the dākinīs, but all that appeared became one taste and I decisively experienced the mandala of the great bliss of appearance and emptiness.

[Our] developing freedom over the elements and [our] magical emanations for the sake of expanding the energy of our realization and so forth are clarified in the Lord’s Treasure scriptures. At that time, I saw Vimalamitra and he gave me his accomplishment practice. The dākinīs of the three realms gathered method and wisdom together in one seat. The vajra offering song and praises of the six satisfactions [that they sang] is clarified in my Treasure [scripture].

In particular, we became extremely quick in decoding our Treasures. Also, for me, by the power of the abundant auspicious connections, I elucidated and propagated the Anu Yoga Esoteric Precept The Entrance to the Quick Path of Vajravārāhi’s Essential Drops and the Profound Explanation of the Meaning of the Great Bliss of the Upper Doors and Enjoying the Three Realms of the Lower Doors that were teachings in the Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs.

Sera Khandro’s severe life-threatening illness finally ends her stubborn persistence in remaining at Banak with Gara Gyalsé. Her illness is not only a physical one, but also seems to be a powerful metaphor representing the neglect and hostility she experienced in her relationship with Gyalsé. Her resentment towards him for not believing she was ill and for expecting her to continue to do considerable manual labor is manifest in her words. She emphasizes the subservient role she had tending and milking the livestock,
sewing clothes, and doing all the housework, all traditional women’s work. Until the last moment, Sera Khandro resists her exile to the Treasure revealer’s encampment (gter sgar), as they call Drimé Özer’s community. She condemns Gyalsé, complaining that after working her whole adult life serving him, the moment she is no longer useful, he casts her out to become another man’s property like throwing away a corpse in a cemetery. Yet there is something ironic in this portrayal of her displeasure at being sent to Drimé Özer’s encampment, given that Sera Khandro seems to be rejecting what she wants most of all, namely reunion with her beloved Drimé Özer. At the same time as her sufferings of illness and marital disputes with Gyalsé reach a fever pitch, she receives the final blow, a prophecy from Drimé Özer that he will not live longer than another year. Her despondency at this news hints at her true desire to be with him. Yet her dismay at Gyalsé’s decision to send her away is not merely a performance. The resentment Sera Khandro expresses sounds like that of a rejected spouse who feels her efforts to support her partner have all been for naught.

The chapter with Gyalsé is finally closed (aside from ongoing child custody battles they conduct through arbitrators and via letters) when Sera Khandro arrives before Drimé Özer at the age of thirty. Just as Drimé Özer slowly cures Sera Khandro’s misery and near-death illness, likewise, Sera Khandro cures Drimé Özer of illness and revitalizes his longevity. On a worldly level, Sera Khandro is released from the suffering of marital disputes and the death-grip of illness. On a spiritual level, method and wisdom merge as one taste, catalyzing their completion of the quick path of Secret mantra, resulting in spiritual liberation for both Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer together as a divine couple.
Love Medicine and the Im/permanence of Life and Death

Even after Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s grand reunion, dramatic illnesses and the looming reality of death color their lives. Death is a theme in Sera Khandro’s writings not only due to the ever-present danger of disease and demonic influence, but also in the sense that Sera Khandro continually yearns to return to the magnificent Buddhahfields that manifest before her as visionary experiences. From the time she was an eight-year-old girl contemplating throwing herself in the river to the time she actually attempted suicide at fifteen by drinking opium and alcohol to escape her arranged marriage, the young Sera Khandro seems to have been drawn to the thought of dying. As an adult as well, Sera Khandro makes repeated references to wanting to return to the Buddhahfields away from the illness and suffering of the world, to go back home to mother Yeshé Tsogyal who sent her into this world of suffering as her emanation. The thread that keeps her attached to this human realm is her promise to Drimé Özer to maintain their pledge to stay together and to fulfill the aspirations of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. The love between her and Drimé Özer is the root that keeps her grounded in this world, pulling her back from her visionary journeys flickering on the border between life and death.

In Sera Khandro’s perspective, death can be at least partially controlled by powerful practitioners of Secret Mantra such as Drimé Özer and herself. Thus, it is a choice of sorts to abandon this world and journey to the heavenly Buddhahfields. Sera Khandro portrays both the lure of death and the power of true spiritual love to defy death’s inviting snare in the following passage from the Autobiography. In this passage, she recollects events that occurred when she was thirty-one after living one year with Drimé Özer. The following exchange emphasizes Drimé Özer’s sentimental feelings
towards Sera Khandro when he finds a text she wrote pertaining to the transference of consciousness at death. Fearing that her death is imminent, Drimé Özer panics:

Again the Lord said, "[Even] if you periodically have oral instructions for me, what is the meaning of your explaining mixing and transferring the five elements at the time of death? No matter how I examine your actions, your physical body, and so forth, I don’t believe you. What is the meaning of your throwing both your son and daughter and in particular me from your heart and not staying in this world? Who will we rely on and who will we love? In particular, since you know that I have no other source of refuge and no other person who is both [my] consort and lama to rely on, how miserable that you would cast me from your heart!"

Because he felt great sadness, I couldn’t bear it and I told him the thoughts I had earlier without hiding or keeping anything secret. I offered a pledge that from now on I wouldn’t do anything like this again. I said, “Now although the extent of my life is not exhausted, the extent of my mind is nearly finished. Hence, be careful. By the great profundity of our prayers for us to meet in many lifetimes, benefit will certainly arise.”

Then, that month on the evening of the twenty-seventh, dākinīs came to welcome me...

[long explanation of dākinīs’ invitation and description of their appearance and of their delightful land filled with rainbow light]...

The four elements finally condensed and my body was as if empty. My mind was equal to the outer expanse. Discriminative insight became naturally purified. Hence, although I clearly saw saṁsāra and nirvāṇa without obscuration, it became difficult to distinguish appearances. At that time, the weeping and wailing of all of the entourage resounded, surrounded by the main figures the Lord himself and Sotrul. The others in the religious encampment gathered there also felt disturbed. As when a hawk destroys a bird’s nest, there was a commotion.

In particular, the Lord was sorrowful and he put my head on his lap and said the following: “Dear child, if you throw me from your heart and go to the Buddhahfields, very soon I will certainly direct my intention towards being there with you. I will forget about maintaining and propagating all religion and Treasures and so forth until not even any remnants of them are manifest. You are the object of my hopes in this life and the next. You are the great chariot for traversing the quick path. You are my method consort, jewel of my heart. In all my rebirths and successive lives may I be without separation from you!”

When [Drimé Özer] was grieving, a big tear fell into my ear. It was as if [it] hit my heart. When this happened, although my external breath had not yet ended, I seemed to have a bit of consciousness. Again, the Lord himself touched his face
to my ear and said again and again, "Dear child, don't forget me. Direct your attention to three [letters] "A Nri Hung" and your consciousness will become clear."

After this, I remembered the words of the Wish-fulfilling Jewel and when I focused my attention on him, all of the previous appearances of light went further and further away and disappeared. All the things of this world became as if they were sometimes clear and sometimes unclear. My illusory body also became like a frozen rock. Like a person who was abruptly awakened from sleep, I forgot all of the things that had appeared before. Not knowing what anything was, since my eyes could see a little bit, I looked around. The entire house was filled with butter lamps. Sotrül and Tupzang were warming my feet with fire. The Lord still had my head on his lap and although he performed [rituals] to stabilize my sense faculties and to summon my life, I didn't have the energy to say anything as if I had become mute. They did all the other healing rituals and so forth. When I was drawn towards death, early in the morning, by the great blessings and power of my secret consort the Wish-fulfilling Jewel, [since] the fruits of my negative karma had not been exhausted, he gradually resuscitated me from being on the verge of my external breath stopping. All of the group of disciples gathered there, especially the Lord himself and Sotrül, were extremely joyous and rejoiced as if meeting someone raised from the dead.\textsuperscript{672}

Drimé Özer tells Sera Khandro that she is his one consort and his only hope for this life and future lives; he prays to her with devotion and sorrow using the same sentimental language that she uses to pray to him. Sera Khandro's depiction of the high level of praise he has for her is noteworthy given that he is male, eleven years her senior, a renowned incarnate lama, and the son of the famous Golok Treasure revealer Dujom Lingpa.\textsuperscript{673} Just as ḍākinīs come to welcome her to their Buddhafield, just as she slips away to their joyous land, the tear drop of his love falls into her ear and touches her heart, reminding her that she cannot slip away from their commitment to stay together. By the power of Drimé Özer's love, Sera Khandro gains the strength to resist the ḍākinīs' enchanting invitations. He gives her a reason to live that is stronger than the death-wish she seems to have had for her whole life. In this case, the old adage "love prevails" proves true yet again.
Unfortunately for Sera Khandro, the dākinīs’ invitations beckoning Drimé Özer to the Buddhahelds overcome her abilities to hold on to his impermanent physical form. Although she successfully restores Drimé Özer’s health and cures his illnesses as he does for her for a period of time, ultimately she can not repel his death. Tragedy strikes in 1924 when Drimé Özer is forty-four years old, only four years after their happy reunion. Due to an outbreak of a contagious illness that spread throughout Drimé Özer’s encampment in the Dartsang/Nyilung area, suddenly, within one week, both Sera Khandro’s young son and Drimé Özer succumb to illness in a striking demonstration of the impermanence of life. In Drimé Özer’s Biography, Sera Khandro records the conversations they had when he was in his forty-fourth year leading up to his passing. Drimé Özer told her,

“... Now if I need to fulfill your aspirations, don’t feel worried. Since we have never opposed each other by even a hair’s breadth, in our rebirths and future incarnations and in all of this life, the next, and the intermediate stage, we certainly will be without parting. Now since I am sick, my life will not remain. Hence, I am ready to go to the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain.” His eyes stared into space.

Dewé Dorjé hugged his neck and said, “Earlier we spoke male and female partner commitment vows saying that still we need to stay here for the benefit of the teachings and sentient beings. In particular, why are you abandoning me and leaving?” Saying this, she wept intensively.

When she acted as if she were about to faint, the Lord couldn’t bear it. His intentions relaxed and he said to Dewé Dorjé, “Okay, dear child, don’t do this. Earlier, when I was "The karmically connected one" (Las 'brel) [referring to a previous incarnation of Longchenpa], because I didn’t get free from someone with deteriorated vows, now, this is the [result]. Now, since our auspicious connections have gone due to other forces, there is nothing to do about it; it is certain that I must go...”

Sera Khandro despaired that she could do nothing to save him from death. Her portrayal of the painful moments when Drimé Özer’s life begins to fade focuses on the Buddhist
theme of impermanence. In his *Biography*, she recounts the following exchange between the two of them that occurred shortly before his death:

He looked into space and said the following:

"Although this *mandala* that is the sun’s clear light
Originates from the east, [it goes] to the direction of the western mountain.
This is like a display of impermanence.

During the three summer months, in the meadows plants flourish;
During the three autumn months, frost and hail vanquish their zeal.
This too is like a display of impermanence.

The assembly of disciples is like [a group of] guests;
Although they were here earlier, they are gone later.
This too is like a display of impermanence.

This illusory body is like a rainbow in the sky;
When that which appears is free of darkness, it disappears into the sky.
This too is like a display of impermanence.

The Truth Body of Pema Ledrel
Manifests as a Buddha in the Glorious Mountain Buddhahfield.
This too is like a display of impermanence.

You, Künzang Chönyi Wangmo,
Don’t miss my body.
Meditate on all that appears as the lama’s body.
Recite sounds as great bliss mantra.
Make your conceptual mind, in nature one with reality,
Nondual with my mind.

I bless you to always be inseparable [from me].
Later I will come to welcome you and to lead you
To the direction of the Glorious Mountain.
Until then, according to your aspirations and pledges,
Perform vast benefit for the teachings and sentient beings."

Having said this, he put his two hands on Dewé Dorjé’s head and prayed. Although Dewé Dorjé felt extreme suffering, she endured it. Seizing the Lord’s hand, she said the following:

"Father Omniscient Pema Ledreltse[^675] —
Think of me with great love."
By the power of the former prayers of Tsogyal and Shelkar and
Now by the pure karmic remainders [of those prayers],
Having become a fortunate one who was near you, protector,
You took me on as your heart’s consort.

From the time I was thirty, our union has helped the teachings and sentient beings
And we have performed vast actions and beneficial deeds.

At this time, because of the demonic influence of perverse prayers,
Your body’s solar mandala is setting into the expanse.
What will we blind people do?

If the dakini’s guide [away] father Wish-fulfilling Jewel,
Who will spread happiness to mother sentient beings?

If our protector goes to the Buddhafields of the Buddhas of the three times,
Who will guide sentient beings who grasp on to duality?

Father Pema Ledrel is departing for the Glorious Mountain –
Who will protect fortunate disciples?

The consort Wish-fulfilling Jewel not staying here,
Who will become the source of refuge and hope for
Me, Dekyong Wangmo, the one with an inferior [female] body?

Actual manifestation of the Lotus Born Protector, you depart into the expanse.
Who will maintain the two Treasures?

The Lord himself not manifestly staying here,
Now I will have to pray to a statue of you.

Without the spoken words of your profound oral instructions,
I will need to consult texts containing your words.

You not nurturing me lovingly,
I will have to meditate without clarity on mixing our minds.

Not nurturing the fortunate entourage of disciples,
I will need to go to the pleasant land where you are.

Now, no matter how I think about it, please don’t lessen your kindness
for me to be inseparable from you, Protector.”
Having said this, she prayed again and again. The Lord also gave her much advice. Then, the two, male and female partners, spoke a great deal about the practices pertaining to primordial purity and spontaneous presence. Sera Khandro’s despondency and Drimé Özer’s advice to see his passing as a sign of impermanence evokes the dialogue between Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava as he prepared to ride a beam of light to his Southwestern Buddhafield. The references to this happening are explicit: Sera Khandro is an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal and her emanation Shelkar Tso and Drimé Özer is an “actual manifestation of the Lotus Born One,” Padmasambhava. Drimé Özer is not preparing to die but rather is embarking on a journey to Padmasambhava’s Buddhafield, the Southwestern Glorious Copper-colored Mountain. Sera Khandro longs to go with him and is devastated by his departure. The last earthly speech Drimé Özer pronounces to her the moment before his passing emphasizes their divine unity as inseparable method and wisdom:

... The Lord put his two hands on Dewé Dorjé’s head and said,

_A ham_. I am the supreme method, the great bliss Heruka.
You are the great mother of wisdom of the expanse of emptiness.
By the meditation of enjoying non-dual union,
In the immense Buddhafield in which the three – appearances, sounds, and awareness – are purified,
In the expanse of inseparable form and primordial wisdom,
As the form of Hayagrīva and Vajrārāhi in indestructible union,
May we attain the fully-awakened youthful vase body of Buddhahood.

Just as Guru Rinpoché departed from Tibet to abide eternally in a deathless state in his Glorious Copper-colored Mountain Buddhafield in the southwestern direction, similarly, Drimé Özer’s death marks not only the impermanence of earthly life, but also his entry into the permanent state of Buddhahood. Just as Sera Khandro’s spiritual liberation is dependent on Drimé Özer, in the above quotation he, too, describes attaining
Buddhahood along with Sera Khandro in the form of the indestructible union of Hayagrīva and Vajravārāhī. Sera Khandro is completely devastated by Drimé Özer’s death, but gradually comes to understand that their connection as the unity of method and wisdom endures beyond the separation of death. Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s physical relationship must end with his death, but their love is synonymous with the realization of Buddhahood itself, the only permanent state possible in a Buddhist philosophical view of the world.

Though she despairs at their corporeal separation, Drimé Özer returns in visionary form to instruct the grieving Sera Khandro on how to move beyond attachment to the false appearances of this world toward realizing the true nature of their inseparability. After the trauma of Drimé Özer’s and her small son’s sudden deaths, she learns that Drimé Özer’s other consorts desired her, her daughter, and her close disciple Tupzang to leave immediately. Just as she is overwhelmed by anguish, Drimé Özer appears before her as a miraculous apparition just days after his death when she was thirty-three. In his Biography, Sera Khandro writes:

At that time Dewé Dorjé thought that what the Lord had said before was certainly true. Thinking that, “Even though I am alone, they don’t let me stay here. From now on, there is nobody who has negative karma like I do,” she went towards the cairn on the rear mountain. She threw her body down on the ground and wailed in a loud voice. Having cried out in despair to the Lord, on account of fierce wind, when she was about to faint, some wind blew on her. When she opened her eyes a bit, her eyesight was blurry. After wiping her eyes a little, she looked and the Lord himself had actually come and was breathing on her face. Dewé Dorjé was extremely overjoyed and hugged the Lord’s neck.

She said, “Because you had passed away, I felt extreme suffering.” She clearly explained all the good and bad events and said, “Now I will be inseparable from you.”

The Lord said, “I wander from land to land but I have never gone anywhere. Why are you feeling this much suffering about what you perceive now that is like an
illusory dream? Aside from your having the perception that we, male and female partners, have separated, why would we separate by even a hair’s breadth? Having decided that all phenomena are just an illusory dream, restrain [this perception] in the great non-dual primordial wisdom. It is not difficult for the sameness of the three Bodies to manifest the way it really is. Now you come later. I have to go earlier.” Having treated me lovingly, he went. 579

Drimé Özer underscores the illusory quality of all phenomena in Sera Khandro’s conventional perception, urging her to see through false, dream-like appearances to the ultimate reality in which the two male and female partners, yab and yum, are inseparable. After Drimé Özer’s death, as Sera Khandro struggles to perceive the illusory nature of the suffering she feels at his loss, Drimé Özer again appears before her. In his Biography, Sera Khandro writes:

When I was praying to the Lord, on account of a fierce wind [arising in my body], when I was about to faint, right in front of me, inside of a seminal drop with five colors of light [in it], two ġākinīs saying they were Dewé Gocha and Rikpé Reltri appeared together with the Wish-fulfilling Jewel. As soon as [I saw that], I became really sad and my senses became dark. At that time, a ġākinī saying she was Kūnselma called me three times and she said:

“Alas! Noble ġākinī—
Not letting your hearing be distracted, listen to me!

All phenomena of samsāra and nirvāṇa are illusory emanations;
Abandon attachment to objects of perception.

Adhere to the fortress of changeless awareness.
Whatever appears is without rejecting or accepting; negating or affirming.

All phenomena have the nature of reality itself.
Whatever arises and whatever appears is the ornament of awareness.

Unceasing appearances are the display of the heroes.
Inexpressible emptiness is the wisdom mother.
The seal of [their] union is without coming together or separating.

In the interdependent arisings of illusory conventional truth,
You will [perceive us] to be separated for just a moment.

In the expanse of great bliss, method and wisdom are without coming
together or separating.
Stay and we will go to see the hero.”

Having said this, because she pointed at and touched my heart, the excellent appearance of a Buddhafield temporarily became visible. When I looked around, the Wish-fulfilling Jewel came to me and asked, “How are you? You are not fatigued? In general, the phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are greatly amazing. In particular, isn’t it amazing that illusory appearances [such as] we seem to have dissolved into the expanse?”

Although he spoke about many reasons for impermanence, I believed in them [as real]. Sobbing, I spoke many sad words, including, “Why did you leave us behind and go to the Buddhafield? Specifically, as you know, everyone mistreats me and does whatever they can to harm me. You know this. Now without a protector and refuge, what will I do?,” and so forth.

He said, “Don’t do this. We two are not separated for even an instant. In general, [we are separated because of] the characteristics of compounded phenomena and specifically, because we both have nurtured the teachings. Because of the outer and inner negative circumstances and the weak merit of beings in these times of great and powerful change, although the appearance that we have separated arises, it is just an illusion of conventional truth. The [ultimate] truth is that because of the great profundity of our connection from former prayers and currently because of our great connection from mutually pure conduct, we lack any separation even for an instant. In the expanse of clear light, we two will always meet.”

Drimé Özer’s death, just like the Buddha’s death, is a manifestation of the impermanence of illusory phenomena, but this is not the whole story. Death is not the final separation, although it is a poignant reminder not to be attached to phenomena that are bound to the cycle of birth and death. Drimé Özer exhorts Sera Khandro to see beyond conventional reality, to see the illusory quality of what she takes to be real, and to realize the ultimate truth of their inseparability. After all, he is a hero of unceasing appearances and she is a wisdom mother of inexpressible emptiness. Just as form cannot exist without empty space from which to differentiate it, just as compassionate action and empty awareness form an essential dyad in order to realize Buddhahood, so too Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro are inseparable. Sera Khandro thus explains the transcendental nature of her
relationship with Drimé Özer by drawing on powerful Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist understandings of the essential nonduality of male method and female wisdom.

Her biographical writings themselves operate on both a conventional and ultimate level. On the level of conventional reality, they are filled with tales of jealousy and disputes related to consort practices. At the same time, they portray the ultimate realization of Buddhahood through a decidedly sentimental, bhakti-like depiction of her love relationship with her consort and guru Drimé Özer. Love is the power that transcends the illusory divides between conventional and ultimate truth, life and death, and samsāra and nirvāna. Hers is a Buddhist model of enlightenment built not on solitary renunciation, but on the divinization of love between a man and a woman as both the Buddhist path and its ultimate goal.

**The Divine Treasure Revelation Couple Incarnate**

Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s vows of eternal love and prayers to be together in all their future lives have not been forgotten by those who inherited the Treasure tradition in contemporary Golok. Despite the radical breaks of tradition and social upheaval caused by the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the ensuing Cultural Revolution (1967-1977), the memory of Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer as a divinely prophesized couple who revealed Treasures lives on in Golok. Just as Sera Khandro drew on the mythic origins of the Treasure tradition in the form of the divine couple Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal to present herself and Drimé Özer as a Treasure revelation couple, the contemporary figures Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok (b. 1944) and his recently deceased consort Taré Lhamo (1938-2002) draw on Sera Khandro’s writings to frame their own vision of
themselves as a divinely prophesized couple who are reincarnations of Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro.\footnote{681} That they are renowned as a Treasure revealing couple primarily, and as individual persona secondarily, is evident by the fact that their biographies are not separate but rather combined into one text titled *The Biography of Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok and Khandro Taré Lhamo*. Their biography, published in 1997, is written by Pema Ösel Thayé (Padma *‘od gsal mtša’ yas*), who is a learned monk originally from Dujom Lingpa’s home area of Dartsang.\footnote{682} Namtrül Rinpoché and Taré Lhamo are one contemporary example of the ways in which the Treasure revelation communities that Sera Khandro depicted in her biographical writings live on today and maintain continuity with their traditional pasts despite the radical changes that followed Golok’s incorporation into the People’s Republic of China.\footnote{683}

Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok describes himself as an incarnation of Drimé Özer and his late consort Taré Lhamo as an incarnation of Sera Khandro.\footnote{684} He clarifies that others suggest he is the body incarnation of Padmasambhava, the speech incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal, and the mind incarnation of Namkhai Nyingpo.\footnote{685} Additionally, he explains that he is a beneficial action (*phrin las*) incarnation of Taré Lhamo’s father Apang Tertön (*A pang gter ston dpa’ bo chos dbyings rdo rje*, 1895-1945). Although Pema Ösel Thayé does not mention that Namtrül Rinpoché is an incarnation of Drimé Özer in his biography, Namtrül Rinpoché himself emphasized this to me in conversation. Namtrül Rinpoché currently resides in his Monastery called Nyenlung Monastery (*Snyan lung dgon pa*) in Serta County, Golok.\footnote{686}

Taré Lhamo was the daughter of the well-known Treasure revealer Apong Tertön whose main seat was Tsinda Monastery (*Rtsis mda’ dgon*) in Padma County, Golok.\footnote{687}
According to Pema Ösel Thaye’s biography of her, she was an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal, Sera Khandro, and Tra Gelong Rinpoche Tsültrim Lodrö (Khra dge slong rin po che tsul khrims blo gros).⁶⁸⁸ In Taré Lhamo’s biography, Pema Ösel Thaye includes a complete version of Sera Khandro’s condensed autobiography from her Treasure cycle.⁶⁸⁹ Nearly half of Taré Lhamo’s biography is Sera Khandro’s condensed autobiography, which demonstrates Taré Lhamo’s strong identification with her Golok dakini predecessor.

Namtrül Rinpoche highlights the connection that both he and Taré Lhamo and Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro share as divinely prophesized Treasure revelation couples. Namtrül Rinpoche stresses that it is not desire that brought these couples together, but rather the power of previous karmic propensities. Just as Sera Khandro had an incredible urge to be near Drimé Özer, Namtrül Rinpoche explains that Taré Lhamo had an inner calling to go to him and hence left her home in Padma County to come to Nyenlung Monastery in Serta.⁶⁹⁰ Even if that urge was not desire according to Namtrül Rinpoche, he paints a decidedly sentimental picture of what it means to be a couple involved in Treasure revelation:

In the case of Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro, they write about each other in their biographies; they are not two separate beings. They are Namkhai Nyingpo and Shelkar Dorjé Tso. Since these two united in Lhodrak Karsha, they have been in union. They will function in union even in death; they are together in a sacred bond.⁶⁹¹

Namtrül Rinpoche’s expression of this sacred bond is analogous to the language Sera Khandro used to represent her relationship with Drimé Özer. Although the sacred bond between a man and a woman does not necessarily imply monogamy in the context of Treasure revealer’s communities in Golok and both Drimé Özer and Namtrül Rinpoché
(as well as Sera Khandro and Taré Lhamo) had/have other consorts, they all have one central partner integral to their Treasure revelation activities. Namtrul Rinpoche clarifies that the relationship between a male and a female Treasure revealer is not just a relationship between a man and a woman, but rather signifies the union of method and wisdom, as Sera Khandro’s writings emphasize. He states that, “method and wisdom are like your two eyes and two hands; just as those eyes and hands operate as a pair, likewise the two male and female partners operate together.” He explains that monks can reveal only one of eighteen different types of Treasure called “hand Treasure” (lag gter) and that they are not able to reveal other types because they don’t rely on the auspicious connections of male method and female wisdom.

Like their predecessors Drime Ozer and Sera Khandro, the sacred bond that Namtrul Rinpoche and Taré Lhamo shared involved revealing their Treasures together as a partnership. Pema Ösel Thaye’s depiction of Namtrul Rinpoche’s life emphasizes this in his repeated descriptions of male and female partners (yab yum) going together to reveal Treasures, give teachings, and so forth. In the longer part of their biography that is the section on Namtrul Rinpoche’s life, Pema Ösel Thaye continually refers to him in the plural, addressing them as “male and female partners” (yab yum) or as “the sovereign male and female partners” (rje yab yum) in a way that accentuates his identity as a part of a sacred couple and not as an individual agent. Namtrul Rinpoche himself explains that, “We [myself and Taré Lhamo] wrote the Treasure texts together and we both propagated empowerment and reading transmissions of them together.” At times when he and Taré Lhamo were separated, he claims that they wrote identical revelations. Namtrul Rinpoche recalls that during his courtship years with Taré Lhamo, they exchanged a series of letters
without ever having met each other due to travel restrictions over the Sichuan/Qinghai border that separated them. He recollects that often their letters would have the same meaning, just as their revealed Treasures did. Namtrül Rinpoché explains that both he and Taré Lhamo became literate in the same miraculous way – without having to study, both spontaneously became able to read.695 Thus, they were not only consorts for each other for sexual purposes, but according to Namtrül Rinpoché and his biography, they participated in the revelation and teaching process together as a couple.696 That there are male and female Treasure revealers who act jointly to reveal Treasures is only natural according to Namtrül Rinpoché’s perspective, for they are all Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal’s emissaries.

Conclusion

Although the emphasis within Buddhism on monasticism and renunciation has resulted in a relative absence of bhakti-like devotional themes in Buddhist literature compared to other South Asian literary traditions, Sera Khandro’s biographical writings remind us that love metaphors can also be found in Tibetan Buddhist literature. Sera Khandro’s relationship with Drimé Özer as her consort and her guru is the centerpiece of her story of spiritual liberation. She represents her love for him in quintessentially Buddhist ways through the terminology of the gendered dyad of method and wisdom. Sera Khandro’s flowing tears and her desperate attempts to convince Drimé Özer to live longer and stay near her lend a strongly sentimental tone to her narrative. Yet her story is not only sentimental; it filled with the angst of marital dispute and separation from her first partner Gara Gyalsé as much as it is her extraordinary love and devotion for Drimé
Özer. The tension produced by this push and pull between the two most powerful men in her life creates an engaging and suspense-filled narrative that documents both the conventional anger, abuse, and sorrow Sera Khandro experienced with Gyalsé as well as the ultimately transcendental power of her love for Drimé Özer. Rather than being a source of attachment to the sufferings of cyclic existence as it is in monastics’ writing, the passionate love between herself and Drimé Özer provides the energy that enables Sera Khandro to cut through her delusion and to gain spiritual realization.

That Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings are one of the only sources written by a female Treasure revealer and that they include the strongly sentimental themes I have elaborated upon above beckons the question: is there a relationship between Sera Khandro’s female gender and the sentimentality of her writing? Even though the scarcity within Tibetan literature of metaphors based on love between a man and a woman reflects the predominantly monastic proclivities of the majority of Tibetan authors, it is not possible to draw any meaningful connection between Sera Khandro’s female gender and the sentimentality of her writing. Certainly Sera Khandro’s experience as a female Treasure revealer with children was radically different than that of the powerful male Treasure revealers with whom she interacted. Yet, whether those differences imply that female Treasure revealers have a more sentimental perception of sexual yoga and consort relationships than male Treasure revealers do is an unanswerable question until more writings by female and male Treasure revealers can be explored.

Given the compelling love story that Sera Khandro’s writings depict, it is not surprising to find that Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s memory lives on in contemporary Golok. Although much of Sera Khandro’s religious lineage was broken during the
Cultural Revolution and it appears that Drimé Özer’s writings were lost, contemporary figures such as Taré Lhamo and Namtrül Rinpoché conceptualize themselves as a divinely prophesized Treasure revelation couple in sacred union, following the example of their previous incarnations Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer and before them, Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava. Just as love prevails over death in Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings, Namtrül Jikmé Püntsok and Taré Lhamo demonstrate the ongoing vitality in eastern Tibet of Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s legacy as a divinely prophesized Treasure revelation couple.
Conclusion

Despite the tomes of dubious materials available in the English language that purport to explore Tantric sexuality, very little is known about the sociology of historical Tantric communities, and even less is known about the position of women within these communities. Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings chronicling her life as a female religious practitioner, as a Treasure revealer, and as a participant in consort relationships make an important contribution to our understanding of these intriguing topics. The details Sera Khandro provides about her interpersonal relationships and the social dynamics of her religious communities ground the esoteric phenomena of Treasure revelation in the practical realities of life in early twentieth-century Golok. Sera Khandro’s personal recollections lend insight into the life of an extraordinary woman who rose above multiple adversities to become one of the very few female Treasure revealers and autobiographers in all of Tibetan history. Yet her writings are not just about one woman’s perceptions; they portray elements of her social world along with her individual transformation from suffering woman to spiritually liberated _OLDIT.

In exploring Sera Khandro’s richly textured accounts of her revelations, visions, journeys, and many conversations, the focus of this study has been twofold: 1) we have examined her auto/biographical writings as literature, analyzing the ways she crafted her self-narrative, and 2) we have read her writings as a resource for understanding more about the community contexts of Treasure revelation and its associated consort practices. The five chapters of this study interwove our two focuses, literature and society, in mutually illuminating ways. Chapter One narrated the dramatic plot of Sera Khandro’s
*Autobiography*, emphasizing the ways she described her involvement in community life. Chapter Two explored Sera Khandro’s relationship to the mythological history of the Treasure tradition and demonstrated the correlation between Treasure revelation and social and environmental well-being in early twentieth-century Golok. Chapter Three focused on literary analysis, exploring the ways in which Sera Khandro articulated her autobiographical self. Chapter Four portrayed how consort practices fit into Sera Khandro’s community life, replete with the jealousies and love that always accompany human relationships. Chapter Five presented Sera Khandro’s representation of her relationship with Drimé Özer, bringing the subject of consort practices out of the sterile domain of religious dictum and into the uncharted territory of a Buddhist love story.

Chapter One, “Sera Khandro’s Autobiography,” recounted the storyline of Sera Khandro’s autobiographical narrative, highlighting the perennial problems Sera Khandro faced finding a home within the Golok religious communities in which she sought acceptance. Recurrent themes such as community tensions, problems getting along with other jealous women, visionary encounters with dākinīs, revelation experiences, depression, sorrow, and love characterize Sera Khandro’s dramatic tale. Chapter One emphasized the hardships she experienced, in particular social problems with other female consorts such as Drimé Özer’s consort Akyongza and Gara Tertön’s spouse Yakza, who both feared (for good reason) that Sera Khandro would usurp their men. Sera Khandro’s repeated social problems reflect her unusual status as a female Treasure revealer who had gained a reputation as a visionary by her late teens. This in combination with her youth and beauty seems to have brought her more female foes than friends throughout her life, reminding us that Sera Khandro’s account is not a feminist story of
women’s liberation in the nomadic alpine Tantric communities of pre-modern Tibet. Rather, it is an account of one woman’s rise against all the odds. If this is so, then what factors enabled Sera Khandro to defy conventional gender expectations to become one of the few female Treasure revealers in Tibetan history to write the story of her life? The personality that comes through her writing is one of a courageous, assertive, inspired, eloquent, and highly intelligent woman. This strong charisma in addition to the connections she forged with powerful male hierarchs in the Golok world of Treasure revelation no doubt contributed to her extraordinary achievements.

Another contributing factor to Sera Khandro’s successful rise as a female Treasure revealer is her alignment with the most well-known female figure in the tradition, Yeshé Tsogyal. Sera Khandro’s Autobiography carefully places her life story in the larger context of Yeshé Tsogyal’s enlightened activities in the world. Her relationship with Drimé Özer as well as her descriptions of her genesis as a Treasure revealer closely relate to the hagiographies of her divine predecessor, thus paving the way for her own apotheosis as a däkinî. Chapter Two, “The Process of Revealing Treasures in Sera Khandro’s Golok,” introduced the history of the Treasure tradition with a particular focus on exploring the ways in which Sera Khandro’s portrayal of herself and Drimé Özer is modeled on the tradition’s paradigmatic divine couple, Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava. Additionally, this chapter illustrated that in addition to acting as catalysts for enlightenment, Treasure revelations also had pragmatic applications involving maintaining the health and well-being of people and their communities in early twentieth-century Golok. Treasure revealers lived in religious encampments (chos sgar), which were mobile communities centered on a charismatic Treasure revealer comprised
of both celibate and non-celibate religious specialists. Like the monasteries (dgon) in which celibate monastics lived in permanent structures, religious encampments were supported in part by the Golok laity in exchange for their ritual interventions.

Chapter Three, “Autobiography, Gender, and the Self,” drew attention to the ways in which Sera Khandro wrote about herself. The chapter focused on three important aspects of her writing: 1) her repeated reference to her inferior female body, 2) the dialogic nature of her writing, and 3) the role of visions in her self-formulation. Sera Khandro’s litany of derogatory comments about her female gender demonstrates the difficulties she faced as a woman in early twentieth-century Golok occupying a religious role generally reserved for men. Her repeated comments about her inferior female body also work to mitigate any accusation of hubris on her part for writing such a long account of her life. Yet, the self-denigrating comments about her gender that are peppered throughout her writing are more than a way to express her humility; paradoxically, they invite the many other voices populating Sera Khandro’s narrative to refute her, offering their positive encouragement for her religious pursuits. Accentuating this confirmation are the many celestial dākinīs whose visionary appearances offer their undivided support, urging Sera Khandro to pursue her destiny as a Treasure revealer and as Yeshé Tsogyal’s emissary. In Sera Khandro’s writing, dākinīs’ prophetic speech may be elusive, but their message is unequivocally ego-boosting, helping her to formulate her identity as a Treasure revealer and counteracting the disapproval of others in her conventional reality. That Sera Khandro looks to divine female role models for encouragement is not surprising given that she never had human female role models or a supportive female community in her mundane reality.
Chapter Three also raised the provocative question: how much of Sera Khandro's writing style relates to her position as a female author? A brief comparison between Sera Khandro's *Autobiography* and the Tibetan language autobiographies of two other women, Orgyen Chökyi and Jetsün Lochen, reminded us of the problems with generalizing about writing style and an author's gender given the many other factors that determine an author's subjectivity including race, class, geographic background, and monastic versus non-celibate status. Sera Khandro's writing style reflects her Golok linguistic and cultural context and her involvement in visionary revelation more than it reflects her female gender. That said, certain thematic elements of her work including her refusal of lay marriage, her lack of a Tibetan-language education, the misogyny she experienced, and her struggles balancing housework and animal husbandry/farming responsibilities with religious pursuits are features often found in accounts of and by Tibetan women.

Chapter Four, "Consorts and Treasure Revelation Communities," addressed the controversial questions of the role of sexuality and the status of women in Tibetan Tantric communities from the previously unheard perspective of a woman who was herself a consort and a religious specialist who had male consorts. Sera Khandro's writing contains some of the only references in all of Tibetan literature to sexual practices from the perspective of a female subject, aside from those found in Yeshé Tsogyal's biographies, which are clearly her literary source. Her writings demonstrate that despite the lack of literary record attesting to it, at times women did engage in sexual practices for their own benefit, and not simply for the spiritual and physical betterment of their male partners. At the same time, the bitterly discordant dynamics of jealousy and aggression between
female consorts that pervade Sera Khandro’s recollections belie any idealistic interpretation of women’s exalted status in her Tantric communities. Female consorts competed with each other not only for the attention of their men, but also for limited financial resources. Her presentation is thus neither wholly gynocentric nor misogynist, but rather presents a balanced view of women’s agency and objectification within early twentieth-century Golok religious encampments.

Sera Khandro’s writing outlined many different purposes for the role of sexuality in Tibetan religious practice: 1) soteriological functions relating to manipulating the internal psycho-physical energies of the body in order to engender spiritual realization, 2) pragmatic functions relating to dispelling obstacles and increasing longevity, and 3) hermeneutical functions specific to the Treasure tradition in which sexuality and the production/decoding of text are analogized as two generative processes rooted in the body. Although prescriptive accounts of sexual yoga tend to highlight the soteriological role of sexuality, Sera Khandro’s writing emphasizes its pragmatic functions in her Golok society. In a world where ritual interventions were the only available form of medical care, sexuality with its associated life-enhancing powers was sometimes used as an antidote to physical illness. According to Sera Khandro’s writings, the curative potential of sexuality at times clashed with monastic celibacy; she recounts numerous occasions in which the onus fell on her to distinguish between lustful breaches of monastic vows and virtuous applications of sexual yoga. Yet aiding her in this dilemma were always the prophetic ḍākinīs, whose message was crystal clear: despite Sera Khandro’s misgivings and fears about engaging in harmful sexual misconduct, she had to fulfill Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal’s command by engaging in sexual yoga with
appropriately prophesized consorts for both her own and her partner’s benefit. The 
ḍākinīs exhortations thus acted as divine backing, allowing Sera Khandro to demonstrate 
the purity of her moral conduct at the same time as she described acting as a consort to 
multiple male religious hierarchs in Eastern Tibet.

Chapter Five, “The Divine Couple,” explored Sera Khandro’s depiction of her 
love for her main consort, Drimé Özer. Perhaps Sera Khandro’s female gender, but 
certainly her non-monastic status, contributed to her portrayal of the Buddhist spiritual 
path in which her love for Drimé Özer was both the path and the goal of her spiritual 
journey. Sera Khandro’s writing thus moves beyond the technical, physiological elements 
of sexual yoga to represent the human relationships that accompanied these practices. 
The sentimental tone of her writing stands in contrast to the more typically negative 
Buddhist evaluation of emotions, which tend to focus on the triadic designation of 
afflictive emotions including anger, lust, and hatred. In addition to the one emotion that is 
valorized in Buddhist contexts, namely compassion, Sera Khandro also valorizes the love 
between prophesized partners as an important part of the spiritual path. Her 
Autobiography and Drimé Özer’s Biography can be read on multiple levels: they portray 
the union of method and wisdom and the religious importance of consort practices for 
Treasure revelation, but they also depict a dramatic love story. For Sera Khandro, the 
culmination of the quick Secret Mantra path is spiritual liberation through union with the 
divine in the form of Drimé Özer. For Drimé Özer as well, according to Sera Khandro’s 
portrayal of him, Sera Khandro is his equal in a spiritual partnership. Sera Khandro thus 
applies the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna understanding of method and wisdom as nondual 
elements of Buddhahood to her understanding of her relationship with Drimé Özer. In
this, as in all things, her model is the founding divine couple of the Treasure tradition, Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal. Just as these Imperial period Tibetan saints live on eternally and inseparably in the Buddhafields, so, too, do Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer live on in sacred partnership, as their contemporary incarnations continue to exemplify.

Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings open a window into one woman’s account of Treasure revelation and consort practices in the religious encampments of early twentieth-century Golok. Yet there are still many more layers of the literary and social world her writings invoke left to explore. Remaining questions include: 1) How do Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings relate to her prolific Treasure revelations? 2) How do Sera Khandro’s writings fit into a larger conversation with those of the other important authors from the Treasure revelation encampments in which she lived, including Dujom Lingpa, Gara Tertön, and their descendants? 3) How does Sera Khandro’s memory live on today in the form of her incarnations and the maintenance of her religious lineage?

Beyond her auto/biographical writings, Sera Khandro wrote more than two thousand pages of Treasure revelations, many of which express more detailed information about her visionary encounters. Given the frequency with which she directs her Autobiography readers to her revelation cycles, a study on Sera Khandro and her visionary world can be deepened through analyzing these materials. In order to better understand the role of her revelations in early twentieth-century Golok society and to investigate the ephemeral boundaries between writing the self and revealing the divine, I plan to continue my research on her revelation cycles.
Sera Khandro’s writings do not stand alone, but rather comprise one part of a much larger corpus of literature associated with Dujom Lingpa and his eight sons (see Appendix II for a list of Dujom Lingpa’s descendants), many of whom were prolific Treasure revealers in their own right. Despite their importance for the Treasure tradition in Golok, very little research has been conducted on his lineage. A complete understanding of Sera Khandro’s works requires a wider study of Dujom Lingpa’s writings (which Sera Khandro redacted and surely was influenced by), Drimé Özer’s writings (if they can be located), Gara Tertön and Gara Gyalsé’s writings from Banak Monastery, and more.

Additionally, a study on Sera Khandro’s presentation of herself and her society in early twentieth-century Golok invites us to explore how her writings and her memory live on in the contemporary world of Treasure revelation in Golok. In particular, I plan to continue my research on her incarnations and those who maintain her lineage, investigating how they apply the powerful metaphors of method and wisdom that defined Sera Khandro’s world to their contemporary lives.

Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* exposes a world removed from our own in time, space, language, and thought. The many conversations she records invite us to observe her social and religious world as well as her perceptions of herself, bridging her geographic and temporal distance through the vitality of her words. Her writings are an offering to those who come after her, but this offering is not without strings. Through all the insights and provocative issues her writings contribute to our academic conversations, we must ask ourselves, if Sera Khandro were listening to us talk about her, would she recognize herself? Would she welcome this new attention to her life and works? After all,
in the last lines of her *Autobiography*, she cautions the protectresses of the profound Treasures to whom she has entrusted her *Autobiography*: “Give this Dharma to fortunate ones with aspiration prayers . . . Don’t propagate this teaching to those without commitments who have wrong views. If you give it to them, quickly show them a sign.” It is my belief that opening up Sera Khandro’s auto/biographical writings to English language readers contributes to deepening our understanding of the lived practice of Buddhism, beneficial to both the academically inclined and the personally devoted. With this aim in mind, may this study of Sera Khandro’s writings not offend the protectors of the Dharma, but rather add greater insight into her spiritual and social world!
Appendix I: Main Characters in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography

People Associated with Dartsang/Sera Monastery:

Akyongza (A skyong bza’), Drimé Özer’s consort before Sera Khandro
Chödrön (Chos sgron), a female friend
Dodrup Rinpoche (Rdo grub rin po che), one of Drimé Özer’s brothers
Dorjé Drandül (Rdo rje dgra ‘dul), one of Drimé Özer’s brothers
Lhachen Topgyal (Lha chen stobs rgyal), one of Drimé Özer’s brothers
Namkha Jikmé (Nam mkha’ ‘jigs med), Drimé Özer’s younger brother
Öbar (‘Od ‘bar), Drimé Özer’s attendant
Sotrül Rinpoche (Bsod sprul sna tshogs rang grol), Drimé Özer’s disciple, Sera trülku
Tsülrdön (Tshul sgron), nun related to A bstan household where she worked as a servant
Tsültrim Dorjé (Tshul khrims rdo rje), attendant to Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro, her scribe

People Associated with Banak:

Chötreng, (Chos phreng), a nun friend
Gara Tertön (Mgar ra gter ston bdud ‘dul dbang phyug gling pa), Gyalsé’s father
Gara Gyalsé (Mgar ra rgyal sras), her spouse (tshe grogs), son of Gara Tertön
Gotrül Rinpoche (Dpal yul sgo chen sprul sku ‘jigs bral chos kyi blo gros), lama friend
Jikmé Könchok (‘Jigs med dkon mchog), Gyalsé’s younger brother
Saldrön (Gsul sgron), Gyalsé’s second wife
Tupzang (Thub bzang), a monk who is Sera Khandro’s close attendant and disciple
Yakza (Yak shul bza’), Gara Tertön’s wife (yum)
Appendix II: Dujom Lingpa’s Family Tree

(from Padma Theg mchog rgyal mtshan. Rdzong gter kun bzang nyi ma ’i gsung chos yongs rdzogs kyi thob yig gter gyi bum bzang)

Dujom Lingpa (Gter chen khrag ‘thung bdud ‘joms rdo rje)’s Eight Sons and their Children:

1. Rdo grub rin po che III ‘Jig med bstan pa’i nyi ma

2. Grub chen sprul sku Padma rdo rje

3. Mdo mkhyen brtse ye shes rdo rje’i yang sprul ‘dzam gling dbang rgyan
   children:
   a. Dpa’ bo nus ldan rdo rje (popularly known as Rdzong gter kun bzang nyi ma)
      children:
      i. Dri med ‘od zer gyi sprul sku shes rab thog med
      ii. A phang bla ma pad nor gyi sprul sku mi ‘gyur rdo rje (or ‘od gsal snying po)
      iii. Sprul sku padma rdo rje’i yang srid padma theg mchog rgyal mtshan
      iv. A bos bsod rgan sprul sku’i yang sprul thub dga’

4. Che bo’i rig ‘dzin chen mo’i sprul sku mi pham rdo rje

5. Klong chen pa’i sprul sku mchog sprul dri med ‘od zer
   children:
   a. Bsod nam lde’u btsan (his mother was Dbang chen sgron ma)
      children:
      i. Mchog sprul rta mgrin dbang rgyal
      ii. Padma dbang rgyal
      iii. Gzhan phan nyi ma
      iv. Mdo sngags nyi ma

6. A phang sku chen gyi yang sprul lha chen stobs rgyal
   children:
   a. Stan ‘dzin bzang po
   b. Dri med kyi sprul sku bkra po
   c. Dam pa rgya gar
   d. Rdo grub rin po che’i sprul sku padma lung rtogs rgya mtsho (or Nyi zla)

7. Rdza dpal sprul gyi yang sprul nam mkha’ ‘jigs med
children:
a. Kun bzang lung rtogs
b. Bstan pa’i gsal byed
c. Sras mo kun bzang dbang mo

8. Gsang bdag gi sprul ba rdo rje dgra ‘dul
children:
a. Mchog sprul bstan ‘dzin nyi ma
Appendix III: Colophon of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography

*English Translation of Autobiography Colophon*

This is called "The Biography of the Central Tibetan Woman Dewé Dorjé: A Reliquary for Fortunate and Faithful Ones [Serving as] a Chariot Leading to Renunciation." Additionally, although it is also difficult to express the name of the Omniscient Lord of Refuge, if I speak it for the purpose of [expressing my] meaning, the Lord of Siddhas Rikzin Pema Ösel Drodül Sangngak Lingpa [Drimé Özer] [gave me] a silver mirror, a crystal vase full of stainless nectar, precious things with the luster of red, white, and blue, and precious red-colored brocade and implored me [to write this text]. Although I didn’t have the power to decline this request that descended upon the crown of my head, based on many conditional factors and in particular, based on the fact that I was a plain, ordinary being without even a hint of good deeds or virtuous qualities, I let [his request] go.

At that time, the disciple of the prophesized Dharma Lord Guru Vimala who was an emanation of the union of the Dharma King (Trisong Detsen) and Namnying⁶⁹⁹ and who upheld the Vinaya and was a master scholar of extremely clear intellect [named] Norbu Wangyal⁷⁰⁰ offered silver and a gleaming Banares silk scarf to the lama. In particular, having offered his body, speech, and mind to the lama, he abandoned non-religious activity. He maintained the tradition of the teachings of intellectual study and contemplative practice and also diligently practiced my accomplishment practices.⁷⁰¹
Having accomplished their quintessence, by offering [this realization], he implored me repeatedly and with great persistence [to write this text].

The lama from Akyap (A skyabs) named Karma Dondrup also implored me [to write this text] by means of [offering me] a good-sized golden statue of Pakma Nampar Gyalma\textsuperscript{702} and a silver inner offering\textsuperscript{703} [skull cup] and so forth.

Those close to me, my prophesized scribe, the virtuous Tsültrim Dorjé, the bud of my own lineage, my daughter Chöying Drönma, my disciple Tupten Zangpo, and so forth implored me [to write this text] with intense longing. In particular, I was unable to resist the repeated and intensive requests of Khenpo Norbu Wangyal and Tsültrim Dorjé who left me no choice but to do this.

This account in which my faults and good qualities are mixed was begun during an auspicious month when I was thirty-five by me, the lowest of all the great Treasure revealer lama’s retinue, the one who was merely his consort who has the Degenerate Age Treasure name Dechen Dewé Dorjé or the vagabond woman from Amdo (Mdo med) who has destroyed confusion named Kunzang Dekyong Chönyi Wangmo. I finished it when I was thirty-six on the first day of the eleventh month in the female fire hare year [1927] in the supreme place where the natural dakinis gather, the isolated mountain hermitage of Sera Monastery. My disciple of intact commitment Tsültrim Dorjé acted as the scribe.

In all the directions in which this Dharma spreads, may all the excellences spontaneously emerge such as long life, absence of disease, the spreading of the Dharma, and so forth! May all be auspicious!

Accordingly, regarding these lying words of a secular lama,
As I said before, for the sake of the noble doctrine holders,
Up to the age of thirty-six,
I wrote about my circumstances in detail, leaving nothing out.

I left the auspicious connections of future circumstances for later. Although I wanted to abandon this which is a cause for laziness for myself and others, the Treasure-guarding ḍākinīs exhorted me symbolically with their purpose.

Also, the doctrine holders with whom I had karmic connections from previous aspirations—
The emanation of Drenpa Namkha named Ayu (A yu),
The emanation of Odren (‘O bran) named Birgya,
The one blessed by Tsogyal [named] Akashila,
The emanation of Mati (Ma ti) with the name Sam (bSam) and so forth,
And also those men who came from the land of Riwoché in Khams
Along with a radiant sky blue scarf and
Insistent fervent yearning and faith
Exhorted me for a long time again and again [to write this text].

Because of this, my heart could not bear it and this perpetual liar,
This guide of degenerate age beings who holds a degenerate age Treasure name,
Who is an object of pity as one who behaves as a householder,
This inferior one who yearned for the isolated hermitage of a homeless one,
The lowest of all, Dewé Dorjé,
From age thirty-six to forty-three
Wrote a bit about the circumstances of my actions.

By the power of this, may the doctrine holder’s obstacles be dispelled!
May those who adhere to the teachings extend their life and may the benefactors’ power increase!
May sentient beings always practice the Dharma with happiness and joy!
May the two purposes [benefit for one’s self and others] ripen like the fruit of a wish-fulfilling tree!
May the extent of [good] deeds and enlightened activity expand and may [all be] auspicious!

I wrote this myself.

Virtue! Virtue! Virtue! Well done! All is auspicious!
Tibetan Transliteration of Autobiography Colophon
སྨྲ་བཞི་བྱེད་བཟོན་གཅིག་གི་དི་དེ་འཐད་འཐད་ཀྱིས་དབེན་སྤྱོད་བྱས་ཡི་ལེགས།
གཉིས་ཐོབ་གཞུང་གི་ཐབས་དི་ཡི་ཡོད་དེ་ཁྱིམ་སྡུག་བསྔུབ་ནི་ཐེག་པར་ཆེན་པོ་
དར་ཤིག་ལེན་གཅིག་གི་དེ་བོ་སྟེ།

[406.5]བོད་ལྷག་ཕྲིན་ཐོབ་དབྱིངས་སྤྱི་དེར།

ཐོབ་བཟོན་གཅིག་གི་དེ་འཐད་འཐད་ཀྱིས་
རང་ཤིག་ལེན་གཅིག་གི་དེ་བོ་སྟེ།

[407]བདུད་ནང་སྐོ་སྐྱོད་བྱས་ཡི་ལེགས།
དུས་སེམས་པའི་མངོན་པོ་
དུས་བོད་དབང་བཞིན་པ་
བཙན་པའི་མངོན་པོ་དབང་པོ་
ཅི་བོད་དབང་བཞིན་པའི་མངོན་པོ་
བཙན་པའི་མངོན་པོ་
སོགས་པའི་མངོན་པོ་
དྲ་བོད་དབང་བཞིན་པ་
མི་མྱུར་བོད་དབང་བཞིན་པ།
ཐོབ་བོད་དབང་བཞིན་པ།

གཞི་དོན། ཁོ་ནོན། ཁོ་ནོན། སེམས་པ། སྙེན་པོ་བཤད་
Endnotes

Introduction

1 Sera Khandro (Se ra mkha’ ’gro) is a name derived from the Sera valley, the location of Sera Monastery, in Serta County, Golok, where she spent much of her later life. Sera Khandro’s disciples in Tibetan diaspora communities commonly call her Sera Khandro. In Golok, Sera Khandro is referred to as Uza Khandro (Dbus bza’ mkha’ ’gro), meaning the Dākinī Lady of Central Tibet. Sera Khandro calls herself Dewé Dorjé (Bde ba’i rdo rje, Blissful Vajra) in her biographical writings, a name that she explains is her Treasure name (gter ming). Another name she uses is Khandro Dekyong Chönyi Wangmo (Mkha’ ’gro bde skyang chos nyid dbang mo), meaning Dākinī Bliss-Sustaining Reality Queen. Her childhood names include Kalsang Drönma (Skal bzang sgron ma), Künnga Wangmo (Kun dga’ dbang mo), and Pema Drönkar (Padma sgron dkar).

A note on Tibetan transliteration: This study follows the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library system of Simplified Phonetic Transcription in order to make Tibetan words pronounceable to non-Tibetologists. I include Wylie transliterations for names and places the first time they appear. See www.thdl.org for more information about this transliteration system.

2 See Havnevik 1997; 1999 on the other early twentieth-century Tibetan female-authored autobiography written by Jetsün Lochen Rinpoché (1865-1951) of Shuksep Nunnery near Lhasa in Central Tibet. See Schaeffer 2004; 2005 for a study on the autobiography of a nun from Dolpo named Orgyen Chökyi (1675-1729). Bde chen 1985 is an early twentieth-century collection of religious biographies exclusively of women compiled by Dechen Chökyi Wangmo (Bde chen chos kyi dbang mo, b. 1868) being studied by Gyatso forthcoming and Rossi forthcoming. Other Tibetan women who have auto/biographies include Minling Jetsün Mingyur Paldren (Smin gling rje btsun mi ’gyur dpal sgron, 1699-1769), Sonam Paldren (Bsdod-nams dpal dren, c.a. 1388-1432, currently being studied by Suzanne Bessenger), Minling Jetsün Gyurmé Trinle Chödrön (Smin gling rje btsun ’gyur med phrin las chos sgron, early 19th century), Samding Dorjé Pakmo Chöying Dechen Tsomo (Bsam sdings rdo rje phag mo chos dbyangs bde chen mtsho ma, 19th century), Gyakari Dorjé Pakmo Dekyong Yeshé Wangmo (Rgya gar ri rdo rje phag mo bde skyang ye shes dbang mo (1886-1909), Kachö Deden Wangmo (Mkha’ spyod bde ldan dbang mo, n.d.), etc. There are also several female-authored delok (’das log) accounts, which are accounts of visiting and returning from the realm of the dead. See Epstein 1982; Pommaret 1989; Delog Dawa Drolma 1995.

3 I use the term auto/biography to refer to both Sera Khandro’s autobiography and the biography she wrote of her consort Drimé Özer. I combine the two terms autobiography and biography into one word as auto/biography intentionally, signifying the overlap between these two genres, which are particularly close in Sera Khandro’s case given that Drimé Özer’s biography contains her own first person reflections as well as her portrayal of Drimé Özer’s life.

See Appendix II for a list of Dujom Lingpa’s eight sons and their descendants.

4 The terrain in which Sera Khandro lived the majority of her life is in the contemporary Serta County, Ganze Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan and Padma County, Golok Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai. The three main communities in which she lived in Golok are 1) Drimé Özer’s father Dujom Lingpa’s seat Dartsang Monastery (Ziar tshang dgon) in Serta County (GPS N : 32 47.505 ft. E: 100 04.097 ft. elevation 13711 ft.), 2) Gara Tertön (Mgar ra gter ston bsdud ’dul dbyang phyug gling pa)’s seat Banak Monastery (Pan nag dgon) in Padma County (GPS N : 32 54.129 ft. E: 100 46.338 ft. elevation 11,924 ft.), and 3) Sera Monastery (Se ra theg chog ’khor gling) in Serta (GPS N : 32 28.703ft. E: 99 50.441ft. elevation 13,407ft.). See Figures 3, 8, and 9 for photographs of these three places.

an interesting study in Tibetan published in the Tibetan Autonomous Region dedicated to correcting the
dearth of sources on the history of women in Tibet, see Ra se dkon mchog rgya msho 2003.
6 Calculating until Drimé Özer’s death on page 230 of 248 pages (because the following pages are written
in the first person by Sera Khandro), his Biography is 52% visions and dreams.
A note on page references regarding Drimé Özer’s Biography: in order to maintain consistency
with Sera Khandro’s Autobiography, I use the Tibetan folio page numbers for both texts, not the western
numbering that is only written on the manuscript pages of Drimé Özer’s Biography.
7 I am thinking primarily of Mason in Olney 1980 and Jelinek 1986. For more contemporary treatment of
this topic see Miller 1994 and Eakin 1999.
8 In her excellent study on the Treasure revealer Jigmé Lingpa, Janet Gyatso analyzes what she refers to as
“diffident autobiography” in which there is a tension between self-aggrandizing and self-humbling rhetoric.
9 See Autobiography 376b.1-3 for one example of Sera Khandro’s self-description as neither nun nor
married woman. I translate this passage in Chapter Four on p. 294, endnote 609.
11 I am thinking particularly of scholars such as Michael Aris who is well known for jumping into the age-
old Tibetan debate over the authenticity of Treasure revelation as a valid form of Buddhist scriptural
transmission. In his study on the famous Bhutanese Treasure revealer Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), Aris asks
of Pema Lingpa, “For how could he look himself in the face and still engage in the conscious charlatanry
of manufacturing his treasures?” Aris 1989: 98. See Doctor 2005: 31-51 for an informed discussion of the
long-standing debate over the authenticity of Treasures. My study of Sera Khandro seeks to investigate
how Sera Khandro understands Treasure revelation and how she portrays it as a community process in her
writings, not to elaborate my opinion of the validity of her words.
14 This is soon to change. Two Tibetan editors are currently preparing publications of Sera Khandro’s
Autobiography. In November of 2006, ‘Ju skal bzang plans to publish the text under the name Dbus bza’
mkha’ gro ma’i rnam thar as a part of a series of volumes published under the name Mgo log dpe rnying
dpe tshogs. These volumes are produced by the Mgo log khul mi rigs skad yig bya ba’i gzhung las khang.
‘Ju skal bzang’s edition of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography is based on a manuscript from Bkra legs
Monastery. Additionally, Humchen of the Xining-based Snags mang shib ‘jug khang plans to publish a
version of the Autobiography that will also come out in the fall of 2006.
15 I have two manuscript versions of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography, one given to me by Chatral Rinpoche,
and one given to me by an informant in Serta, Golok. Both of the manuscripts I have are photocopies of
handwritten originals. The page numbers in this study are based on the manuscript copy Chatral Rinpoche
lent me. The two manuscripts I have are identical in content as far as I have been able to determine, but
they are written by different scribes on differently sized paper. Because of these variations, the Golok
manuscript copy is 436 folio pages long whereas Chatral Rinpoche’s copy is 407 pages long.
16 Bde ba’i rdo rje. 1934. Dbus mo bde ba’i rdo rje’i rnam par thar pa nges byung dren pa’i shing rta
skal idan dad pa’i mchod sdong. Unpublished manuscript.
17 Sera Khandro’s condensed Autobiography is in Bde ba’i rdo rje 1978 vol. 4: 103-129.
18 Bya bral sgags rgyas rdo rje. 1976, Dbus bza’ mkha’ gro bde ba’i rdo rje’i rnam thar chen mo’i mjug gi
kha skong rnyun du g.yu yi phra tshom (unpublished manuscript): 5.
19 Many of Sera Khandro’s writings mention the involvement of her scribe, who was both her and Drimé
Özer’s close disciple named Tshültrim Dorjé. Tshültrim Dorjé was a monk and was one of her main doctrine
holders (chos bdag) who traveled with her throughout her life. It is not unusual in the context of pre-
modern Tibet for authors to have scribes. Sera Khandro never clarifies whether she spoke her words orally
to him or whether she wrote them and Tshültrim Dorjé copied them. Interestingly, there are two sections of
her Autobiography’s colophon, one that mentions Tshültrim Dorjé’s involvement, and one that does not.
Perhaps this indicates that Sera Khandro wrote the latter part of her Autobiography that recounts her life
from age thirty-six to forty-three herself without using a scribe.
Three main points of proof that she is in fact the author of her works include 1) the fact that she
clearly states so in her colophons; 2) The denigrating language with which she represents herself, which no
disciple of hers would have authored; and 3) the fact that her Autobiography is exclusively written in the first person voice with no third person slippages. In contrast, Drimé Özer’s Biography does include slippages in which she begins to refer to herself as “I” and then switches back to writing of herself in the third person (and after his death she writes entirely in the first person). There is also a great deal of internal consistency between the two biographical works concerning events and language style, indicating that they were authored by the same person. Although extraordinary, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Sera Khandro gained expertise in Tibetan literacy over time from the religious communities in Golok in which she lived, despite her lack of formal education. She mentions issues related to writing and her educational background several times in her autobiography, which I will describe in Chapter One.

20 Reasons Sera Khandro’s lineage and manuscripts are rare in Tibet include: 1) Sera Khandro did not have a blood lineage heir to carry on her teachings although she did have close disciples who maintained the manuscript versions of her works. The reincarnation of Sera Khandro’s life partner (tshe grogs) Gara Gyaltsé named Lama Gelek in Padma County, Golok, told me that Sera Khandro’s one child who lived past childhood, her daughter Chöying Drönma, had one son named Dolé Nyima. After he was killed during the Cultural Revolution, Sera Khandro’s blood line ended. 2) Shortly after Sera Khandro’s death in 1940, Golok was increasingly embroiled in turmoil due to Chinese incursions. Perhaps this political and economic climate caused Sera Khandro’s religious lineage and her manuscripts to become relatively obscure in Tibet aside from the few communities in which they were maintained, notably Riwoché (Ri bo che) and Trlek Monastery (Bkra legs dgon) in Kham. I explain why the Autobiography is also rare in Tibetan diaspora communities below.

21 Chatral Rinpoche has rejected Tibetans’ and Westerners’ offers to publish the Autobiography as a Tibetan manuscript. He confers empowerment in Sera Khandro’s religious lineage only extremely sparingly. During the summer of 2000 in Pharping, Nepal, Chatral Rinpoche lent me a photocopied manuscript version of the Autobiography and allowed me to read it. In January, 2001 in his monastery in Salbari, India, he gave me permission to translate and publish the Autobiography in English. In the fall of 2004, he showed me his original manuscript version of the Autobiography that was written by Sera Khandro’s scribe Tsültrim Dorje, but he did not allow me to reproduce the original.

22 The only published translation of any part of Sera Khandro’s writings in English is a translation of a short biography of Padmasambhava from the first of Sera Khandro’s four volumes of Treasure cycles (gter skor), Bde ba’i rdo rje 1978: 35-54, by Ngawang Zangpo in Guru Rinpoche: His Life and Times. Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2002. The same author is currently preparing an English translation of Sera Khandro’s commentary on Dujom Lingpa’s Buddhahood Without Meditation that has also recently been published in Tibetan under the name Snang sbyang dbus ’grel, ed. Lcags khung ngag dbang bio bzang. Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2002.


24 Drimé Özer’s Biography 241b.6-242a.3:

25 Chapter Three will explore the ways Sera Khandro represents herself through the genre of Tibetan autobiography. For informative discussions of biography and autobiography as genres of Buddhist literature, see Gysatso 1992a, 1998; Penny 2002; Reynolds and Capps 1976; Robinson 1996; Schober 1997; and Williams 1982.
26 I was also influenced by the suggestion of Drimé Özer’s contemporary incarnation in Serta, Golok named Namtrul Jikme Puntsok (Nam sprul ‘jigs med dkon mchog) of Nyenlung Monastery (Snyan lung dgon pa) who insisted that a study of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography had to be complimented by a study of her consort’s Biography, since, he said, the two texts are meant to be read together as a representation of the male and female, method and wisdom. He seemed to intuit my interest in women’s studies by cautioning that, “Sera Khandro is not more amazing because she is female — remember the union of wisdom and skillful means. Study Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro’s biographies together. Don’t think of Sera Khandro as a female Treasure revealer but as a Treasure revealer.” Personal communication in Selitang, Padma County, Golok, August 2004. I try to take his advice to heart in this study. In this effort, I have translated Drimé Özer’s Biography into English in full in addition to my translation of Sera Khandro’s Autobiography.

27 The Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs (Chos nyid mkha’ ‘gro gsang mdzod) is Bde ba’i rdo rje 1978 vol. 1-2 and The Reality Dākinīs’ Heart Essence (Chos nyid Mkha’ ‘gro thugs thig) is Bde ba’i rdo rje 1978 vol. 3-4.

28 There is much more to be said about this overlap and interplay between Sera Khandro’s literary accounts of divine revelation and self-representation. Both her Autobiography and Drimé Özer’s Biography include extensive cross-references to her Treasure revelations. Sera Khandro writes in at least 27 different places in her Autobiography something to the effect of, “For fear of too many words, I won’t write this here but it is elucidated in my Treasure scriptures.” See Autobiography 115, 118b, 138, 236, 240b, 245b, 254, 262b, 263b, 264, 274, 286.5, 295, 303b, 306b, 308, 309, 312, 327b, 348b, 351b, 360, 365, 366b-367, 372, 379b, 390. The same is true in Drimé Özer’s Biography, although it is often not clear whether she is referring the reader to her own Treasure revelations or to his. She refers the reader to his (?) Treasure revelations for more detail in at least 12 different places; see Biography 112b, 125, 166b, 174, 177, 189, 190b, 196b-197, 197b, 203b, 213b, 218. This intertextuality between Sera Khandro’s accounts of her (and his) divine revelations and their auto/biographical narratives highlights the significance of divine visions to her understanding of selfhood and agency as well as the murky distinction between divine revelation and self-authored literature. I plan to explore these ideas further in future research on Sera Khandro’s Treasure revelations (gter chos).

29 Dubs bza’ mkha’ ‘gro ma 2002.

30 Dubs bza’ mkha’ ‘gro ma 2002: 199.

31 When I mention the prevalence of male authors in representing women’s lives, I am thinking in particular of Medieval Christian female mystics whose visions and biographies were written almost exclusively by male clerical interpreters. See Mooney 1999: 7.

The greatest bibliographer of Tibetan Studies, Gene Smith, has been unable to locate the works of Drimé Özer, and Chatral Rinpoche has also told me that he does not have them. Aside from a few fragments of Drimé Özer’s gter chos, Dujom Rinpoche’s student Lama Rinchen Puntsok in Bouda, Nepal does not have them. I was not able to find them in Golok, although I suspect there are more private libraries to explore in Golok before determining with certainty that they are lost.

Chapter One: Sera Khandro’s Autobiography

32 Autobiography 7b.2-5 (see below for Tibetan).

The palace name Gyarakashar is very similar to the name of the Lhasa noble family known as Dokhar (Mdo mkhar) or Ragashak (Ra kha shag), also spelled Ragashar (Ra kha shar), whose palace was to the West of the Jokhang. See Petech 1973: 70-87 for a description of this family. Petech directs us to Waddell 1906: 331 for a map of the location of the Rakshar Palace. Another connection between Sera Khandro’s account and the Rakshar family is that both were affiliated with Taklung Monastery (Stag lung dgon) and its abbots including Ma Rinpoche who is the first lama mentioned in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography. I would have to conclude, however, that the evidence connecting Sera Khandro with the Ragshar Tibetan nobility family is weak considering that Sera Khandro’s father is Mongolian and not Tibetan and considering that the genealogy of the Ragshar family in the early twentieth century is well known. I have seen no other source connecting Sera Khandro to this family.
35 Gesar’s younger sibling.
34 Autobiography 7b.5-6:
35 Autobiography 17a.2. Chatral Rinpoché also describes Sera Khandro’s father as Chinese, although he adds that her true father was not this man but was the Buddhist mountain deity Nyenchen Tangthog (Gyantse Thang Thog). Personal communication, Pharping, Nepal, March 2005. For reference to Nyenchen Tangthog being Sera Khandro’s father see Autobiography 17, 19.

But what does Sera Khandro mean when she calls her father Chinese? What groups of Chinese people were in Lhasa at the turn of the century? Sera Khandro’s father is not a foreigner or an outsider to Tibet; just like the suitor he later chooses for her, Sera Khandro’s father is a man who wears Chinese attire (cha lugs rgya nag) but is a devout Tibetan Buddhist practitioner within the Seminal Heart lineage (chos lugs snying thig) who appears to be fluent in both literary and spoken Chinese and Tibetan (Autobiography 27b-28).

It is not particularly surprising to find people with Mongolian ancestry residing in Lhasa during the early twentieth century given that Mongols have been a major imperial force in the power plays involving Tibet as far back as the late twelfth century when Tibet began paying tribute to Genghis Khan’s newly unified Mongolia in exchange for peace. In the thirteenth century, the famous Sakya lama Sakya Pandita and Genghis Khan’s grandson Godan Khan established what would characterize Mongol-Tibetan relations for centuries: the priest/patron relationship (yon bdag) in which the Tibetan lamas provided religious instruction, divination, astrology, and rituals in exchange for military protection and material support from the Imperial polity. Godan’s successor Kublai Khan went on to conquer China in 1279, thus founding the Yuan Dynasty in which Tibet and China were both subsumed under Mongol leadership. When the Yuan dynasty fell in 1368 to the ethnically Chinese Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Ming emperors no longer exerted any administrative authority over Tibet. Yet the priest/patron relationship between Mongol powers and Tibet was not over; in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in order to gain a foothold in Tibet’s internal sectarian power politics, Tibetan Geluk ecclesiasts sought the political backing of the Mongols in order to overtake the Kagyé sect’s power and the associated Tsang king of Tibet. In 1640, with the military backing of Gushri Khan, the chief of the Qosho tribe of Western Mongols, the Geluks successfully took power in Tibet. However, their patrons, Gushri Khan and his army, did not simply turn over power to their priests, the Geluks, but rather established themselves as the rulers of Tibet and settled in the Lhasa region. While the Geluks were consolidating their power as regents of Tibet with their powerful Mongol backing, the Machus successfully conquered China in 1644 thus establishing the Qing Dynasty which would last until the time of Sera Khandro’s Lhasa, finally succumbing in 1911. Relations between the Mongols and the Geluk regents of Tibet fell apart during the time of the controversial sixth Dalai Lama, who refused to live the monastic life decreed by protocol. This ended with Lhapsang Khan attacking the Geluk regent in Lhasa, becoming King of Lhasa, and agreeing to make regular tribute payments to the Qing in return for protection. Thus, Tibet entered a relationship with the Manchu Qing Imperialists as a
subordinate state controlled by the Mongolian Khans. Yet again the Geluks turned to a different set of Mongol patrons, the Dzungars, for aid in reclaiming Tibetan sovereignty from the King of Tibet Lhabsang Khan. Their 1717 victory was quickly defeated by the Qing emperor who placed the seventh Dalai Lama in power over a Tibet that was subsumed under the Qing Empire. Thus, from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, the Dalai Lamas ruled Tibet under the Qing Dynasty, whose imperial rulers demonstrated their involvement in Tibetan government by the two Manchu imperial residents, or ambans, stationed in Lhasa along with varying numbers of Manchu Qing troops. The Qing’s Manchu ambans exercised varying amounts of control in Tibet ranging from phases in which they had very little control to crack down periods such as the 1792 regulations during which time the ambans shared power equally with the Dalai Lama. Yet throughout the period of Qing control they made no effort to absorb Tibet into China; Tibet had its own language and government and did not pay tribute to China (Goldstein 1997: 20). By the late nineteenth century when the Qing Dynasty was drawing to a close, plagued by problems in other areas, the ambans in Tibet had very little real control so that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and those in power before him were able to manage Tibetan state affairs with no interference from the Qing. This stage of freedom from Qing lordship changed as a reaction to the British Younghusband expedition of 1904, but before the Qing had time to strengthen their sovereignty over Tibet, it fell and once again the Thirteenth Dalai Lama regained control and sought to make Tibet an independent state (Goldstein 1997: 3-21).

I include this brief political history of Mongol/Tibetan/Qing relations as background to suggest that it seems likely that Sera Khandro’s father was a descendant of the Mongol Khans who settled in Lhasa. This is corroborated by the fact that Sera Khandro mentions that she was a descendant through her father’s ancestry of Chögyal Ngakyi Wangpo (1736-1807), a famous Nyingma Lama who himself was a descendant of Gushri Khan.

So why does she call her father Chinese (rgya)? Sera Khandro was not necessarily drawing a distinction between Mongol and Manchu political leaders when she describes the “Chinese leaders” (rgya dpon) in Lhasa. In any case, there was most likely some overlap between those two ethnicities stemming from their previous alliance against the Dzungar Mongols.

36 In page 8 of the Autobiography Nup is spelled gnub, which is most likely a variant spelling of gnubs, one of the six royal Tibetan clans dating from the Imperial period. Yeshé Tsogyal is also said to be from this ancestry. See Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 1999: 8.

37 Perhaps this refers to a birth in which the placenta is wrapped around the baby’s body.

38 Autobiography 8a.4-8b.1.


40 Taklung Maha Rinpoche (Stag lung ma ha rin po che) is also mentioned numerous times in the other Tibetan female-authored autobiography we have from this time period written by the Shuksep Jetsünma Ani Lochen, researched by Hanna Havnevik. Taklung Rinpoche was an incarnate lama from the Kagyü center north of Lhasa in the Tiger (stag) Valley affiliated with the Ragashar or Dokhar family. See Havnevik 1999: 79-80.

41 Autobiography 9a.5-9b.1:

42 Her father’s interest in educating her in literary Chinese for work as a female political leader (dpon mo) is curious for a number of reasons. First, it is somewhat unusual to hear of Chinese education in Lhasa, although not unheard of. Second, it is extremely unusual to hear of a female political leader in early twentieth-century Lhasa.

A main location of Chinese literacy in Lhasa during the period Sera Khandro lived there between 1892-1907 was the Manchu ambans offices, which were active during this time period and were staffed by employees who were literate in both Tibetan and Chinese. In the interesting autobiography of the Chinese man Ts’an-chih Chen, who was born in Lhasa only one year later than Sera Khandro in 1893, he recounts that as a boy he studied Chinese at a Chinese school for boys in Lhasa in preparation for work in Chinese and Tibetan government at the amban’s office. He records that while he was in school, his sisters were
taught [in literary Chinese] by private tutor at home (Richardus 1998: 165, 168. Thanks to Gray Tuttle for directing me to this source). This is not so different than Sera Khadro’s mention of studying literary Chinese privately with some other girls. Thus, Sera Khadro and Ts’an-chih both document the education of girls from “Chinese” families in literary Chinese in turn-of-the-century Lhasa when Tibetan literacy was common only for upper class boys, monks, and fortunate nuns.

Although I have seen no records indicating that other Manchu or Mongolian women held leadership positions in Lhasa that were affiliated with the amban offices, Sera Khadro’s Autobiography appears to be indicating that it was this that Sera Khadro’s father and his cohorts had in mind for her.

44 Autobiography 12b.3-5:

45 Autobiography 13a.3-4:

46 Autobiography 13a.4-6.

47 Autobiography 7b.6.

48 Avalokiteśvara’s mantra, Om ma ni pemé hum.

49 Autobiography 10b.3-5.

50 Autobiography 14b.1-6.

51 “rgya shog dpon khag bco brgyad.” The Tshig mdzod chen mo’s definition for dpon khag includes firstly the Chinese term thu’u si, which is defined as “During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, a hereditary leadership rank as the chieftain of minority peoples in the northwest and southwest (of China).” Tshig mdzod chen mo 1993: 1176. Hence, I interpret this Chinese group of leaders to refer to Qing Dynasty Manchu leaders.

52 Autobiography 11b.5-12a.1:

53 Autobiography 21a.4-21b.3:

Note on Tibetan transliterations: I am reproducing the manuscript exactly and am not correcting spelling errors/variants because it is at times difficult to determine the difference between regional orthographic variation and scribal errors. Above, I am quite sure the last word is supposed to read “gleng.”
Autobiography 23b.1.

Sera Khandro's Autobiography contains 88 visions, which comprise 46% of the text. Out of the 88 visions she describes, 55% of them are visions of female divinities, 27% of them are male divinities, and 16% include both male and female divinities (or neither in the case of formless visions and visions of animals not distinctly gendered).

This breakdown is similar to Drimé Özer's Biography, in which visions comprise 52% of the text. Out of 80 different visions, 58% of them are of female divinities, 31% male divinities, and 10% include both male and female divinities (or are genderless, i.e., animals or formless voices).

Autobiography 13b.4-5.

Autobiography 14b, 15b-16.

Nyenchen Tanglha is an important protector of the Nyingma Teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and is also the name of a mountain range in Central Tibet north of Lhasa, south of Namtso Lake (Gnam mchog), and west of Damshung (Dam geung).

Autobiography 16b.5-17a.6.

Autobiography 22. This is one example of many in which genealogy is of central importance in determining whether Sera Khandro has the authority to assume or not to assume various roles including that of a political leader and that of a Treasure revealer.

Autobiography 27b.3-5.


Autobiography 27b.6.

Chinese leader is a translation of gya sde'i dpon khrus, a leader from the Chinese group. Khrus is an abbreviation of Khrus zhi is a Chinese word rendered in Tibetan meaning “the chairman” or “the highest ranking official.”

Da lo yi is a Chinese honorific title transliterated into Tibetan meaning something to the effect of “great old gentleman.” It appears to be a very minor title meaning “your honor, his honor,” given to local leaders as a polite way to refer to a Prefect, Department, or District magistrate. It was not an official rank in the Qing system but rather was a respectful form of address that came to command respect in the official’s local community. Thanks to Gray Tuttle for the above information. Tuttle also notes that he has seen it several times as a Chinese title given to local Tibetans in the Muli region of Kham. Sperling 1998: 331 translates it as “his honor,” in his context a title of a translator to the Qianlong emperor in the late eighteenth century.

This could refer to the place Skyid grong in the ‘On region near Bsam yas mchims phu.

Autobiography 27b.6-28a.1:

Autobiography 28a.5-6:

Autobiography 28a.5-6:
Perhaps “both ranks” (thob gnyis) refers to that of both Sera Khandro’s area and that of her betrothed.

60 *Autobiography* 28b.1-2:

61 *Autobiography* 33b.3-34a.2.
62 *Autobiography* 37b.4-38b.6.
63 *Autobiography* 38b.6-40b.5.
64 *Autobiography* 42a.5-44a.4.
65 *Autobiography* 34a.3-35b.3.
66 *Autobiography* 45b.1-3.

70 The Secret Treasury of Reality Dākinīs (Chos nyid mkha’ ’gro gsang ma’zod) and The Dākinīs’ Heart Essence (Mkha’ ’gro thugs thig) are the names of Sera Khandro’s two main Treasure cycles.
71 *Autobiography* 48b.2-49b.6:
Autobiography 50a.1-50b.5. This passage is translated in Chapter Three on p. 152.
Kukurepa is one of the 84 Indian siddhas, or accomplished masters. Sera Khandro spells his name Kukurepa, while the Sanskrit spelling is Kukkuripa.
The Kukurepa vision is Autobiography 57b.3- 65b.6. Chapter Four pp. 226-230 includes a translation and discussion of this passage from the Kukurepa vision and the relevant passage from Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography.
Autobiography 51b.4-52a.3.
Autobiography 56a.2-3.
The central encampment (dbus sgar) is the name Sera Khandro uses to refer to Drimé Özer (and his brother’s) religious community. For a discussion on the nature of these religious encampments, see Chapter Two.
Rdzogs chen dpal dge is another name for Patrul Jikmé Chöki Wangpo (1808-1887), the famous Patrul Rinpoche who wrote The Words of My Perfect Teacher. Contextually this comment seems to apply to Drimé Özer whom Sera Khandro is about to introduce, but actually it was his brother Namka Jikmé (Nam mkha’ ’jigs med) who was the incarnation of Patrul Rinpoche.
Kun mkhyen klong chen rab ’byams, the famous polymath who lived from 1308-1363 who systematized the Great Perfection Seminal Heart teachings of the Nyingma School.
Autobiography 66b.2-67a.1:
Autobiography 68a.5-68b.1:
83 *Autobiography* 71b.2-73a.3.
84 *Autobiography* 73a.3-73b.1:
85 *Autobiography* 74b.3-4:
86 *Autobiography* 76a.6-76b.1:
87 *Autobiography* 76b.2-3.
88 *Autobiography* 77b.6-78b.5.
89 *Autobiography* 76a.4.
90 *Autobiography* 75b.6-76a.2.
91 Akyongza was Drimé Özer’s consort in Golok.
92 *Autobiography* 79b.3-4:
93 The eight worldly dharmas refer to ordinary human reactions to 1) gain and loss, 2) fame and infamy, 3) praise and blame, and 4) happiness and sadness.
94 *Autobiography* 83a.3-83b.6. This song is in seven syllable per line verse, a common style Sera Khandro employs. I include this entire song to demonstrate the different writing styles Sera Khandro uses in her *Autobiography* – there is a frequent shift from Golok dialect influenced colloquial prose writing when she
is recording everyday events (like many of the quotations above) to songs and poems in this style of “philosophical poetry” that often includes dialogic interactions between Sera Khandro and many divine interlocutors.
105 *Autobiography* 87a.1-2:

This Purifying Appearances teaching would have been a commentary on Drimé Özer’s father Dujom Lingpa’s famous *snang byang* teaching, translated into English by Richard Barron and Susanne Fairclough as *Buddhahood Without Meditation: A Visionary Account Known as Refining One’s Perception (Nangjang)*. Junction City: Padma Publishing, 2002. This is the text about which Sera Khandro wrote a commentary. Here, she describes receiving the teaching herself for the first time at the age of sixteen. See Dbus bza’ mkha’ ‘gro ma 2002.

106 *Autobiography* 87a.6- 87b.1.

108 *Autobiography* 87b.4-5:

109 As the Gyalrong Khenpo Sangye informs me, in early twentieth-century Golok, Tibetans did not have socks; they put grass/straw inside their leather shoes instead.

110 *Autobiography* 87b.5-88a.3:

111 *Autobiography* 89a.6-89b.2:

112 *Sapta* demons (*bdu dang sbot*) refers to hindrances and obstacles along the religious path.

113 *Autobiography* 90b.1-6:
Gara Tertön (1857-1911) was a Treasure revealer whose main seat was near the county center of Padma County, Golok, called Banak Monastery (Ban nag dgon pa). Sera Khandro also refers to his community as a Treasure revelation encampment (gter sgar), perhaps indicating that it included both monastic and non-celibate religious practitioners. See Chapter Two for more discussion about the distinctions between a monastery (dgon) and an encampment (sgar). There is a short biography of Gara Tertön in Dar thang dgon pa'i gdan rabs 1999: 364-382. Banak Monastery is still in operation, and a newly rebuilt version of the house in which Sera Khandro and Gara Gyalsé lived is still standing. The monastery is accessible by road, a few kilometers outside of Selitang, situated on a hillside by the Mar (Smar) River. See Figures 9 and 10.

The Dar thang dgon pa'i gdan rabs also states that just before Gara Tertön’s death, “Finally, the auspicious connections (ten 'brel) of the supreme consort in the Đakini' prophecies named the Central Tibetan Lady Khandro Chönyi Dekjong Wangmo were confused (chugs pa).” Dar thang dgon pa'i gdan rabs 1999: 379. This is an example of the life prolonging effect that union with a consort has according to this tradition; the implication is that because Sera Khandro wasn’t able to be Gara Tertön’s consort, he passed away.
Sera Khandro also recounts the story of Gara Tertön’s invitation to herself and to Drimé Özer in his Biography, 259-263.

121 Autobiography 105.
122 Autobiography 107a.1:

123 Autobiography 107b.6-108a.6.
124 Autobiography 113a.6-113b.5:

125 Autobiography 113b.5-6:

126 Autobiography 115a.5-115b.3.
127 I.e., people say that her cures are coming from her own artifice and are not divinely inspired. Sera Khandro didn’t learn how to read or write Tibetan as a child because her father forced her to learn Chinese instead. In Drimé Özer’s Biography, she records telling Drimé Özer, “When I was nineteen years old due to an illusory dream, when I awoke I effortlessly knew how to read and recite text.” Biography 163b.6-164a.1:

128 Autobiography 115b.4-5.
129 Autobiography 121a.5.
130 Autobiography 138a.3:

131 Sera Khandro describes Gyalsé as her “life partner,” (tshe grols). She never recounts any sort of marriage ceremony, but it is clear in later passages that she “belongs” to Gyalsé. When she finally leaves Gyalsé’s community, she mentions going through an arbitration process in which they debated over child custody and finances in a manner not unlike a divorce court.

132 Autobiography 139a.3:
Autobiography 139a.5-6: For Milarepa’s black magic use, see Lhalungpa 1977: 22. Sera Khandro does not specify what undesirable occurrences her incantations caused.

Autobiography 139b.3-140a.3: (Note: This poem is in eight-syllable verse, unusual for Tibetan poetry that is most often in odd-syllable verse. Many of Sera Khandro’s verses are in either six or eight verse poetry)

135 I explore this theme further in Chapter Three.

136 Autobiography 140b.1-3:

137 Autobiography 141a.2-3. This is the second reference to Milarepa’s hagiography, suggesting that it could have had some influence on the way she framed her narrative self-representation.

138 Autobiography 141a.3-4. His words make a reference to ‘Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas (1813-1899)’s Gier ston rgya risa (One Hundred Treasure Revealers), a nineteenth century compilation that includes both Jo mo sman mo and Kun dga’ ‘bum ma as female Treasure revealers.

Note: “These days,” Deng sang is spelled dengs sang in the Autobiography manuscript.

139 Autobiography 141a.5. This is the first mention of Sera Khandro writing her Treasures instead of finding a scribe to write them for her, and at this point in the text she is twenty-two years old.

140 Autobiography 146a.5-146b.2:
Sera Khandro refers to her daughter more commonly as Chöying Drönma, Chos kyi dlhying sgron ma.

The Buddhai of Guru Rinpoché, Zangs mdog dpal ri.

Autobiography 147b.6-148a.2: (note: This song is also in eight syllable verse)

Autobiography 148b.5-149a.3 (note: this is an example of six syllable verse):

Autobiography 144a.3.

Solung Drakar (Bswob lungen brag dkar) is a holy site within a few kilometers from Banak Monastery. It is located just off the modern road between the Padma County seat Selitang and Banak Monastery.

Autobiography 153a.5-6:

By Sera Khandro’s “associates,” I am referring to her daughter, her very close and trusted monk attendant Tupzang, and some of their friends. Sera Khandro never had an exclusively female group of companions as many female religious specialists do; throughout her life, her closest associates were Tupzang, her scribe Tshultrim Dorjé, and her daughter Chöying Drönma. She also mentions her nun friend Chödrön repeatedly.
The phrase is “driven by shog skya rlung” but the meaning of shog skya is unclear to me.

Autobiography 213a.4-213b.3:

 Golok Lady” probably refers to Gyalse’s new spouse named Saldrön (Gsal sgron) who he took on as a wife while living with Sera Khandro when she was about twenty-seven years old.

Autobiography 213a.4-213b.2:

This passage is interesting not only because it represents the deep rifts in Sera Khandro’s community while she was living with Gyalse, but also because it suggests the danger associated with childbirth and the prevalence of childbirth related mortality in early twentieth-century Golok. When Sera Khandro gave birth to her three children (two of whom did not survive past childhood), she had no medical treatment of any kind aside from ritual interventions and she does not mention having any help with the birth, implying that she gave birth alone.

Autobiography 158b.4-5. This is a common litany in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography. From these comments, we can deduce that gossip swirled around Sera Khandro because each time she records interacting with a celibate monastic, for example Kittrül Rinpoche, Sotrül Rinpoche, Gotrül Rinpoche, etc., she fears people’s negative gossip.

Autobiography 162b.3-4:

Autobiography 155b.3-4:
158 Autobiography 161b.2-3:  

159 Autobiography 164a.1-165a.4. See Chapter Four in the section titled “The Exchange of Women” for a full translation of this passage in which Drimé Özer and Gyalsé discuss exchanging Sera Khandro between the two of them.

160 Autobiography 211b.2-212a.1.

161 Autobiography 228a.3-4. Gotrül Rinpoché who was a celibate monk is not claiming fatherhood (although this would not be inconceivable), only that the child is his incarnation. In Drimé Özer’s Biography, Sera Khandro writes of the way she became pregnant with this son in greater detail. Sera Khandro responds to Drimé Özer’s question asking who the child’s father is, saying, “This son of mine has no corporeal father. Last year on the tenth day of the monkey month [7th month] during the periodic feast offering when it became time to invite [the deities], my perception transformed. On account of my enjoying blissful union with a hero who was wearing a tiger skin and bone ornaments who sometimes said he was Sararahapa and sometimes said he was Shami gcocha, as soon as this happened, my body felt bliss and it was as if everybody there knew it. Gyalsé, his brother Jigmé Könchok and all the monks asked me, ‘Are you sick at all?’ I said, ‘With what sickness? I am reciting the feast offering prayer.’ Although I was extremely sick, I kept it secret.” Drimé Özer Biography, 183a.1-5:

(Note on transliterations from Drimé Özer’s Biography: spelling inconsistencies/variants are very common in this manuscript and will appear in these transliterations; I am not correcting/altering the Tibetan.)

162 Autobiography 233a.6-233b.3:

163 Contextually Kargab Garkor (Mkhar ’gab mgar skor) appears to be an area near Drung ri (‘Brong ri), the abode of the main mountain deity in Serta, Golok.

164 Sera Khandro repeats this phrase “being without the backing of my father’s name” (rgyab pa ming med pa) and others like it in various places in the text. Her meaning is that her father is far away in Lhasa and therefore without her father’s support and influence, nobody was there to “back her up” or “stand up for
her” when her status in the community was threatened. This highlights the importance of family lineage in Golok society; Gelek 1998: 52 notes that “... the strength of the idea of descent, that is of descent as conveyed by the ‘bone’ or Rus in the male line, is one of the most singular traits of these nomadic people. Almost every Washu Serthar family knows its Ru.” Sera Khandro was a single foreign woman in Golok descended from a father’s line that had no relation to Golok society, which contributed to her insecure status in Golok communities.

165 *Autobiography* 233b.5-234a.1:

166 This is one example of the way Sera Khandro repeatedly cross-references her autobiographical reflections with her revealed Treasure scriptures.

167 Method and wisdom in this context refers to male and female; Sera Khandro is praying that she and Drimé Özer remain inseparable. See Chapters Four and Five for further discussion of the gendered dyad of method and wisdom.

168 *Autobiography* 235a.6-235b.2:

169 *Autobiography* 236b.4.

170 *Autobiography* 242a.6-242b.2.

171 *Autobiography* 250a.3-4.

172 *Autobiography* 254a.1-2. Yusé Chawa (*G.yu bswe bya ba*) is another location in the Serta/Padma County area.
In Drimé Özer’s Biography, Sera Khandro recounts that when she came back from Adzom’s encampment and arrived before Drimé Özer’s community, “The damage [from a disciple] breaking his commitment [that afflicted] Dewé Dorjé’s leg dispersed and without having to hold on to a cane, she quickly came forward. All the disciples gathered there said it was amazing and greatly rejoiced.” Biography, 214a.5-6:

By Western calculations, Gyurmé Dorjé would have been a boy of age four by this year, 1925.

Just after this description of Drimé Özer’s death, Sera Khandro notes that, “All the dialogue between the male and female partners [i.e., between Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer] is elucidated in detail in the Lord’s biography.” Biography 293a.4:
This sentence documents the intertextuality between the two works as well as their sequence; Sera Khandro had already written Drimé Özer’s Biography when she was composing her own autobiography and she chose to elaborate or not elaborate on particular topics based on what she had written previously. Instead of repeating her words, she directs her readers to her other works. See Biography 229b-230 for detailed description of Drimé Özer’s death. I translate a passage from this deathbed dialogue in Chapter Five in the section titled, “Love Medicine and the Im/permanence of Life and Death.”

191 Autobiography 295a.4-5:

192 Autobiography 296b.4:

193 Sera Monastery, full name Se ra thug chö ‘khor gling is not associated with the famous Geluk Monastery in Lhasa by that name. It is a small monastery north of the Serta County seat founded in 1736. See ‘Jigs med bsam grub, ed. Khams phyogs dkar mdzes khul gyi dgon sde so so ’i lo rgyus gsal bar bshad pa thub bstan gsal ba ’i me long, vol. 2, 353-361. Driving there in a land cruiser from the Serta County seat takes about 5 hours; there is no road leading to the monastery for the last several kilometers of the drive as of 5/2005.

194 Autobiography 303b.2-3.

195 Autobiography 305b.4-6:

196 Autobiography 307a.3-4:

I am interpreting this as a spelling mistake for dgon pa.

198 Autobiography 309a.6:

Sera Khandro teaches Ma bsgom sangs rgyas to Sera Monastery monastics 312, Ma bsgom sangs rgyas to others 343, 390, Snying thig ya bzhi 348b, 371.

199 Autobiography 309b.1-2. Perhaps the significance of Sera Khandro specifying in this case that she taught laywomen to recite mani prayers is that since they were uneducated, it wasn’t appropriate to confer the Treasure empowerments on them that she gave to monastics and lamas.

200 Autobiography 314b, 343, 357b-358, Sera Khandro teaches all of Dujom Lingpa’s gter chos 366b, both father and son gter chos 370b, rtsa gsum khrus ma cycle of, 385, entire father and son gter chos 388b-389, at Vairocana cave Mkha’ ‘gro yang rdzong entire father and son gter chos 392b-393, 399b-400, 400b.

201 Autobiography 337b. This comment is interesting because at present Drimé Özer’s Treasure volumes are lost, but apparently at one time they totaled 18 volumes.


203 Autobiography 351b.6.

204 Autobiography 379b.2-3.

205 Autobiography 383b.5-384a.5.
For a very elaborate description of her visionary experience interacting with Guru Rinpoche and Yeshé Tsogyal, see *Autobiography* 318b.1-335a.1.

This would have been an enormous task, as this Treasure cycle contains approx. 20 volumes, depending on edition. The names Dujom Dorjé and Dujom Lingpa refer to the same figure.

This term “correcting” (*dpe ched*) is not in any dictionary that I could locate, but Gyalrong Khenpo Sangyé, with whom I did a detailed study of this text, told me that *dpe ched* means to verify, examine, and confirm the veracity of a text whereas he said that “editing” (*zhu dag*) means to compare an original and a new copy of a text.

It is clear from these statements that it was Sera Khandro herself that was doing the editing and correcting along with her companions. This demonstrates her high level of Tibetan literacy and supports my argument that Sera Khandro is in fact the author of her *Autobiography* despite the involvement of her scribe Tshültrim Dorjé as transcriber of her texts.

Sera Khandro does mention having texts printed in addition to hand-copying texts, but not as often. She writes that she received sponsorship from the Lingkar Dharma King (*Gling dkar chos rgyal*) and his family to publish (*spar du bzhengs pa*) Dujom Lingpa and Drímé Özer’s complete teachings, the complete texts on tenth and twenty-fifth day (ritual practices), and Breakthrough (*khregs chod*) and Direct transcendence (*thod rgyal*) teachings. *Autobiography* 400b.6-401a.2. Probably the distinction between publishing and hand-copying was economic; with royal sponsorship, the more expensive option of wood-block printing was possible. Given that this comment suggests that Drímé Özer’s teaching cycles were carved into wood blocks along with his fathers, it is curious that they are lost.

Sera Khandro also mentions in the *Biography* a large wood-block printing project that Drímé Özer began at the close of his life to publish his father Dujom Lingpa’s entire Treasure collection. Drímé Özer ordered his close disciples to gather 1000 wood blocks and sent his student from Dege back home to bring ten wood carvers back to carve the wood. It is unclear from the *Biography* whether this project was completed at this time or not because Drímé Özer died shortly after this and Sera Khandro was expelled from the community. See *Biography*, 218b-219.

There are two possible interpretations of this metaphor: 1) like two sides of a drum never can meet each other, she never meets her previous home and friends; 2) They are two-faced, not always nice to her, as the damaru drum has two sides.

Gyalrong Khenpo Sangyé says the meaning of *spos rgya’i ris* is that it is an interlocking pattern, never-ending.

The eight worldly concerns (*chos brgyad*) are reactions to 1) gain, 2) loss, 3) fame, 4) infamy, 5) praise, 6) blame, 7) happiness, and 8) sadness.
220 Autobiography 363a.5-364b.3. I include this song to give an example of the many songs that Sera Khandro interweaves into her narrative, many of which at the end of her Autobiography are reflections on impermanence like this one.
Sera Khandro notes in her colophon that she wrote her *Autobiography* in two phases, one up to the age of 36 and one from the ages of 36-43. See Appendix III for a translation of the colophon in which the two sections, the first in prose and the second in verse, are distinct. Although the colophon clearly marks the two different phases in which she wrote her *Autobiography*, the *Autobiography* itself reads seamlessly. There are no stylistic, tonal, or grammatical differences between the sections of her narrative leading up to the age of 36 and those afterwards. Interestingly, in the latter colophon she concludes with the words, “I wrote this myself,” without citing the involvement of Tsültrim Dorjé, the scribe for the earlier section.

*Autobiography* 407a.4:

This last line is an indication that Tsültrim Dorjé was not involved in the writing of the latter section. If this is the case, it is further evidence that his role was entirely scribal, as Sera Khandro states, and not authorial since the two sections are clearly the work of one author.

*Autobiography* 368a.6-368b.1; entire passage is *Autobiography* 367a.3-368b.2. I translate this passage in full in Chapter Four, pp. 258-259.

Tsül khrims rdo rje. Rgyal yum ye shes mtsho rgyal mi mgon mam thar bzhengs pa mkha’ ‘gro rin po che bde ba’i rdo rje’i ‘das rjes kyi mam thar don bstan su bkod pa. Unpublished Manuscript, 1948. This text is handwritten in cursive (yig nag) Tibetan as his other manuscripts are, but it appears to have been written quickly or casually – mistakes are crossed out and the handwriting is very messy, unlike his meticulously neat transcriptions of Sera Khandro’s works.


Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: Sb.3-6a.2; Tsül khrims rdo rje 1948: 2a.2-5.

Tsül khrims rdo rje 1948: 2b.1-3.

Tsül khrims rdo rje 1948: 3a.2-4.

Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 7a.5-6.

Tsül khrims rdo rje 1948: 5a.5-5b.2.

Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 8a.6-8b.2; Tsül khrims rdo rje 1948: 6a.4-6b.1.

Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 8b.4-9a.2.

Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 10a.3-11a.4.

Tsül khrims rdo rje 1948: 9a.2-9b.1.

Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 11b.5-12a.1.

Tsül khrims rdo rje 1948: 10b.5-11a.1.
Chapter Two: Treasure Revelation in Golok Society


Trulku Thondup 1986: 61. My discussion of Treasure revelation will draw heavily from Trülku Thondup’s Hidden Teachings of Tibet, which is a translation of the Third Dodrupchen Jikmé Tenpé Nyima’s (Jigs med bstan pa’i rnyi ma, 1865-1926) Wonder Ocean: An Explanation of the Dharma Treasure Tradition (Las ’phro gter brgyud kyi rnam bshad nyung gsal ngo mthar rgya mtho, also known as Gter gyi rnam bshad) because this presentation of the Treasure tradition is the most closely aligned with the Treasure revelation milieu in which Sera Khandro participated. Jikmé Tenpé Nyima was in fact the brother of Sera Khandro’s consort Drimé Özer and she may have known him personally, although she does not state this in her Autobiography. Ironically, Trülku Thondup himself is a family relation of Drimé Özer’s contemporary incarnation Trülku Jikmé Püntsok, so his work is doubly “all in the family.” This is not mere coincidence; Treasure revelation is and was predominantly a family-inherited tradition in Golok.


Germano 1999: 152.
Thondup 1986: 149.
Thondup 1986: 61, 90.

See appendices in Thondup 1986 for more information about categories of Nyingma scriptures.

Thondup 1986: 47. Dharmakāya, Sāṃbhogakāya, and Nirmāṇakāya refer to three dimensions of Buddhahood that can be described as having the essence of emptiness, the nature of spontaneous presence, and the dynamism of compassion.

Thondup 1986: 67-68.

Perkins 1995: 3.


See Blondeau 1980 for a more detailed description of different types of Padmasambhava biographies, which she separates into those in which he is miraculously born (rdzus skyes), which tend to be revealed Treasure literature, and those in which he is born from a womb (mngal skyes).

Tsogyal 1993: 145.

Tsogyal 1993: 209.

Tsogyal 1978: 746.

Dujom Rinpoche 1991: 746. Perhaps this can also be detected from The Autobiography of Guru Chos-dbang (1212-1270) in which, Janet Gyatso notes, there is no reference to Jo-mo sMan-mo, the famous female Treasure revealer who later sources assert was his consort. See Gyatso 1994: 283.

Bstag sham nus ldan rdo rje (b. 1655), Bod kyi jo mo ye she snying rgyal gvi mdzad ldan rnam par thar pa gab pa mgon byung rgyud mngas dri za'i glu phreng. Kalimpong: Zangs mdog dpal ri Monastery, 1972. I choose this version because it is a well known and paradigmatic example of Yeshé Tsogyal’s hagiography, although there are other versions and I do not know precisely which version(s) Sera Khandro would have read or heard. In her Autobiography, Sera Khandro recounts writing a Yeshé Tsogyal biography, but she records that due to the critical words of one of Gyalse’s monks, she became angry and threw the manuscript into the fire. See Autobiography 144a.5-145a.3. As far as I have seen, her collected works do not contain a Yeshé Tsogyal biography although they do contain Yeshé Tsogyal Accomplishment Practices (sādhana), feast offerings, a fire offering, and an empowerment.

Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 1999: 132; Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje, Bod kyi jo mo, f. 89b.1-2; 3.

Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 1999: 132-133; Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje, Bod kyi jo mo, ff. 89b.6-90a.3.

Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 1999: 133-134; Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje, Bod kyi jo mo, ff. 90b.2-5.

Autobiography 3a.1-4a.1:
267 *Autobiography* 4a.5-4b.1:


268 Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 1999: 197-198; Stag sham nus Idan rdo rje, *Bod kyi jo mo*, ff. 128b.4-6:


269 *Autobiography* 5a; 11b.

270 Jomo Menmo (*Jo mo sman mo*) was a thirteenth-century female Treasure revealer and consort of the Treasure revealer Guru Chöki Wangpo. See Dujom Rinpoche 1991: 771.

271 Having unmediated access to the divine is not specific only to Treasure revealers, as those who receive Pure Vision teachings or even more generally those who master generation and completion stage meditation practices can also be understood in this way.

272 Thondup 1986: 68.

273 In numerous publications, Janet Gyatso has demonstrated the ways in which these visions, as well as the larger project of writing autobiography, serve to legitimate the Treasure revealer’s role as an authentically prophesied revealer. See Gyatso 1986, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998.
Eliade 1954: 89.
Janet Gyatso also notes the Eliadian quality of temporality in the Treasure tradition, but concludes that the Treasure tradition differs from Eliade’s understanding of the myth of eternal return given the intermediary stages in Treasure revelation including the transmission from primordial Buddhas to Imperial Tibetan mytho-historical figures such as Padmasambhava and then to Treasure revealers. Gyatso 1993: 112. Sera Khandro’s biographical writings seem to collapse the stage of transmission between primordial Buddhas and Padmasambhava, making Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal the primordial figures from which Sera Khandro, as their prophesized emissary, receives direct instruction.

Drime Özer Biography 184a.4- 184b. 4:

“‘One with the Power of a Karmic Link (to the Lotus Born One)” is an epithet of Drime Özer, who by this time in Sera Khandro’s Autobiography has already passed away. Sera Khandro’s constant interaction with figures in her life who have died is another example of her access to a timeless dimension via her visionary experiences.

According to Chatral Sängey Dorje Rinpoche, “sapta” demons refer generally to obstructions that hinder virtuous activities. Personal communication, September, 2005. Sera Khandro mentions sapta demons very frequently, in almost every prophecy she records. Interestingly, an incarnate lama in contemporary Golok defined sapta demons in Sera Khandro’s writings as “Chinese people,” suggesting his view of what obstructs religious accomplishment, although Chatral Rinpoche does not agree with this definition and suggested it is a more general term for hindrances. Sapta is Sanskrit for “seven,” which
raises the question of whether this term for demons could have a link to the Sanskrit Saptamātrikā (Seven Mothers)?

280 Gter gnyis, two Treasures, refers consistently to Dujom Lingpa and Drimé Özer’s Treasure cycles, both of which Sera Khandro was empowered to teach.

281 Benefitting oneself and others.

282 That is, later you will be reborn in Padmasambhava’s Buddhafield called The Glorious Copper-colored Mountain.

283 Sgra brgya ’i gdong gis bsus ’ong. Sgra brgya could be a metaphor for thunder but it doesn’t seem to fit contextually here.

284 Autobiography 355b.4-356b.1:

285 This is similar to the famous female Treasure revealer’s biography from the thirteenth century, Jomo Menmo (Jo mo sman mo), who also received a prophetic vision from Vajravārāhī when she was thirteen that began her career as a Treasure revealer. See Dujom Rinpoche 1991: 771-772.

286 See dissertation p. 25-26 for the English translation of this full passage.

287 Autobiography 49a.6-49b.6. Tibetan transcribed in Ch. 1 endnote 77.

288 As quoted in Mitchell 2002: 39.

289 Autobiography 209a.6-209b.3:
290 Solung Drakar (Bswor lung brag dkar) is a Treasure revelation site a few kilometers outside of the current Padma County seat Selithang off of the road that leads to Banak Monastery, Gara Tertön’s seat, where Sera Khandro lived for many years and where she raised her daughter Yangchen Drönma.

291 Autobiography 152b.3-153a.4:

292 See Chapter One pp. 39-41 for more information on Gara Tertön.

293 Thondup 1986: 107

294 There are also some cases of Treasure revealers who were monks and did not have consorts. For example, see Germano 1998: 68-70 for a discussion of the Serta Treasure revealer Khenpo Jikmê Pûntsok (1934-2003) and the importance he placed on monastic vows. The incarnate of Sera Monastery in Serta named Sera Yangtrül (Se ra yang sprul, 1925-1988), who was the incarnation of the close disciple of Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer Sotrül Rinpoche, was also a monastic Treasure revealer. See Bsod nams ngyi ma 1994 for a biography of Sera Yangtrül. Although there are some examples of monastic Treasure revealers, there is a pervasive idea that monastics cannot reveal all of their prophesized Treasures because of not relying on a consort and therefore not having all the auspicious circumstances necessary for their revelations. See Chapter Four for more information on this point.

295 Thondup 1986: 130.

296 Autobiography 326a.1-3:
297 Bi ma ramsi'i dbu ljon gyis dkris pa'i rdo rje'i brda byas pa'i tshe. The meaning of this is unclear. If dkris was spelled bkris, it would be an abbreviation of bkra shis, hence it would change the meaning to "auspicious vajra." The import of this phrase seems to be that Bi ma ramsi, i.e., Skt. vimala (stainless) + ramsi (ray of light) or Tib. Drimé Özer made a sign that enabled the Treasure entrance to open.

298 Autobiography 203a.4-205a.2:
259 It is interesting to consider whether this focus on male and female partnership is related to Sera Khandro’s identity as a female Treasure revealer, although there is insufficient research to date to draw any conclusion about this. Another example of a Treasure revealer couple who suggest they need each other to reveal their Treasures is Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer’s incarnations Namtrul Jikmé Püntsok and Taré Lhamo, who draw from Sera Khandro’s writings to formulate their identity as a divinely prophesized Treasure revelation couple. In this couple as well, both figures are renowned for being Treasure revealers in their own right, yet Namtrul Jikmé Püntsok explains that they revealed their Treasures together as a couple. I discuss this further in Chapter Five.

260 Here in Drimé Özer’s Biography, Sera Khandro refers to herself as the Tibetan word for dakini, khandroma, and also by her Treasure name Dewé Dorjé.

261 Drimé Özer Biography 210b.5-212a.4:


302 Autobiography 245a.2-3.
303 This is an alternative name for Drimé Özer meaning “Place of Secret Mantra that Tames Beings.”
304 Autobiography 357a.4- 357b.1:

306 Traces of the hegemonic conversion of Tibet to Buddhism beginning in the eighth century are still visible today in this rhetoric of subjugating and controlling the local deities.
Lharik Nyentsé (*Lha rig gnyen rtses*) is the name of a mountain deity affiliated with the Golok mountain range Nyenpo Yutsé in Jiktril County, Golok, just over the county line from Padma County and nearby Pelyül Tartang Monastery. Nyenpo Yutsé is the principal holy mountain of Golok, revered as the birthplace of the Golok tribes.

"Autobiography" 342b.1-343a.2:

309 Sangngak Lingpa is an epithet of Drimé Özer, but here the name does not refer to him but a different figure named *A skyes gsang sngags gling pa*. Since Sera Khandro almost always refers to Drimé Özer as "The Lord himself" (*rje de nyid*) or as "The Wish-fulfilling Jewel" (*yid bzhin nor bu*), in any case it would be unusual for her to call him by this name.

"Autobiography" 309b.5-310b.1:
“Compound metal” refers to a compound of gold, silver, zinc, and iron called li khra.

Drime Özer Biography 58b.3-60a.2 (see endnote 316 for more discussion of the significance of Gesar references):
Another interesting element of Drimé Özer’s Treasure revelations is that he revealed not only Buddhist, but also Bön Treasures according to Sera Khandro (see Prats 1980: 250 and Blondeau 1984 for other examples of Treasure revealers who revealed both Buddhist and Bön Treasures). In Drimé Özer’s Biography, Sera Khandro writes,

[Drimé Özer] gave whatever Dharma empowerments, reading transmissions, and so forth that were in accordance with the monk’s own [Buddhist] system. Having given the Bön practitioners the explanation and reading transmission for the Dharma Cycle on the Seminal Essence of the “A” Explanation, he fulfilled all their hopes without remainder. Having upheld [Drimé Özer] as their crown jewel, the [Buddhist] monks and Bön practitioners offered him many [types of] service doing whatever pleased him (Biography 108b.2-5, see below for Tibetan).

From this comment, it appears that there was no great animosity between Buddhists and Bön practitioners and that it was coherent for one lama to be affiliated with both traditions. In fact, we should not be too surprised by this because the Bön religion had a very active role in Golok society in the early twentieth century and before. According to Gelek, “The religious structure [of Serta] followed the military structure in that for every thousand households there was a senior Bön spirit-medium called Lha dPon and a junior Bön spirit-medium called Lha Pa for each combat group” (Gelek 1998: 54).

Biography 108b.2-5:


315 Despite the radical changes that centralized Chinese government has made on this equilibrium between local deities and local villages through the bridge of their village leaders, annual propitiation rites still exist and are faithfully observed throughout Golok. Each village has their own special offering site, to be used by no other group, and it is almost always only men who are allowed ritual interaction with the local deities through making offerings, although in recent years women also circumambulate these sites. I was present in the early summer, 2005, at Drungri for the annual propitiation rite of the Washül (Wa shül) tribe of Serta lead by the son of the former Washül Serta leader named Tsedrup Gön (Zhe grub mgon). Only men attended the rite (I had to stand far away because I was a foreigner and a female), which consisted of offering new prayer flags, wind horses, and copious amounts of incense to the Washül cairn, riding around the cairn on horseback many times yelling invocations to the gods, and competing against each other in bareback horse races.

This annual mountain deity propitiation rite retains a separation between Buddhist elements, conducted in a separate “shrine” tent by monks, and mountain cult elements, conducted by the laymen at the cairn. However, the whole ritual takes on a Buddhist tone when all the men including the Washül leader gather, sitting in a wide circle, for a sermon given by their community’s monastics.

Drungri is in the middle of nomadic grasslands and high mountains populated only by seasonal nomads’ black yak hair tents. There is no Chinese road leading to Drungri as of August 2005. The only access is paths on the grasslands accessible by horseback or rugged four-wheel-drive vehicles. A local Tibetan Serta government official told me that he had successfully lobbied against building a road to the sacred mountain because he feared that a road would bring too much Chinese presence to the site. See Karmay 1998a: 428-429 for a description of a similar mountain cult ritual; Karmay 1998a: 432-450 for the
political significance of mountain deity cults. See Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Blondeau 1998 for studies on mountain cults.

316 Drimé Özer Biography 181a.3-6 (see below for translation). There is a strong relationship between narratives about the mythical Tibetan hero Gesar, reminiscent of the Arthurian legends of England, and narratives of Tibetan nationalism. See Karmay 1998a: 465-501; Dreyfus 1994: 210-212 for more on the relationship of Gesar and Tibetan nationalism. As a Tibetan warrior whose myth originates in the Amnyé Machen region of Amdo, Gesar's memory is extremely popular in Golok. He appears in contemporary Eastern Tibet via an ongoing tradition of bards who sing stories about him and monastic dances ('chams') dedicated to re-enacting his epics. Also, he is related to Treasure revelation via the Treasure texts attributable to him such as this one given to Drimé Özer. Also, Gesar is channeled by Tibetan spirit mediums (lha pa), who are sometimes also Treasure revealers, although since ca. 1959 when spirit possession was outlawed he has appeared with less regularity. In Serta, Gesar possessed at least two of the handful of famous contemporary Treasure revealers including Trülku Jikmé Püntsok and Rikzin Nyima. Drimé Özer Biography 181a.3-6:

317 Drimé Özer Biography 176a.2-6:

318 Autobiography 383a.2-6:

319 Autobiography 380a.2-3:
320 Drimé Özer Biography 107a.2-5:

Sera Khandro uses the term Treasure revelation encampment (gter sgar) and religious encampment (chos sgar) interchangeably. Both seem to refer to a mobile community of monastic and non-celibate practitioners gathered around a charismatic Treasure revealer. See the discussion below regarding the definition problems regarding religious encampments versus monasteries. In the contemporary context, it is much more common to hear the term chos sgar (religious encampment) than Treasure revelation encampment (gter sgar). See Terrone forthcoming for an informative discussion of the role of chos sgar in contemporary Eastern Tibet. In the contemporary context, chos sgar are not necessarily mobile, but in Sera Khandro’s writings chos sgar are by definition mobile, comprised of non-celibate and celibate religious specialists living in yak hair tents. They can, however, be linked to permanent structures such as monasteries. The two primary communities Sera Khandro refers to with the term gter sgar are 1) Dujom Lingpa/Drimé Özer’s area called Dartsang and 2) Gara Tertön/Gyalse’s area called Banak.

322 Gelek 1998: 47. Much of my discussion of Golok will focus on Serta, but actually Sera Khandro also lived and traveled in other parts of Golok as well, most notably Banak Monastery in Padma County. Although I do not have statistical data on Padma County, their nomadic social structure would have been similar to that of Serta. Drimé Özer’s Biography also contains more information about Serta because it is the location of his Treasure encampment.


324 Oral interview, June 2005 conducted in Serta, Golok (the names of my informants are withheld for their security).

325 Rock 1956: 127.


329 Oral interview May 2005 conducted in Serta, Golok.

330 Drimé Özer Biography 197b.3:

331 Gelek 1998: 54.

332 This distinction is a generalization and I am making the point here that the line between monastery (dgong) and religious encampment (sgar) is blurry; in fact one place can sometimes be referred to by both of these names, and religious encampments are not always mobile, especially in the contemporary context. A contemporary example of this is the Treasure revealer Rig ‘dzin nyi ma’s sgar in Nyenlung, Serta near the border between Sichuan and Qinghai, which is a permanent community comprised of monks and headed by a non-celibate Treasure revealer who has a consort. On the other hand, just up the road is another permanent community comprised of monks, the non-celibate Treasure revealer Trülku Jigmé Püntsok’s residence, which is called Nyenlung Monastery (Snyan lung dgon pa). Perhaps the difference between a
sgar and a dgon pertains to the type of religious community who originally founded the site.

In contemporary Tibet, the distinction between a monastery and a religious encampment has significant political ramifications. Germano had demonstrated how the most famous contemporary encampment, Larung Gar, founded in 1980 by Khenpo Jigmé Puntsok, has been able to grow exponentially, follow its own academic curriculum, and avoid political indoctrination campaigns and population limitations because it is not formally registered as a monastery, but is registered as an academy Germano 1998: 63.

Terrone traces the history of religious encampments back to the fourteenth century to the large outdoor religious encampments organized on the occasions of the teachings and empowerments given by the fourth Karmapa Rol pa’i rdo rje (1340-1383). Terrone argues that religious encampments have gained in popularity in post-Mao Tibet because they offer a way to escape the “patriotic education campaigns” enforced since 1996 in monasteries. In contrast, religious encampments offer traditional religious education without restrictive government control. Terrone argues, “The revitalization of religious communities such as the religious encampments and of activities such as Treasure revelation represent a growing need to find sources of authority, legitimacy, and prestige claims by Buddhist practitioners elsewhere than in the formal religious institutions recognized by the government.” Terrone forthcoming: 16.

Levine 1998: 70.

334 Sera Khandro does mention performing typical nomad woman’s domestic responsibilities such as milking livestock (nor) and churning butter as part of her regular duties when she lived in Gara Gyalse’s encampment. See Autobiography 257. Throughout her writing she describes going out and collecting firewood, which is often what she is doing when her divine visions come to her. Thus the lines between lay nomadic householder pastoralist work and religious encampment ritual work are blurry especially when it comes to women’s work. However, the central difference between the lay and religious communities Sera Khandro describes in early twentieth-century Golok is that religious encampments (chos sgar) had ritual expertise and were commissioned by local lay nomadic encampments (ru skor, tsho ba) for their religious skill.

335 In Golok, I saw an old photo from the early 1980s of Serta showing the tents surrounding the Gogentang Stupa with no visible permanent structures aside from the Stupa itself.

336 See Biography 25b for one description of moving and pitching tents etc. from Drimé Özer’s childhood when he helps Dujom Lingpa move to Lungkham (Lung kha ma), a location in upper Dartsang (here spelled Bdar tshangs instead of Zlar tshang).

337 My translation of ‘nas ‘go’i dbon po is tentative in this passage. The word dbon po could mean “male relative,” or it could mean “Tantrist” as it does in parts of Amdo. However, Sera Khandro does not use the term dbon po to refer to a Tantrist any other place in her auto/biographical writing. I wonder if the term dbon po could be a misspelling for dpon po, which means leader and comes up frequently in her writing. Hence, I have tentatively translated the passage as “the leader of the head of the land in Drongdün.” Drongdün literally means “in front of Drong,” i.e., Drongri, therefore this village was very close to the sacred mountain.

338 This appears to be an epithet for Longchenpa.

339 Sotrül Rinpoche was Drimé Özer’s closest disciple. He was the incarnate lama of Sera Monastery also in Serta, and before his death, Drimé Özer charged Sotrül Rinpoche with caring for Sera Khandro for the rest of her life.

340 Gyal byar byon, i.e., had gone out to gather resources by performing rituals/giving religious instruction.

341 Drimé Özer Biography 197a.2-197b.4:
A field research anecdote: After several months in Serta conducting research in the spring and summer 2005, I needed to return to Chengdu on a specific day to pick up friends there. The night before my departure there was a massive rainstorm all throughout the Serta area, and I was distraught to realize the next morning that the road to Chengdu was impassable due to a landslide (an unfortunately common occurrence). Dismayed, we returned to Serta. I insisted that my driver find an alternate route to get me to Chengdu. There were only a few options, all involving dangerous roads, potential landslides, and high mountain passes. My driver made some phone calls (presumably to his driver friends or local road authorities) and after a while came back to me gleefully happy, telling me he had found a passable road! We set out immediately. As we were winding our way up the mountain, my driver told me that there could be no problem: he couldn’t reach any other drivers or authorities to find out about the road conditions, but he had called the lama at one of Serta’s local monasteries and had received a favorable divination indicating that certainly the road was open! Prophecy is thus a determining element of life even today in Serta and beyond in Tibet. Despite some doubting minds, I can report that the road was open, and I made it to Chengdu tired but unharmed.

Autobiography 197b.2 (transcribed above in endnote 341).

Biography 128b.4-129a.1.

Levine 1998: 70.

Biography 128.

Biography 192a.3-4:

This name means Golden Wild Yak.

Biography 195a4-6:

Thondup 1986: 121.

Biography 48b.6-49a.6:
352 Biography 80a.4-80b.1:

353 Autobiography 250a.3-6:

354 Autobiography 254a.1-2:
Chapter Three: Autobiography, Gender, and the Self

Another way of describing this tension between confident and self-humbling self-representations following the terminology of Reynolds and Capps’s work analyzing spiritual biography is that the tone of some biographies “humanizes” the biographical subject by reflecting her common human weaknesses while others “spiritualize” the subject by removing all human foibles from their narrative self-presentation. Reynolds and Capps 1976: 3. Sera Khandro paints a human, albeit extraordinary, vision of herself but completely spiritualizes her portrayal of Drimé Özer. However, the focus of this chapter will be on Sera Khandro’s Autobiography.


This discussion of self-humbling and self-aggrandizing rhetoric is informed by Janet Gyatso’s study on the autobiography of another Treasure revealer, Jikmé Lingpa. See Gyatso 1998: 105, also Gyatso 1992a. My addition to Gyatso’s portrayal of the tension between self-humbling and self-aggrandizing autobiographical rhetoric concerns the role that Sera Khandro’s gender plays in this dialectic in her writings.


Weintraub 1978: xvii.


Sayre 1994: 3. Sayre cites Thomas Cooley, Educated Lives: The Rise of Modern Autobiography in America (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1976: 3) for the earliest usage of “autobiography.” Despite the relatively late origins of the term autobiography, self-referential religious writing, what we today term spiritual autobiography, has far older roots, originating in the Western literary tradition in Classical Antiquity with St. Augustine’s Confessions (see chapter 1 of Weintraub 1978). Interestingly, in the context of European spiritual autobiography, medieval women’s biographical writings play a prominent role, including the writings of Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Clare of Assisi, and others. Ancient and medieval European spiritual autobiographies differ from the later post-Enlightenment genre of secular autobiography in that they record the religious journey of the soul towards God instead of the later secular autobiographical focus on the social struggles of the self. Theorists commonly delineate the turning point between these forms of autobiography with the Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) in which the author’s achievements and social interactions take center stage instead of the earlier focus on the movement towards God’s salvation (Jones 2005: 699).


The sentences in this paragraph are paraphrases of Gyatso 1998: 101.

Wu 1990: 8.


Sera Khandro describes her autobiography using the term namtar and not rangnam in the title of the work. However, Sera Khandro explicitly claims authorship of the work in several places, and I see no reason to doubt the veracity of her claim especially given that the text is narrated entirely in the first person voice and includes pervasive self-humbling rhetoric characteristic of self-written accounts.


Paul de Man 1979: 920.


Here I am drawing from Geertz’s famous statement in “Religion as a Cultural System” that, “Unlike genes, and other non-symbolic information sources, which are only models for, not models of, cultural patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, i.e., objective conceptual form, to social and
psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves." Geertz 1973 : 8.
Schober (1997: 2) also applies Geertz’s terms to Buddhist biography.
375 “Realizations” is a translation of rtags brjod, literally “realization expression.” It is one word for
biography and can be used to refer to autobiography as well. This term shares with its more common term
namtar an etymology that links telling one’s life story with a teleological narrative expressing one’s
realization (rtags) or liberation (thar), thus defining biography in the Tibetan tradition as a story
documenting the subject’s religious realizations leading to spiritual liberation.
376 Autobiography 7a.6-7b.2:
377 See Aziz in Willis 1987: 79-81 for further elaboration on this term skye dman. The most common
colloquial term for woman in Golok dialect Tibetan is the non-honorable term mo or nag mo although skye
dman is also used.
380 Autobiography 13b.1-3:
381 The Buddha who preceded Sakyamuni Buddha.
382 Autobiography 105a.6 - 106a.2:
383 Autobiography 174b.5-175a.4:

384 I am thinking in particular of the statement in Myers and Powell 1999: 329 also cited by Kurtis Schaeffer in Gyatso and Havnevik 2005: 107 that, "...there is no gender-linked ambiguity about the man's worthiness to be a subject. In general, men's accounts do not employ sex as a category for establishing the significance of the story or its outcome. Gender is not even discussed; a man's biographer might focus on the subject's extraordinary charity or favored state as receiving divine mercies, but in no way are these held out as unusual for his sex in particular. Accepted as normative, the male subject's masculinity is, therefore, literally unremarkable. In narratives about women, by contrast, gender is a central concern. In fact, much of the drama in these narratives-and the justification for taking the time to attend to a woman's life, whether one's own or someone else's-derives from the amazing spectacle they present of a woman managing to live a praiseworthy life in spite of her sex." Considering the focus Sera Khandro placed in her autobiographical writing on her gender and its influence on her ability to reveal Treasures, Sera Khandro's Autobiography can certainly be used as an example in support of Myers and Powell's insight that women's writings must articulate why they managed to live extraordinary lives in spite of their female gender.

385 Female Treasure revealers are rare, but not entirely unheard of. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899)'s Gter ston rgya rtsa includes mention of Jomo Menmo (Jo mo sman mo) and Kunga Buma (Kun dga' 'bum ma) as female Treasure revealers. Some recent examples of female Treasure revealers (gter ston ma) other than Sera Khandro include the recently deceased Bön woman Khandro Khachi Wangmo (see Hanna 1996), Taré Lhamo (1938-2002, who was recognized in Golok as being an incarnation of Sera Khandro), and Künzang Wangmo, a contemporary figure residing in Dzachuka who is the daughter of Namkha Jikmé, the brother of Sera Khandro's partner Drimé Özer (I plan to conduct future research on Künzang Wangmo). Hanna Havnevik (1999: 12) also mentions that Jetsün Lochen Rinpoche (1865-1951) revealed mind Treasures (dgongs gter).

386 The Dharma King Ngak'i Wangpo (Chos rgyal ngag kyi dbang po, 1736-1807) was of royal Mongolian ancestry, just as Sera Khandro describes her father. He was a descendant of Gushri Khan (1592-1654) who
lived in the Kokonor region of Amdo. He renounced his claim to Gushri Khan's kingdom and became a prominent Nyingma Master. He was the teacher of Shabkar Tsonkham Rangdröl (1781-1851). See Ricard 1994: 565-568 for a description of his family genealogy. This reference to Ngaki Wangpo as one of Sera Khandro's paternal ancestors strengthens the case that her "Chinese" father of "royal Mongolian ancestry" who was a Seminal Heart practitioner was a descendant of the Mongolian Khans who migrated to Lhasa.

387 Autobiography 17b.3-4:

388 Autobiography 141a.3-4 (see Tibetan below). This seems to be a reference to 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899)'s Gier ston rgya rita (One Hundred Treasure Revealers), the 19th century compilation mentioned above that includes both Jo mo sman mo and Kun dga' 'bum ma as female Treasure revealers.
Chapter One p. 46 includes a translation of this interesting birth story in which Sera Khandro emphasizes their negative perception of the female gender.

In the Autobiography, 187 pages are representations of Sera Khandro’s visionary and dream experiences and 219 pages of the Autobiography represent her this-world life experiences.

See complete translation of this passage in Chapter One, pp. 25-26.

"Kyema Ho!
Yogini seasoned in the Secret Mantra!
The ground of Liberation
Is this human frame, this common human form—
And here distinctions, male or female,
Have no consequence.
And yet if bodhicitta graces it,
A woman’s form indeed will be supreme!" (Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 1999: 91)

Schaeffer also raises this point about whether or not the Life of Orgyen Chökyi was subversive: “Was the Life of Orgyen Chökyi a ‘voice of opposition,’ that represented or provoked any real change in the status of religious women during or after Orgyen Chökyi’s time, or simply an ‘alternative voice,’ easily usurped by her master or other lamas?” (Schaeffer 2004: 103). Answering this question in reference to Sera Khandro’s Autobiography, the fact that many women in Golok after Sera Khandro’s death consider themselves or
were considered to be emanations of Sera Khandro may allude to the fact that Sera Khandro’s precedence as a female Treasure revealer did pave the way for future women to pursue religious careers.

Auto biography 147b.6-148a.2:

Auto biography 165b.6:

Auto biography 165b.6-166b.3:

Auto biography 167b.1.

Auto biography 360b.1-3:

Auto biography 361a.5-361b.4:
My comments about Jetsün Lochen Rinpoché and her autobiography rely on Hanna Havnevik’s extensive doctoral study and translation of her autobiography, Havnevik 1999. Although Jetsün Lochen and Sera Khandro’s dates overlap, they do not mention each other in their autobiographies. Given that Sera Khandro left Central Tibet at the age of fifteen, it is likely that at least Jetsün Lochen never knew of Sera Khandro.

Havnevik 1999: 143, 145, 163; Sera Khandro *Autobiography* 8-8b, 10b.


Havnevik 1999: 285; for Gyalse’s criticism of Sera Khandro’s visionary writings see *Autobiography* 141, 143.5, 144, 147.

Havnevik 1999: 157, 283, 365, 423, 535, 603, 635, 659, 661; for some of the most important dakini visions Sera Khandro records see *Autobiography* 37b-40b, 48b-49b, 97b-100, 108b-110, 122b-125, 166b-171b, 184-189, 237b-239b, 275-277, 303b, 349-351, 367-368b.


Havnevik 1999: 497; Sera Khandro *Autobiography* 45b-46.

Havnevik 1999: 625, 627.

*Autobiography* 403a.1-2:

413 Havnevik 1999: 58, 60.

414 Chapter Four elaborates on the jealousies and suspicion that surrounded Sera Khandro wherever she went, particularly when she interacted with monastics and stayed in monasteries.

415 Havnevik 1999: 149; Sera Khandro *Autobiography* 145b-147.

416 My analysis of Orgyen Chökyi’s writing is based on Kurtis Schaeffer’s insightful study and translation of her autobiography. See Schaeffer 2004.


418 Schaeffer 2004: 142.

419 Schaeffer 2004: 143.

420 Schaeffer 2004: 96.

421 Schaeffer 2004: 98.

422 Schaeffer 2004: 91.

423 Liz Wilson (1996) has elaborated on this connection between cyclic existence and the female body in the context of early Indian Buddhism.


425 Schaeffer 2004: 143; *Autobiography* 13b.2:

426 Schaeffer 2004: 103 raises the question of whether or not we can interpret a subversive element to Orgyen Chökyi’s *Life*.

The few female religious teachers she does mention include a famous incarnation of Machik Labdrön named Ané Zangmo (A ne bzang mo) who Sera Khandro was unable to meet because she died when Sera Khandro was twenty years old. See Autobiography 122b-123a. Later in her narrative, Sera Khandro recounts that, "When I was thirty-nine years old, Khenpo Norbu Wangyal and the Tantric priest Nyima Drönma (sngags btsun nyi ma sgron ma) and so forth invited me to come seek alms in their land."

Autobiography 368b.2-3. Khenpo Norbu Wangyal is the contemporary Nyingma Master Chatral Sangyé Dorjé Rinpoche's uncle, who was from Absé (A bswe) in the Nyarong region of Kham. The title sngags btsun, Tantric priest, used in reference to a woman is noteworthy; it would be interesting to explore how often this title is used in reference to female figures. Sera Khandro mentions one other khandroma, the dākinī from Tromgé named Dawa Drönma (Khrom dge'i mkha' 'gro zla ba sgron ma), who, Sera Khandro writes, wanted to meet her and traveled with her to Dzakhok (Rdz a khog) when Sera Khandro was forty-one years old. Autobiography 381b2-4.

435 Autobiography 6a.6-6b.2:

438 Autobiography 122b.2-123a.5:
Harding 2003: 80.
See Epstein 1982; Pommaret 1989; Drolma 1995 for accounts by and about this predominantly female role of experiencing temporary death-like states in which the delok travels to the realm of the dead and returns with moral tales advocating virtuous living through illustrating the variegated sufferings of the Buddhist hells. Delok accounts are the only form of Tibetan biographical literature whose subjects are more commonly female.

Autobiography 33b.6-43a.5; Sera Khandro’s written delok account is not in her gter chos as published in Bde ba’i rdo rje 1978. It is a fifteen folio page text titled Nyams byung skor las bar do ’i mthong snang nges ’byung gsal sgron. In the colophon, Sera Khandro signs it as Köünzang Chöiyi Wangmo and states that it is an account of a vision she had when she was twenty-one years old. She specifies that two women, her daughter Chöiyin Drönma and her disciple Sherab Drönma, exhorted her to compose the text.

Schaeffer 2004: 59-60.
Kim Gutschow notes that the Zanskar nuns she studied extensively explained that women participate in the fasting rite more often than men because they have a greater need for merit and purification. Gutschow 2004: 214. See Losang Kalsang Gyatso 1995: 193-196 for a summary of Gelong Palmo’s life based on Yeshé Gyaltse’s 1760 composition of her biography.

Harding 2003: 32.
Havnevik 1999: 41.

Autobiography 388b.5-6.
Smith and Watson 2001: 121.
Mason in Olney 1980: 231.
Jelinek 1986: xiii.
Jelinek 1986: xiii.
Eakin 1999: 49.
Smith and Watson 2001: 177.
Stanton 1987: 15
The Life of Shabkar, the autobiography of the nineteenth-century wandering yogi from Rebkong, Amdo, with its songs, dialogues, and letters written back and forth is one example that demonstrates that dialogic interaction is not exclusive to Tibetan women’s writing. The interesting point to examine regarding gender and dialogic interactions concerns what is at stake in the dialogues that Sera Khandro recounts, which are often issues related to her legitimacy as a female Treasure revealer.

This is also very much true about her visionary encounters, which are the subject of the following section. Here I confine myself to dialogic interactions that Sera Khandro records having taken place during her worldly life.

Autobiography 162a.5-163a.4:
468 Autobiography 163b.4-5:

This discourse of relying on each other for the benefit of sentient beings is suspiciously close to the way that Sera Khadro describes engaging in consort practices. This would be surprising, however, since Gotrül Rinpoche was a monastic hierarch at Pelyü Tartang Monastery. Indeed, she alludes that she and Gotrül were close, but her comments appear to be purposefully vague. In Chapter Four, I return to this question of the nature of their relationship.

470 Autobiography 198a.3-199a.3:
471 Autobiography 280b.2-281a.6:

472 Autobiography 281a.4-282b.6:
473 The point here is that Gyalse’s religious encampment (chos sgar) picked up and moved camp to the location of his family (the Gar family’s) camp (Mgar skor).
474 Autobiography 255b.1-5:
The second most common type of visionary figure Sera Khandro encounters are (male) siddhas, or Accomplished Masters, including Guru Rinpoche, Sarabapa, Taranatha, Kukurepa, Dujom Lingpa, Drimé Özer, Gara Terton, and Gotrül Rinpoche, the latter four coming to her in visions after their deaths. These and other siddhas appear about twenty times. Thirdly, she interacts with many classes of non-human spirits including land deities, most often Nyenchen Tangilha, nāgas, and various classes of demons in approximately eleven visions.

477 This distinction between dākinī visions reminding a male subject of the undecidedness of his experience, of the unformulatedness of his selfhood, and dākinī visions offering a female subject support, encouragement, and advice without much emphasis on destabilizing her newly bolstered sense of self is reminiscent of the point within contemporary feminist theory that postmodern theories deconstructing a coherent sense of selfhood are only liberating if one already has a strong enough sense of self to be deconstructed, something that women, racial or sexual minorities, and poor people are not always privileged enough to have.
479 Germano and Gyatso 2000.

480 Autobiography 17b. 4-18a.1:

481 Autobiography 22b.5-23b.1:
482 *Autobiography* 35a.2-5:

483 *Gtum mo* is a yogic practice in which the meditator cultivates heat in his or her body.

484 *Autobiography* 97a.3–99a.6:
བོད་ཡིག་འདི་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་

[98] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[99] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[100] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[101] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[102] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[103] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[104] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[105] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[106] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[107] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་

[108] ལུ་མོ་བོད་ཡིག་བཞི་བོད་ཡིག་
Chapter Four: Consorts and Treasure Revelation Communities

487 *Autobiography* 50a.4-5:

By “normative ideas” of the role of consorts I am referring to presentations such as that of the Third Dodrupchen Rinpoche named Jikme Tenpe Nyima (1865-1926) who was an older brother of Sera Khandro’s main consort Drimé Özer and who wrote a famous nineteenth-century explanation of Treasure revelation translated by Thondup 1986. See the section titled “Consorts” in Chapter Two for a description of the role of consorts according to Jikme Tenpe Nyima.


490 Snellgrove 2002: 258.


492 Davidson 2002: 199.


494 Davidson 1995: 301.

495 Dujom Rinpoche 1996: 144.


498 This stands in contrast to the Geluk system, which holds that without consort practices (real or visualized), one cannot gain enlightenment in this body. Because the great patriarch of the Geluk school Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) preserved his monastic vows and did not engage in consort practices, it is said that only after his death did he gain enlightenment through practicing the latter stages of Highest Yoga Tantra. See Cozort 2005 [1986]: 97.
This connection between holding in seminal fluid and maintaining physical energy and spiritual power is one psycho-physiological reason for celibacy in Tibetan Buddhism. Another reason is that celibacy allows men and women freedom to study and practice religion away from the demands of lay life.

The three channels (rtsa gsum) include the central channel (dbus ma) with the taste lady (ro ma) and lone lady (rkyang ma) to either side, in males on the right and left respectively and reversed for females. The five wheels (cakras) are located in the center of the body along the central channel at the crown of the head, the throat, the heart, the navel, and the genitals.

The path of accumulation (tshogs lam) is the first of five paths, traversal of which results in Buddhahood. The other four (respectively) are the path of joining (sbyor lam), seeing (mthong lam), cultivation (yongs byang lam), and no more learning (sgrol lam).

Bodhicitta, here a translation of its abbreviated form “sams,” (Skt. citta) is a word with two meanings: the literal translation is “mind of enlightenment” but actually in channel and wind (rtsa rlung) practices, bodhicitta is a euphemism for seminal fluid and can refer to male or sometimes female fluids. Because of these two meanings, there is no good English translation and I will render the term in its Sanskrit form “bodhicitta.”

The white is the man’s semen and the red is the woman’s blood. These are considered to be equivalent fluids in the man and woman’s bodies.

The three realms comprise the whole world, including the desire realm (‘dod kham), the form realm (geugs kham), and the formless realm (geugs med kham). The “lower door” refers to the lower door of the human body, the genitalia.

There are thirteen grounds on the bodhisattva path, each ground referring to an additional level of realization. Here, the gradual drawing up of the seminal nuclei into the woman’s body is linked to successive stages of attaining the bodhisattva grounds.

The secret abode is the secret wheel (cakra), the lowest one of five cakras located at the genitalia.

The crown protrusion (gtug tor) is the protuberance at the top of the Buddha’s head, one of the thirty-two major marks of a Buddha.

“Awareness body” is a translation of rig stū, but Gyalrong Khenpo Sangye suggests this is a misspelling in the Autobiography that is meant to be rigs stū, which would translate as Buddha body, or lineage body.

The seven aspects of union (kha sbyor yan lag baun): 1) complete enjoyment (longs spyod rdoregs pa), 2) union (kha sbyor), 3) great bliss (bde ba chen po), 4) no self-nature (rang bzhin med pa), 5) completely filled with compassion (smying rjes yongs su gang ba), 6) uninterrupted (rgyun mi chad pa), and 7) unceasing (gog pa med pa).

Autobiography 64a.4-65b.6:
དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [64b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]

དོན་དང་དོན་ནི་གནོད་བོད། སྤོ་བུ་ཕན་ཐོབ་མི་གནོད་པ། ང་རིམ་གཞེན་པར་བོད་པའི་ཟིན་ཏེ་དྲི་ནུ
རིགས་གཞན་གཞན་དང་ཞིག་འབུར་མཛད་པའི་ཡུལ་དོན། [65b]
515 Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo 1999: 42-44; Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje, Bod kyi jo mo, ff. 28b.4-30a.3.
516 See Chapter Three pp. 150-151 for Sera Khandro’s account of how she became upset and threw her unfinished biography of Yeshé Tsogyal into the fire.
517 Autobiography 96b.6-97a.1:

518 Dar thang dgon pa’i gdan rabs 1999: 379.
519 Autobiography 235b.4-5:

520 Autobiography 236a.1:

521 Autobiography 283b.1-2 (I discuss this visit to Adzom Rinpoche in greater detail later in the chapter):

522 Autobiography 352a.1-2:

523 Lcags ri 'od 'bar is a sacred mountain in Padma County, Golok by the Smar River just outside of the county seat on the road to Banak Monastery where Sera Khandro lived with Gyalsé when she was twenty-three.
524 Autobiography 149a.4-149b.2:
525 Autobiography 316a.5-6:

526 Autobiography 378a.4-5:

527 Autobiography 204a.6-204b.1 (I translate this interesting Treasure revelation passage in full in Chapter Two on pp. 103-105):

528 Drimé Özer Biography 174b.3-6:

529 Thondup 1986: 107, 130.

530 Gyatso 1998: 255-256 elaborates on this link between dākinīs, bliss, language, and Treasure revelation.

531 Drimé Özer Biography 166a.4-6:

532 Autobiography 264a.2-5:

533 Drimé Özer Biography 184b.2:

534 Autobiography 204b.3 (see Chapter Two pp. 103-105 for a full translation of this passage):
Autobiography 198b.1-2 (see Chapter Three pp. 187-188 for a full translation of this passage):


536 Dokham (mdo khams) refers to Amdo and Kham, whereas Domé (mdo smad) refers to Amdo.

538 Gang ri thod dkar is a famous pilgrimage site near Shuksep Nunnery known for being the fourteenth-century Nyingma polymath Longchenpa’s hermitage site.

539 Autobiography 53b.1-54b.2:
In Sera Khandro’s *Autobiography* 109b.5-6, this line is actually “If you don’t meet with a consort of noble lineage,” (rgs ldan gyi grogs dang ma ’brel na) but what follows makes no sense if this line is negative because Dorjé Zungma’s main point is that Sera Khandro needs to engage with a consort.

The wheels or cakras of the body each have letters (yi ge), or Sanskrit syllables, associated with them.

“No more learning” (mi slob) is the fifth and final of the five paths of a bodhisattva equal to the realization of Buddhahood.

*Rlung phyogs tsam yang ma ston cig,* i.e., don’t even breathe a word of this; don’t let others hear about this.

*Autobiography* 108b.1-110a.4:
བཟོམ་རྩིམ་དབང་ཕྲོད་ ཚུས་ཀྱི་བཤེག་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཕོ་བོ་ཏོ་སྐྱེ་བཞི་དཔལ་གྲོགས།
ངོ་བོ་གྱི་བཤེག་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཕོ་བོ་ཏོ་ལྡེབས་ཕོ་རྒྱལ་དབང་ཕྲོད།
ངོ་བོ་གྱི་བཤེག་དབང་ཕྲོད། དགེ་གཉེན་པོ་མ། [110]དེ་བོ་རྒྱལ་པོ་སྔོན་པོ་དབང་ཕྲོད།
རྒྱལ་པོ་སྔོན་པོ་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཕོ་བོ་ཏོ་ལྡེབས་ཕོ་རྒྱལ་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཞི་ཕུ་སོགས་པར་
རྒྱལ་པོ་སྔོན་པོ་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཕོ་བོ་ཏོ་ལྡེབས་ཕོ་རྒྱལ་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཞི་ཕུ་སོགས་པར་
རྒྱལ་པོ་སྔོན་པོ་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཕོ་བོ་ཏོ་ལྡེབས་ཕོ་རྒྱལ་དབང་ཕྲོད། ཞི་ཕུ་སོགས་པར་

545 Bimarasmi is the Tibetan spelling of the Sanskrit vimala (stainless) and raśmi (ray of light), the Sanskrit translation of Drimed Özer (Dri med 'od zer).
546 Autobiography 178a.6-180a.4:
547 This line rhymes in Tibetan: “da ni ban nag grong nag yul la.”

548 This type of elusive, symbolic speech is common in the dākini prophecies Sera Khandro includes in her writing. The symbolic metaphors often relate to the natural world, to different animals and environmental phenomena.

549 *Gter nyid* (the two Treasures) refers to the Treasure cycles of Drimé Özer and his father Dujom Lingpa in Sera Khandro’s writings.

550 *Autobiography* 156b.6-158a.2:
The small monk's name is written as an unreadable symbolic character in the Autobiography 353a.1.

Dam tshig la mgon khor med pa byed nges pa yin means that she will not publicly adhere to a particular commitment vow (such as celibacy) but secretly violate that vow.

Autobiography 352a.4-354b.4:
554 Rnam grum bag chags refers to the karmic propensities, or instincts, of body, speech, and mind according to Rigzin 1986: 179.

555 Gyalrong Khenpo Sangye says that ya mi means to fear but I did not find it in any dictionary.

556 I.e., she lived as a celibate practitioner.

557 Autobiography 335a.1-337a.1:
The following vision appears right after Sera Khandro notes that her disciple Khenpo Norbu Wangyal (Mkhan po nor bu dbang rgyal, the contemporary Nyingma Rinpocé Chatral Sangye Dorje’s uncle) didn’t arrive for a teaching she gave at Sera Monastery on Drimé Özer and Dujom Lingpa’s Treasure cycles. Gyalrong Khenpo Sangye interprets that the following vision implies that because Khenpo Norbu Wangyal didn’t come to Sera Khandro’s teaching, the auspicious connections she needed did not fully come together and as a result, she became ill.

This refers to the wheel at the crown of the head.

I.e., Drimé Özer.

Autobiography 367a.3-368b.2:
Two of my teachers, Khenchen Tashi (Khenpo Chödrak’s close disciple in Tagong) and Gyalrong Khenpo Sangyé told me that they think this passage should read “holding a jewel vessel in his left hand and a yak hair whip in his right and riding a black horse with white fetlocks,” but I have translated exactly what is written in Sera Khando’s Autobiography 368b.6-369a.1.

Autobiography 368b.6-369b.5:

564 Autobiography 79b.2-4:
565 Autobiography 81b.2-4:

566 Autobiography 85b.6-86a.2:

567 Autobiography 87a.2-4:

568 Autobiography 96.1-3:

569 Autobiography 101a.3-5:

570 Nga ma sgun dub u bsdag dgos don ci yod is an idiomatic expression meaning, “Why do you think of me as a horrible person?”
571 Da chu zan ’og la ’dus pa’i la byed rjes is a very similar idiomatic expression to the English expression, “Now, it’s all water under the bridge,” i.e., it’s behind us now; it’s too late.

572 Autobiography 101a.6-103b.3:
573 See Chapter Three pp. 146-147 for a partial translation of the dialogue that ensued between the visionary Gara Tertün and Sera Khandro in which he encourages her, telling her that she can accomplish her goals even though she is a woman.

574 In the following section titled “The Exchange of Women,” I explain this exchange scene between Gyalsé and Drimé Özer in greater detail along with relevant translated passages from Sera Khandro’s writings.

575 See Dar than dgon pa'i gdan rabs, pp. 392-393 for a short biography about Sgo chen 'jigs bral chos kyi blo gros.

576 See Chapter Three p. 186 for a translation of this interaction.

577 'Bam gzi is some type of gout or rheumatoid arthritis. Both Giotril Rinpoche and Sera Khandro had this illness.

578 I.e., the horns of a rabbit don’t exist; there isn’t anybody who has even a little pity for Sera Khandro.

579 Autobiography 221a.6-222a.6:
580 Autobiography 193a.5-193b.6:

[Text in Tibetan script]
581 See Autobiography 228a.3-6.
582 Drimé Özer Biography 186b.6-187a.5:

583 Autobiography 165a.1:

584 It is interesting to note that Sera Khandro’s only surviving child, her daughter Chöying Dröma, had a
cchild named Dolé Nyima (Mdo lì n gi ma or Dpal don ’grub ’phrin las rnam rgyal mchog) by Sönam
Detsen (Gier chen bsod nam Id ’u btsan), who was Drimé Özer and Dbang chen sgron ma’s son. Dolé
Nyima was born in 1946 and died during the Cultural Revolution. Padma ’od gsal, Deb chung a ru ra’i
dga’ tshal, pp. 71-72.
585 Autobiography 305b.4-6. The full quote is translated in Chapter One p. 61.
586 The multiple meanings of this word bdag po include “owner, lord, master, boss, husband, guardian.”
Hence, the word implies that Drimé Özer is now her owner or guardian as well as being her husband,
although Sera Khandro does not mention any formal marriage rite aside from this agreement between the
two men.
587 Autobiography 162b.6-165a.4:

589 Autobiography 165a.6-165b.4:

590 Autobiography 277b.3-279a.2:
Noteworthy, also, is the positive reception that Sera Khandro received not only from Adzom Rinpoche himself, but also from his consort and children. This is a nice counter-example to the trouble Sera Khandro had with jealous female consorts. After she concludes nurturing auspicious connections with Adzom, she writes, “Then, his wife, child, and retinue escorted me [away] with great loving. His daughters Künzang Chimé and Apel both escorted me a very far distance away.”

"Intelligent wisdom lady" is a translation of shes rab ma rig can. Perhaps it is supposed to read shes rab ma rigs can, “noble wisdom lady”?

I.e., she won’t promise one thing overtly and do another secretly.

I interpret this to mean that Tritül gave her teachings and precious objects and in return her presence was helpful towards dispelling his obstacles, but that they left the actual auspicious connection of engaging in sexual yoga for later because of Sera Khandro’s misgivings relating to having a liaison with a monastic and having a liaison without Drimé Özer’s permission.
བོད་ལུགས་ཀྱི་ལེགས་པའི་ཁྲིམས་པ་བཞིན་པ་ལས། རྐྱེས་རྒྱུ་ལམ་བཅོས་ལ་མདོར་བོད་ཀྱི་རྒྱུད།
རྒྱུན་ལྡན་མཐོང་ཆུ་མེད་པའི་ཆུ་གའི་ཁྲིམས་པོ་[223b] རྒེས་རྒྱུ་ལམ་བཅོས་ལ་མདོར་བོད་ཀྱི་རྒྱུད།
ཞིབ་འབྲིང་ཞིབ་ལས་བཞིན་པ་ལས། རྒྱེས་རྒྱུ་ལམ་བཅོས་ལ་མདོར་བོད་ཀྱི་རྒྱུད།
དབང་ཆེན་མཐོང་ཆུ་མེད་པའི་ཆུ་གའི་ཁྲིམས་པོ་[224] རྒེས་རྒྱུ་ལམ་བཅོས་ལ་མདོར་བོད་ཀྱི་རྒྱུད།

597 The eight freedoms include freedom from being born in the hells, in the hungry ghost realm, as an animal, a long-lived god, or a barbarian, freedom from having wrong views, from being born where there is no Buddha, and freedom from being born deaf and mute. See Patrul Rinpoche 1994: 20.
Nyon dang btsun lus mdo shor bo. Here I am translating mdo in the sense of rule or axiom, hence in this context as "vow" according to Gyalrong Khenpo Sangye's suggestion.

Refers to the three dimensions of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmankanaya.

Autobiography 172b.6-173b.6:

601 Autobiography 174a.3-5:

602 Autobiography 173b.6-174a.1:

603 "Blessing substance," is tshag shyar. The exact meaning of this is unclear.
Drimé Özer Biography 32b.6-35a.3:

་དཔེ་དབང་ཕྲིད་དགའ་་དཔེ་དག་ལྟ་ཕྲེན་པ། [33] དཔེ་ལྷ་པ་ཆེན་མན་སི་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ་ཏེ་་བཟང་པོ་འཇིག་རྟེན་དག དེ་དག་དག ཚིག་པར་རྩེ་བོ་བུ།
605 Drimé Özer Biography 160a.1-6:

The strong connection Sera Khandro emphasizes in Drimé Özer’s Biography between a non-celibate life and the capacity to reveal Treasure stands in contrast to the recent figure Khenpo Jikmé Pöntsok of Larung Gar in Serta, Golok, who, as Germano points out, emphasized celibacy and monastic ethics even for someone like himself who was a Treasure revealer. Khenpo Jikmé Pöntsok recounts rejecting a female consort who was connected to him through prophecy in favor of maintaining his monastic vows. See Germano 1998: 68-72.

607 Autobiography 11b.6-12a.1. For Tibetan, see Chapter One endnote 52.

608 The three trainings on the path are discipline, concentration, and knowledge.

609 Autobiography 376b.1-3:
Sera Khandro mentions in two places in her Autobiography that she did not eat meat. See Autobiography 94a.3. An exception to this was that when she was thirty, Drimé Özer urged her to eat meat to cure her illness. Sera Khandro records that she did this as a special dispensation from her normal vegetarian diet, see Autobiography 261-261b.

Tentative translation of Sha tsha li khyed so gnam sto yangs pa' sa kha che ba'i mi yin ni 'dra 'dra gsungs nas.

Dus rgyun du gshin po'i ro dum khur.

I.e., you have no shame.

Trainings and vows (bslab sdom) refers to the three types of vows pertaining to the monastic, bodhisattva, and Secret Mantra paths.

Autobiography 93a. 4-93a.4:
616 Havnevik 1989: 147.
617 Makley 2005: 279.
618 Autobiography 107b.4-108a.6:
621 The term I am translating as gossip, *mo kha*, is a colloquial Golok expression and is not in any dictionaries that I have seen. It refers specifically to gossip pertaining to associating with women.

622 *Autobiography* 190b.5-191b.2:

623 In this chapter on p. 272 I translate another passage from this meeting between Sera Khandro and Gotrul Rinpoche describing a vision she had while with him.

624 *Autobiography* 196b.2-4:

625 *Autobiography* 301b.2-4:
Chapter Five: The Divine Couple

I am thinking of the love poetry about Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, for example Jayadeva’s Gītā Govinda, composed in the twelfth century, and the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, dating from the ninth-tenth century.

José Cabezon offers an interesting analysis of the gendered symbolism of male method and female wisdom within Mahāyāna doctrine. Rather than concluding that women’s association with wisdom was positive or at least not misogynist, Cabezon argues: “Wisdom is characterized as feminine (1) because of wisdom’s inferiority in determining Mahāyānic ethnicity and (2) due to the Mahāyāna’s preoccupation with the centrality of emotional states as the distinguishing characteristic (its uniqueness) as a tradition, therefore considering them as more important to Mahāyānic identity, and hence characterizing them as masculine. Clearly, neither of these two reasons for using gender-based symbols adds to the status either of wisdom or women.” Cabezon 1992: 190. In the context of the Treasure tradition, aside from the gendered inequity between the prevalence of sources portraying men searching for their requisite female consort and the rarity of sources documenting women looking for their requisite male consort, it seems that the dyad of method and wisdom reflects two equally necessary facets of auspicious connection in which one does not exceed the other in importance. However, this does not refute Cabezon’s insightful point.

I am thinking in particular of the passage in Drimé Özer’s Biography when he tells her, “... Out of those, it is clear in the prophecy that there will be one extraordinary [consort] who will benefit the Treasures who is equal to me – this is you. Hence, because of this, we can act as consorts for each other.” Of course Sera Khandro then mitigates this strong assertion of equality by adding, “Although Dewé Dorje thought, ‘It is certain that an inferior one like me is not equal to Trülku Rinpoché,’ for the purposes of auspicious connections, she didn’t say anything [like this] and said, ‘Okay.’” See Chapter Two pp. 94-95 for the full translation. For Tibetan, see endnote number 277 or Drimé Özer’s Biography 184a.4-184b.4.

Personal communication August 2004, in Padma County, Golok.

Rdzogs chen dpal dge is another name for Patrul Jikme Chöki Wangpo (1808-1887), the famous Patrul Rinpoché who wrote The Words of My Perfect Teacher. Contextually this comment seems to apply to Drimé Özer whom Sera Khandro is about to introduce, but actually it was his brother Namka Jikmé (Nam mkha’ 'jigs med) who was the incarnation of Patrul Rinpoché.

Autobiography 66b.2-67a.1. This passage also appears in Chapter One p. 27; endnote 86 for Tibetan.

Autobiography 67a.1-67b.4:
Nai gro rdo rje rdzong (also called Nyi lung, see Figures 5 and 6) is a cave on a hillside where Drimé Özer did many of his retreats located about one kilometer away from Dujom Lingpa’s seat Dartsang in what is today a vast and open nomadic pasture land in the northern region of Serta County, Golok (Sichuan, PRC). The GPS location of this cave is elev. 14.035°; N 32 49.079°; E 100 04.427°. Near the cave at Nai gro rdo rje rdzong there is an old wooden structure that Dartsang locals describe as Drimé Özer’s household (bla brang, see Fig. 4). It is two stories high with one or two rooms on each floor. In 2005, the structure was used to house statues of Dujom Lingpa and other protector deities and Nyingma hierarchs. In the summer of 2005 some ground on this hillside was flattened and construction began for a new stupa dedicated to Drimé Özer on this site.

Khyentrül Rinpočhe is one of Drimé Özer’s seven brothers, all sons of Dujom Lingpa. See Appendix II for a list of the eight brothers.

Autobiography 216a.1-219b.4:

[216b] རྩོས་ཁྲེང་ཞིང་

[217a] འབུམ་སྐུབ་སྐད་ཐང་}
བོད་ཀྱི་རྩི་བརྙན་བོད་ཁྱབ་བཅུག་རྒྱལ་འབྱུང་གནས་མངོན་ རྩི་བརྙན་བོད་ཁྱབ་བཅུག་རྒྱལ་འབྱུང་གནས་མངོན་

[217b] རྡོ་རྗེ་འབྲོ་བཞི་བཐོས་པའི་དགོན་བཞི་འབྲོ་བཞི་

[218a] རྡོ་རྗེ་འབྲོ་བཞི་བཐོས་པའི་དགོན་བཞི་འབྲོ་བཞི་

[218b] རྡོ་རྗེ་འབྲོ་བཞི་བཐོས་པའི་དགོན་བཞི་འབྲོ་བཞི་

[219a] རྡོ་རྗེ་འབྲོ་བཞི་བཐོས་པའི་དགོན་བཞི་འབྲོ་བཞི་
[Sera Khando recounts dream]  

649 “Taming disciples” (gdul bya) is in this case a euphemism for saying that Drimé Özer’s household is telling him he needs to go out and make some money by performing rituals/giving teachings/collection alms to keep the household running.  
650 Drimé Özer Biography 161b.6-165b.3:
བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་བཅུ་ལས་དབུ་ལྡན་བཅུ་ལས་གྲེང་གི་བདག་དབུ་ལྡན།

[163a] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་བཅུ་ལས་དབུ་ལྡན་བཅུ་ལས་གྲེང་

[163b] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་བཅུ་ལས་གྲེང་གི་བདག་

[163c] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་བཅུ་ལས་གྲེང་

[163d] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་བཅུ་ལས་

[163e] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་

[163f] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་

[163g] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་

[163h] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་

[163i] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་

[163j] བདེན་བྱེད་དཔལ་ལྡན་
[164a] གྲ་གླུ་མཐོང་ནང་ཐུབ་བོར་གྱི་བོད་བོད་ཅི་བུ་
ོང་བྱུགས་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤཽ་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
ང་བོར་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རབ་ཏུ་རང་ག་ཤུགས་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རྒྱུ་ལུགས་པ་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
[164b] གྲ་གླུ་མཐོང་ནང་ཐུབ་བོར་གྱི་བོད་བོད་ཅི་བུ་
ོང་བྱུགས་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
ང་བོར་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རབ་ཏུ་རང་ག་ཤུགས་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རྒྱ་ལུགས་པ་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
[165a] གྲ་གླུ་མཐོང་ནང་ཐུབ་བོར་གྱི་བོད་བོད་ཅི་བུ་
ོང་བྱུགས་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
ང་བོར་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རབ་ཏུ་རང་ག་ཤུགས་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རྒྱ་ལུགས་པ་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
་བོད་བོད་ཅི་བུ་
ོང་བྱུགས་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
ང་བོར་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རབ་ཏུ་རང་ག་ཤུགས་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རྒྱ་ལུགས་པ་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
[165b] གྲ་གླུ་མཐོང་ནང་ཐུབ་བོར་གྱི་བོད་བོད་ཅི་བུ་
ོང་བྱུགས་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
ང་བོར་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རབ་ཏུ་རང་ག་ཤུགས་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
རྒྱ་ལུགས་པ་ཤིག་ཡི་ཤེིས་ཤིན་ལྷ་བཅུ་
མང་པོ་ལྷ་བཅུ་མི་བཤོས་ཞིག་ལ་སློབ་སྐྱིད་
651 Autobiography 235a.5-236a.4:

652 This is one instance in which Sera Khandro as biographer of Drimé Özer forgets to write about herself in the third person as she generally does in Drimé’s narrative. Instead, she refers to herself in the first person. Slippages like this are clues supporting her claim that she is the author of Drimé Özer’s Biography. In her Autobiography, she always refers to herself in the first person and there are no slippages into the third person.

653 Drimé Özer Biography 172b.2-175a.5:
654 I translate gza’ sdog as “marital dispute” according to the oral explanation of Gyalrong Khenpo Sangyé. I suspect that gza’ is a misspelling or alternate spelling of bza’ as in bza’ tshang, or couple.
655 Naringma (Bya khog sna ring ma) is a valley in-between Dartsang (further north) and the Serta county seat (further south) in Serta County. Naringma is roughly in-between Sera Monastery and Dartsang. The GPS location of this valley is approximately N: 32 43.650°, E: 099 59.079°, elev. approx.: 12,696 ft.
656 Drimed Özer and Sera Khandro’s commitments between male and female partners (yab yum bar gyi dam tshig) refers to their promise to remain inseparable from each other in this life and in all their future incarnations.
657 Autobiography 242a.6-245b.1:
[242b] [243a] [243b]
658 Drimé Özer Biography 181b.3-183a.6:

[245b] གཉིས་ལོག་གི་དྲི་མེད་ལྟར་བཞིན་སྟེ། སྐྲེལ་བ་པ་ལ་བདག་དག་མེད་ལྟར་བཞིན་སྟེ།

[182a] སྐིལ་ལམ་པའི་སྐྱེལ་མོ་བླང་བཞི་བཞིན་འབྲིང་ལྷན་བཞི། རྡེ་རྒྱུས་བདུན་བཤད།

[182b] སྐིལ་ལོག་བཐུབ་པ་ལྟར་བཞིན་སྟེ། རྒྱུས་ལྷན་བཞི། ཡིན་པ་འབྲིང་པོའི་དོན་དོན་ལྟར་བཞིན་སྟེ། རྡེ་རྒྱུས་བདུན་བཤད།

[183a] གཉིས་ལོག་གི་དྲི་མེད་ལྟར་བཞིན་སྟེ། སྐྲེལ་བ་པ་ལ་བདག་དག་མེད་ལྟར་བཞིན་སྟེ།
659 'Brong skor is a nomadic camping area near Drongri ('Brong ri), the most important mountain deity of the Serta region where Sera Khandro, Drimé Özer, and many other Treasure revealers extracted and hid many Treasures.
660 A type of Tibetan medicine.
661 This is a reference to battles between the Chinese and Tibetans that were going on around Sera Khandro in the 1920s and 1930s, in this case in approximately 1922.
662 The three kindnesses offered in service of one’s lama are 1) practicing the Dharma, 2) serving the lama (attending to his needs), and 3) offering material wealth.
663 “Pray” is a translation of smon lam dkar nag ‘khyud ‘khor bar du biab. The meaning of this phrase is unclear, in particular the term ‘khyud ‘khor.
664 Drimé Ozer Biography 193b.1-197a.2:
665 Autobiography 253b1-4:

666 Autobiography 254a. 6-255a.1:
657 The term Sera Khandro uses is nor, which can refer to livestock in general, to cattle, to yak/cattle cross-breeds, or to yaks.

658 "Lag ngar gyi thu rong pas thal phyag byas" refers to collecting the embers from the fire at night and patting them into a mound in order to keep them hot enough to reignite the fire the following day.

659 The three liberations are emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness.

660 This is another of many instances in which Sera Khandro cross-references events she narrates in her auto/biographical writings with her (and his) Treasure scriptures. This level of intertextuality between auto/biography and divinely inspired revelation suggests the permeability and interpenetration of these two categories in Sera Khandro’s writing.

661 Autobiography 257a.3-264a.5 (This Autobiography passage is a more expanded version of an otherwise very similar passage in the Biography, hence to avoid repetition I do not cite the Biography passage here):
བོད་ཡིག་བོད་ཡིག་བོད་ཡིག་བོད་ཡིག་བོད་ཡིག་བོད་ཡིག་བོད་ཡིག

[259a] བོད་ཡིག་བོད་ཡིག

[259b] བོད་ཡིག

[260a] བོད་ཡིག
དགུ་བོག་བསྐོ་བ་བདེ་ཡོད་པའི་ཐམས་ཅད་བསྡུས་པའོ། ཤེས་བསྡུན་གཞོན་པའི་གཞན་དབང་གྱིས་སྐྱེབས་ཀྱིས་མི་ཚོགས་པ་ནི། རྒྱལ་དཔོན་དཔོན་ལ་ཆེན་པོ་བན་པའི་རྒྱལ་བོ་གཞན་པར་འགྱུར་པའི་དགེ་བོ། ངེས་བསྡུན་བུ་གྱིས་ཞིང་། ཡི་བོ་བཞི་བ་ཞིག་གྱི་གྲུ་བོད་བཟེང་དོན་ལ་ངོ་བོ་སེམས་དཔའ་སེམས་ཀྱིས་དགོས་པ་ནི། ལྷུག་ཚེ་བན་པའི་དགེ་བོ་བཞི་བ་ཞིག་གྱི་གྲུ་བོད་བཟེང་དོན་ལ་ངོ་བོ་སེམས་དཔའ་སེམས་ཀྱིས་དགོས་པ་ནི། བྲུག་པ་གཞན་ལ་ཇི་ལྟར་བསྡུན་གྱིས་བུ་མེད་པ་དགོས་པ་ནི། རྒྱལ་རང་བཙན་བུ་ན་སྨན་པ་དགོས་པ་ནི། ༡༠༣[260b] རྒྱལ་རང་བཙན་བུ་ན་སྨན་པ་དགོས་པ་ནི། ༡༠༤[261a] སྨན་པ་དགོས་པ་ནི། ༡༠༥[261b] སྨན་པ་དགོས་པ་ནི།
[262a] ... a discussion with a harmful demon that she tames [262b] ...
672 Autobiography 268b.4-269b.1; 271b.4-273.6:  
 downloadable [269b] [... long explanation of dakinīs’ invitation and description of their appearance and of their delightful land filled with rainbow light] [271b.4]  
 downloadable [272a].
673 Sera Khandro also cites Drimé Özer's honorific words about her by quoting him saying, “Because you are a lama, I won’t displease you by a hair’s breadth.” Autobiography 267a.1:
674 Drimé Özer Biography 223a.4-223b.5:

675 This name, as I have mentioned earlier, is an epithet of Longchenpa’s previous incarnation and, as in this case, of Drimé Özer. It means “one endowed with the power of having a karmic connection to the Lotus [Born One, i.e., Padmasambhava].”

676 Drimé Özer Biography 226b.3-228a.6:
677 Drimé Özer Biography 229b.6-230a.3:
ཐེག་ཆུབ་བཤད་པ་དེ་བཤད་པ་མཛད་པར་བེད་པ།
དེ་དེ་བཤད་པ་དེ་བཤད་པ་མཛད་པར་བེད་པ།
དེ་དེ་བཤད་པ་དེ་བཤད་པ་མཛད་པར་བེད་པ།
དེ་དེ་བཤད་པ་དེ་བཤད་པ་མཛད་པར་བེད་པ།

678 Drimé Özer had warned Sera Khandro ahead of time that his community wouldn’t let her stay after his death. He had already asked his closest disciple Sotrül Rinpoche to look after Sera Khandro at Sera Monastery.
679 Drimé Özer Biography 232a.3-233a.2:
ཐེག་ཆུབ་བཤད་པ་དེ་བཤད་པ་མཛད་པར་བེད་པ།
དེ་དེ་བཤད་པ་དེ་བཤད་པ་མཛད་པར་བེད་པ།
680 Drimé Özer Biography 233b.2-235a.2:

""
There are many other examples of contemporary Treasure revelation couples who perceive themselves to be divinely prophesied consorts, but Namtrul Jikmé Püntsok and Taré Lhamo are the only example that I have heard of about a couple who understands themselves to be incarnations of both Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro. Taré Lhamo is one of many figures who has been recognized as Sera Khandro's incarnation. In Golok, others include Drimé Özer's teenaged great grandson in Dartsang named Trinlé Tenzin (Phrin las bstan 'dzin) who is her speech incarnation, Dzongtrul Rinpoché's daughter Lhasham Chökyi Drönma (Lha leams skyi sgron ma, see Padma 'od gsal 2003: 73 for a reference to her), and Khandro Rinpoché (b. 1954) from Darlag, Golok (see Mchog sprul rang rig rdo rje rin po che, Mdo khams rgyal mo tsha ba rong gi bai ro'i sgrub phug ngo spro dril bsdus 2006:19-36 for biographical information about Khandro Rinpoché). I am currently conducting research on Khandro Rinpoché and on other incarnations of Sera Khandro and Drimé Özer.

When I asked Chatzal Rinpoché whether Sera Khandro had incarnations, he responded by telling me that Sera Khandro foretold that she would have many incarnations, but that they would not be well-known; they would not be monks or lamas, but would be lay people. Personal communication, October 2004. Chatzal Rinpoché's oldest daughter Semo Sarasvatī is widely rumored to be Sera Khandro's incarnation, but I have not heard Chatzal Rinpoché verify or negate this.

The Cultural Revolution created a major break in the Treasure revelation lineages that Sera Khandro described in her early twentieth-century context. One casualty of this turbulent time period appears to be Drimé Özer's collected works. Sera Khandro's Treasure revelations, biographical writings, and commentaries survived the period of the Cultural Revolution but her biological descendant, her grandson by her daughter Chögying Drönma named Dolé Nyima, did not. Her student Chatzal Rinpoché brought her lineage and her writings to Nepal along with him. Other sets of her manuscripts have been preserved in Tralek Monastery (Btse legs dgon) in Gandze, in Riwoché, and in Serta by her disciple Sotrul Rinpoché (of Sera Monastery) and his descendants. In Golok, there are contemporary religious figures such as Drimé Özer's descendant Lama Gönpa Kyap of Dartsang, Serta, who received empowerment in Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro's religious lineages from Sera Khandro's scribe Tṣültrim Dorjé. However, in Eastern Tibet, Drimé Özer and Sera Khandro's Treasure revelations are not widely practiced. An exception to this is the
Katok Monastery branch Tralek Monastery where there are religious figures currently maintaining and propagating Sera Khandro’s Treasure teachings.

Pema Ösel’s biography of Namtrul Rinpoche states that Gzhu chen bai ro mi ‘gyur ye shes rdo rje recognized Namtrul Rinpoche as the incarnation of Gzhu chen nam sprul ‘jigs med ‘od gsal rig pa’i rdo rje at the age of nine, a proclamation that Rdzong gsar mkhyen brtsen rin po che ‘jam dbyangs chos kyi blo gros confirmed. Padma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas 1997: 14. Pema Ösel also mentions that Namtrul Rinpoche was prophesied to be the incarnation of the following figures: a mind incarnation of Padmasambhava and an incarnation of the Spiritual Master Namkai Nyingpo (Slob dpon nam kha’i snying po), the Knowledge Holder Jetsön Nyingpo (Rig ‘dzin ‘ja’ tshon snying po), the Treasure revealer Nyinda Sangye (Gter ston nyi zla sangs rgyas), Jangsé Yülha Tokgyur (‘Jang sras gyu lha thog ‘gyur), Prince Draha Tsegyal (Lha sras dgra lha rise rgyal), Prince Manikara (Lha sras ma ni ka ra), and so forth. Padma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas 1997: 19. In his biography of Namtrul Rinpoche, Pema Ösel does not write that Drimé Özer was a previous incarnation of Namtrul Rinpoche, but rather he writes that Drimé Özer incarnated as Sera Yangtrul Rinpoche of Sera Monastery, who was the later incarnation of the figure Sera Khandro refers to as Sotrul Rinpoche (Padma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas 1997: 52). In conversation, Pema Ösel explains that Namtrul Rinpoche was also recognized by ‘Prin las nor bu as an incarnation of Drimé Özer but that he didn’t mention this in his biography because there is no official certificate or letter legitimating the recognition. That said, Pema Ösel adds that it is widely accepted. Personal communication, July 2006.


The GPS reading for Nyenlung Monastery (Shyan lung dgon) is N: 32 47.890’, E: 100 34.789’, elev. 13,369’.

The GPS reading for Tsinda Monastery (Rtsis mda’ dgon) is N: 32 48.059’, E: 100 33.956’, elev. 14,975.’ Holly Gayley is currently conducting doctoral research on Taré Lhamo.

Padma ‘od gsal mtha’ yas 1997: 131-132. Interestingly, Pema Ösel Thaye documents Sera Khandro’s death date as 1937 in order to make sense of Taré Lhamo’s birth date of 1938. Actually, according to Sera Khandro’s attendant and scribe Tsültrim Dorje’s account of the end of her life, Sera Khandro died in 1940 at the age of 49 (Tshul khrims rdo rje 1948: 12). In Chatral Rinpoche’s account of the end of Sera Khandro’s life, he also documents that she died at the age of 49 in 1940 (Bya bral sangs rgyas rdo rje 1976: 13b).

The condensed version of Sera Khandro’s autobiography, which she wrote in 1929, is found in her published Treasure volumes. See Bde ba’i rdo rje. Kus su lu’i nyams hyung gi gnas tshul m dor bs dus rdo rja’i spun gyis dris lan mos pa’i lam bsng. In Misho rgyal drgos sngang bde skyong dbang mo yi zab ger gsang ba’i chos mdzod rin po che. Kalimpong: Dupjung Lama, 1978, vol. 4:103-129.

Oral interview August 2004 with Namtrul Rinpoche, paraphrased.

Oral interview August 2004 with Namtrul Rinpoche, Trülku Thondup, trans.

Oral interview December 2004 with Namtrul Rinpoche.

Oral interview December 2004 with Namtrul Rinpoche.

Oral interview August 2004 with Namtrul Rinpoche.

Oral interview December 2004 with Namtrul Rinpoche, paraphrased. Sera Khandro claims the same thing about her own reading and writing abilities.

An addendum to this is that although he emphasizes that he and Taré Lhamo revealed Treasures together as a partnership, he suggests that he, as Drimé Özer before him, was the main person to reveal physical Treasures and not Taré Lhamo or Sera Khandro. (Oral Interview August 2004 with Namtrul Rinpoche, Trülku Thondup, trans.).

Conclusion

Gyatso also calls attention to this absence in Gyatso 2005: 289-290.

Autobiography 404b.4-6:
Appendix III

699 Nam mkha’i snying po, one of Padmasambhava’s 25 disciples.
700 Nor bu dbang rgyal, Chatral Rinpoche’s uncle.
701 I.e., he diligently engaged in practices from Sera Khandro’s Treasure revelations (gter chos).
703 Nang rchog, “inner offering,” refers to ritual substances related to the Secret Empowerment in Tantric Buddhism and to the skull cup in which these offerings are held.
704 Dran pa rnam mkha’i is one of Padmasambhava’s original 25 disciples, who was a Bönpo priest before converting. I think that this figure named Ayu signifies Khenpo Norbu Wangyal.
705 My hypothesis is that this refers to Karma Dondrup, who Sera Khandro mentions in her colophon above and on f. 337b of her Autobiography as “The direct disciple of the Lord [Drüm Özer], the doctrine holder, the renunciate lama from A skyabs Karma Don’ grub. . . .”
706 A ka’ shi la refers to Tsültrim Dorje; it is part of his name in Sanskrit.
707 This refers to Jiktel Chöki Lodrö (Jigs bral chos kyi blo gros), the lama from Pelyul Tartang Monastery whom she calls Dharma Mati on Autobiography 158b.4. Sera Khandro mentions four pillars who will be her four main doctrine holders (chos bdag). These four names, endnotes 6-9, seem to be the list of her four main doctrine holders. Sera Khandro expresses this only symbolically, however; she does not clearly list these four names as the four doctrine holders in her auto/biographical writing.
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