

Research Article



***The Family and Legacy of the Early
Northern Treasure Tradition***

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The Northern Treasure Tradition is well known as the scriptural and ritual platform for Dorjé Drak Monastery in Central Tibet. The historical accounts of this lineage most often focus on the exploits of the tradition's founder, Gödem Truchen (1337-1409), and his successive incarnations seated at Dorjé Drak Monastery. In this article, the biographical sources are revisited to produce a complementary interpretation of the early history of the tradition. The investigation focuses on the web of family and clan relationships that supports this community of lay practitioners through the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and highlights the contributions of several unsung matriarchs and patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition. This article also contributes to the ongoing study of the gradual development of the institution of rule by incarnation within the Nyingmapa Treasure Traditions through an analysis of the life of Sangyé Pelzang (15th c.), the first of the lineage to buttress his authority through claims of reincarnation.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism; Northern Treasure Tradition; Jangter byang gter; family

In the context of Tibetan Buddhism, the authority and effectiveness of each religious tradition are maintained through careful preservation of lineage. As a result, Tibetan religious historiography tends to focus on the individuals who are the common spiritual ancestors of each of the major traditions. The histories of the treasure traditions likewise feature those individuals who revealed the scriptural wealth that gives each lineage its unique character. Nevertheless, when the historiographic sources are observed more closely, it is evident that these individuals depended upon many others for their successes. This article contributes to the study of the development of the Tibetan Treasure Traditions by drawing focused attention to the families that founded and maintained the Northern Treasure Tradition through its formative years (14th–15th c.).¹ Early biographies of the lineage patriarchs are employed to produce a complex map of the familial associations that link the early patriarchs of this Nyingmapa tradition. Analysis of this network of relationships not only sheds light on the connections

¹ For an extensive discussion of the development of the incarnation lineage of this tradition, see: Jay Holt Valentine, *Lords of the Northern Treasures: The Development of the Tibetan Institution of Rule by Successive Incarnations*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Virginia, 2013).



between religious authority and family in this lineage but also gives voice to the unsung women and men whose contributions can be found within the biographies of the celebrated patriarchs. This article concludes with an analysis of the first recorded case of reincarnation within the leadership of the Northern Treasure Tradition and thus contributes to the ongoing study of the rise of incarnate lamas within the Nyingmapa treasure traditions.²

The Historiography of the Northern Treasure Tradition

At the foundation of the Northern Treasure Tradition is a collection of tantric scriptures that were unearthed like buried treasures at Mount Trazang in Western Tibet by the visionary master Gödem Truchen (1337-1409).³ During the seventeenth century when large-scale monasticism was developing within the Nyingmapa Order, the patriarchs of the tradition established Dorjé Drak Monastery in Central Tibet. The Northern Treasure constituted the backbone of the ritual platform of this monastic institution. The historiographies of the Northern Treasure Tradition that were written after the establishment of Dorjé Drak Monastery by luminaries such as the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), Pema Trinlé (1641-1717), and Guru Trashi (b. 18th c.) emphasize the manner in which the tradition was founded and transported to central Tibet by Gödem Truchen and his incarnations.⁴ As a result, the Northern Treasure Tradition is best known for its association with Dorjé Drak Monastery, which was founded and maintained by Gödem Truchen's successive incarnations (see **Table 1**).

All later historical sources feature this connection between the treasure tradition, Dorjé Drak monastery, and the successive incarnations of the original treasure revealer.⁵ Based on these sources alone, one might conclude that this was a monastic tradition guided by the reincarnations of Gödem Truchen from the very beginning. To the contrary, the early Northern Treasure Tradition consisted of a small group of householder lineages that tended to privilege family relationships, rather than serial incarnation, in matters of succession.⁶ The historiographic goal of this article is

² Daniel Hirshberg examines what may be one of the first incarnation lineages in the Nyingmapa Order. See: Daniel A. Hirshberg, *Delivering the Lotus-born: Historiography in the Tibetan Renaissance*, Ph.D. diss. (Harvard University, 2012). For a discussion of the incarnation lineages of Katok, see: Jann Ronis, *Celibacy, Revelations, and Reincarnated Lamas: Contestation and synthesis in the growth of monasticism at katok monastery from the 17th through 19th centuries*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Virginia, 2009).

³ For a brief summary of the history of the tradition in English, see Boord (1993), 21-35.

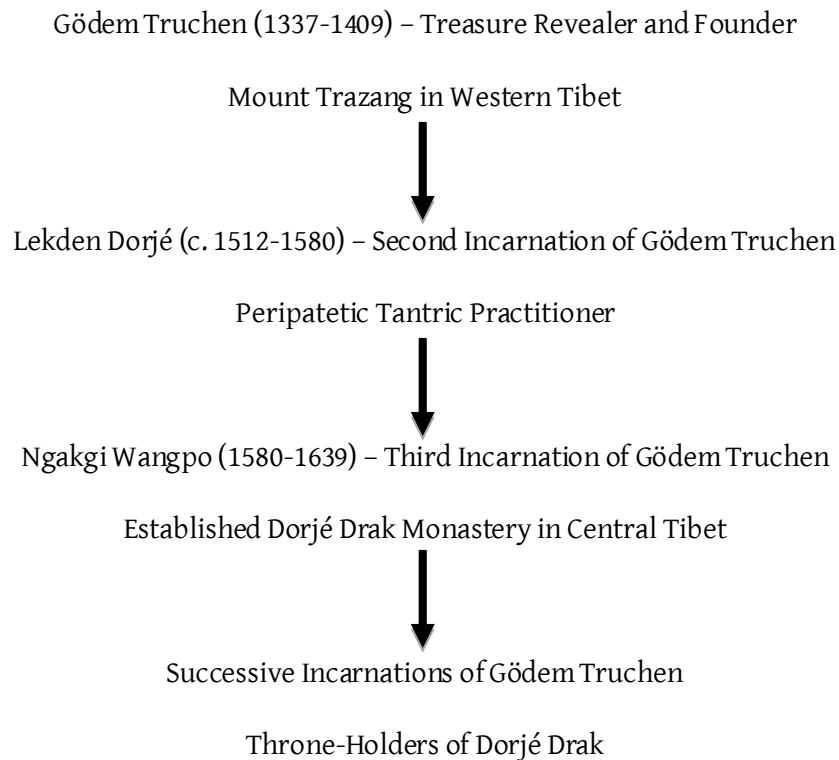
⁴ For relevant works by these three authors, see respectively: *The Wondrous Ocean* (17th c.), *The Life of Rindzin Lekden Dorjé* (17th c.), and *Guru Trashi's History* (18th c.).

⁵ For a contemporary example, see: *The Azure Garland: A Brief History of Dorjé Drak*, which is still available at the monastery today. For details, see: Kunzang Drödü Dorjé (kun bzang 'gro 'dul rdo rje, 18th-19th c.), *thub bstan rdo rje brag dgon gyi byung ba mdo tsaṃ brjod pa ngo mtshar bai DU r+ya'i phreng ba*, TBRC W00KG03797, 1 vols. [s.l.]: [s.n.], 2004.

⁶ Jürgen Herweg accurately describes the early tradition in his study of Gödem Truchen as a "family affair," indicating how often the treasure revealer transmitted his unique teachings and

therefore to use sources authored during the fifteenth century to present an account of the early history of the Northern Treasure Tradition that highlights the web of relationships that created and nurtured the lineage through the first century of its

Table 1: A Simplified View of the Lineage of the Northern Treasure Tradition



This study is grounded in two biographical texts written before the patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition relocated to central Tibet and founded Dorjé Drak Monastery. *The Ray of Sunlight* is the earliest known biography of Gödem Truchen.⁷ This hagiographic text was written by Nyima Zangpo, a patriarch of the Sé clan, in the early fifteenth century. The author presents himself as a direct disciple of Gödem Truchen and implies that he and his Sé clansmen are the rightful inheritors of the lineage's religious authority. Featured in this biography is an edict that describes the patronage relationship between the royal family of the kingdom of Mangyül Gungtang and the

practices to a close-knit group of related individuals. He does not, however, discuss any of the significant details that are included herein. For details, see Jurgen Wilhelm Herweg, *The Hagiography of Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem 'phru can and Three Historical Questions Emerging from It*, M.A. thesis (University of Washington, 1994), 40.

⁷ Nyima Zangpo (nyi ma bzang po, 14th-15th c.), "sprul sku chen po'i rnam thar gsal byed nyi ma'i 'od zer (ga)," in *byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*, TBRC W27866 (Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Lama Dawa, 1983), 53-152. Discussed throughout as *The Ray of Sunlight*.

Northern Treasure Tradition.⁸ The centrality of this edict and the narrative stream within the biography connecting the concealment of these specific treasures to the precise needs of Mangyül Gungtang suggests the biography was authored early in the fifteenth century when the kingdom was still a relevant political entity in southwestern Tibet. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the balance of power shifts toward the Tsangpa polity of Central Tibet (Ü and Tsang), which eventually conquers Mangyül Gungtang in 1620.⁹

The Garland of Light, on the other hand, is a collection of six short biographies of the early patriarchs of the tradition beginning with Namgyel Gönpö (1399-1424), Gödem Truchen's son, and ending with Sangyé Pelzang (late 15th c.), the lineage's first reincarnated lama.¹⁰ The unnamed author of the text maintains that the information for these biographies was received verbally from Sangyé Pelzang, and thus it appears to have been composed toward the end of the fifteenth century but before the death of this final patriarch of the collection.¹¹ When analyzed as a single unit, the text explains how the authority of Gödem Truchen, which initially passes through five patriarchs with strong familial connections to the founder, rightfully falls into the hands of a family outsider, Sangyé Pelzang. The biographer is primarily concerned with tracing the flow of authority within the tradition, and thus the main events unfold in Jang Ngamring where the tradition's original epicenter of Trazang is located. The only political figure mentioned in the collection is Könchok Lekpa (15th c.), a member of Jang Ngamring's ruling family, which established relations with the Ming court in China.¹² Könchok Lekpa was involved with his family's ambitious construction projects in the region, including building a particularly revered chapel at Mount Trazang where one of the key mystical events of the biography unfolded.¹³ On the other hand, there is no mention of the royal patrons of Mangyül Gungtang, demonstrating that the author of *The Garland of Light* was primarily concerned with internal and local politics.

This investigation has been limited to these two texts as they are the only known fifteenth century sources from which one can draw extensive conclusions regarding the early patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition. These sources present divergent, though overlapping, historiographic visions regarding the origins and early development of this treasure lineage. Nevertheless, the information pulled from these texts offers unique insight into the family relationships that formed the foundation of this tradition.

⁸ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 125-128.

⁹ For an account of the Mangyül Gungtang dynasty, see Sørensen (2007).

¹⁰ "bla ma rnams kyi rnam thar 'od kyi 'phreng ba," (circa late-15th c.) in *byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*, TBRC W27866, (Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Lama Dawa, 1983), 176-177. Discussed throughout as *The Garland of Light*.

¹¹ *The Garland of Light*, 206.

¹² Cyrus Stearns, "Namgyel Drakpa Zangpo," *Treasury of Lives*, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://www.treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Namgyel-Drakpa-Zangpo-/6278>.

¹³ *The Garland of Light*, 179-180.

The following presentation is not intended to correct a perceived manipulation or suppression of historical facts. Rather, the traditional historiography of the Northern Treasure Tradition of Dorjé Drak is an important narrative for the practitioners of the current tradition in Tibet, India, and the West. In fact, the specific historiographic narrative describing the relocation of the Northern Treasure Tradition to Central Tibet features the patriarchs that are also important conduits through which the blessings of the tradition flow in the quintessential practice of guru yoga.¹⁴ The traditional historiography of the lineage therefore is important not only because it offers a broad narrative regarding history but also because it supports the soteriological activities fundamental to tantric Buddhism in Tibet.

Nevertheless, I concur with the sentiments of Geoffrey Samuel who asserts the following in reference to the foundations of the Indian yogic and tantric traditions:

[...] there are many important things that the world can learn from Asian religious traditions, but that our ability to integrate their knowledge into the evolving body of understandings on which our now global civilisation conducts its affairs will be greatly aided by knowing more about the origins of these traditions.¹⁵

Similarly, this article is part of a larger endeavor to uncover the precise manner in which hereditary treasure traditions operated and eventually adopted the system of rule by incarnation. The detailed view of the early history of the Northern Treasure Tradition presented below fosters comparative discussion with other recent studies of treasure traditions, which will be featured later in this article.

Family Foundation and the Transmission of Religious Authority

Gödem Truchen's authority is grounded first and foremost in his status as a great treasure revealer.¹⁶ Thus, each of his biographies features his exploits as a visionary archaeologist, who fulfills prophecies by unearthing caches of sacred scriptures and artifacts. While it is through the accomplishment of these feats that Gödem Truchen consummates his status as a treasure revealer, there are several elements of his multidimensional authority that are transmitted to him through family and clan

¹⁴ In the following manual that has recently been translated by the living patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition, guru yoga is identified as the most important practice. See: Pema Trinlé (1641-1717), *The Path of Secret Mantra Teachings of the Northern Treasures Five Nails - Pema Tinley's Guide to Vajrayana Practice*, Trans. Khenpo Chowang (Berlin: Wandel Edition Khordong, 2014), 161-167. For an example of the lineage prayer that is used in guru yoga within the Northern Treasure Tradition, see: Padma Trinlé (padma 'phrin las, 1641-1717), "ngo mtshar bla ma brgyud pa'i gsol 'debs byin rlabs bdud rtsi'i sprin phung," in *snga 'gyur byang gter chos skor las 'don cha'i skor*. TBRC W26672 (Simla: thub-bstan rdo-rje-brag e-wam lcog-sgar-dgon nas par 'debs mdzad, 2000), vol 2. pp. 101-114.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2008), 11.

¹⁶ For further information regarding treasure traditions, see: Gyatso (1994 & 1998), Germano and Gyatso (2000), and Doctor (2005).

relationships. He receives (1) biological authority from his father's Degyin Hor clan and (2) tantric spiritual authority and ritual training from his benefactors in the Sé clan. His authority as a (3) treasure revealer, however, is arguably received as a result of his relationship with his maternal uncle of the Dopawa clan. Thus, a significant portion of Gödem Truchen's religious authority can be seen as received through his relationships with the patriarchs of these three related clans.

The Authority of the Clan-Bones: The Degyin Hor

According to *The Ray of Sunlight*, Gödem Truchen was descended from a long line of tantric masters. His clan ancestors had reportedly been practicing ritual priestcraft since they entered Tibet while in the service of the Chinese Princess Wencheng, who was given as a bride to the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century:¹⁷

The family of [Gödem Truchen's father] was the royal family of the *Degyin Hor*, which was as regal as a *shala* tree [among the common trees of the forest]. [...] Using an exoteric version of the Kīla (phur pa) rites, [his later ancestors] beheld the countenance of the deity named Vajrakumara. They also attained experiential understanding of the enlightened nature of awareness. Their power subjugated the life-forces of both the wrathful goddesses and the human laity. They were quite simply endowed with the sight of the gods.¹⁸

As a scion of the Degyin Hor clan, Gödem Truchen inherited the authority to practice various tantric cycles through his bones.¹⁹ This authority entails a charismatic talent that is required to handle the extraordinary responsibilities of a tantric priest. In this sense, Gödem Truchen's authority is a product of his genetic inheritance; it is not a quality that is earned or bestowed upon him by a religious figure or institution. The Degyin Hor bones that he received from his patrilineal clan gave him the authority to learn and practice the craft of tantra.

The Lineage of the Benefactors: The Sé Clan

Although a significant portion of Gödem Truchen's authority was derived from his clan-bones, he still needed to be trained in the family craft to offer services for hire. The tantric legacy of the household was in crisis, however, because his father died before he could pass on the family vocation. Nevertheless, two benefactors entered the narrative to solve the problem:

When the precious one was still young, his father died. His mother taught him to comprehend reading, writing, and other basic skills. Two brothers from the Sé clan, Pelchen Bumpa and Lekpawa, acted as his masters and taught him the

¹⁷ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 57-58.

¹⁸ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 58.

¹⁹ In Tibetan culture, children are understood to inherit their bones (gdung) from their fathers and their flesh (sha) from their mothers.

elevated subjects. With them, he learned his father's traditions, such as the Gyuntrül, Mamo, and Kila cycles.²⁰

Thus entered the Sé brothers to act as benefactors of the fatherless Gödem Truchen without an explicit explanation of their connection to the Degyin Hor clan.²¹ Because they were in possession of the "father's traditions" (pha chos) that were Gödem Truchen's birthright and were willing to train the child, the relationship must have been significantly intimate.²² The rigorous process of being schooled in the tantric arts led to a life-long relationship with the Sé patriarchs, who continued to act as his spiritual advisors later in his career.²³

Regardless of the nature of their relationship, Gödem Truchen and his family certainly owed a great debt to the Sé benefactors. The importance of training cannot be underestimated in the context of the esoteric traditions of Tantric Buddhism, which depend upon the restricted transmission of a large variety of empowerments for each cycle of practices. While clan-bones are an important requirement for this lineage of householder practitioners, authentic training is equally indispensable.

The Transmission of the Treasure: Ritropa Zangpo & Ritropa Sangyé Tenpa

Even though Gödem Truchen is uniformly hailed as a great treasure revealer and the founding patriarch of the Northern Treasure Tradition, he is not the first treasure revealer of the lineage. The set of scriptures and prophecies that constitutes the Northern Treasure texts first began to be revealed and collected by the little-known Ritropa Zangpo (14th c.). *The Ray of Sunlight* narrates the extensive visionary process that leads this minor treasure revealer to send off his cache of materials with a trusted disciple in search of a more qualified master to fulfill the prophecies.²⁴ The faithful disciple eventually encounters Gödem Truchen in a chance meeting and passes the scriptures into his worthy hands.

The author of *The Ray of Sunlight* emphasizes the indirect, but prophetically driven, nature of the transmission of the treasure materials from Ritropa Zangpo to Gödem Truchen. This account is compromised elsewhere in the text, however, by the intimate participation of Gödem Truchen's maternal uncle of the Dopawa clan, Ritropa Sangyé Tenpa (14th c.), in the founding of the Northern Treasure Tradition. First, Ritropa Sangyé

²⁰ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 66.

²¹ The Sé clan is one of the older family lineages in Tibet. It is possible that they are related to the pre-Tibetan Sé kings. The Sé clan is more clearly involved with the early distillation of the Bon tradition in Tibet. The Sé is also one of the original six clans of Tibet. For additional details, see Karmay (1972: 27, 58) and Ramble (1997).

²² The term *pachö* (pha chos) has two general meanings, and both are applicable in this context. *Pachö* first of all means father's dharma, which in this case refers to the cycles that are mentioned in this passage as well as those that are mentioned above in relation to Gödem Truchen's father. Secondly, *pachö* can also refer to the Father Tantras; the Gyuntrül belongs to this class of tantras, as opposed to the Mother Tantras.

²³ For a good example of their relationship later in life, see Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 100.

²⁴ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 84-91.

Tenpa's root guru is known to have been a close friend of Ritropa Zangpo, the original treasure revealer of the tradition.²⁵ Second, the scriptures received by Gödem Truchen include prophecies not only about himself but also about the future deeds of his uncle.²⁶ Third, while Sangyé Tenpa does not reveal treasures himself, he is present when they are extracted and works to promote the new scriptures in the royal court of Mangyül Gungtang.²⁷ Last, Sangyé Tenpa is identified as Gödem Truchen's primary disciple during the early years of the tradition.²⁸ When these points are considered together, it is unlikely that Sangyé Tenpa was not involved with the transition of the treasure materials from his master's friend to his talented young nephew. At the very least, it is clear that Gödem Truchen's maternal uncle was intimately involved with the creation of the Northern Treasure Tradition, which reconfirms the family-based nature of this lineage.

Before proceeding to a fuller discussion of the maintenance of Gödem Truchen's legacy, it will be helpful to reflect on the absence of significant data regarding the women who must have contributed to the early tradition. I agree with the sentiments of Mary Pat Fisher, who maintains that when historical sources clearly reflect androcentric tendencies, it is often necessary to use feminist analytical methods to highlight the significant contributions of women, even if these methods result in conclusions that were unintended by the original authors.²⁹ Karen Pechilis takes this line of reasoning one step further by asserting that if gender biases are identified in our source material, then it becomes "necessary to discover patterns of oppression and empowerment in history."³⁰

Foremost among the women present during Gödem Truchen's early years was his mother, Lady Sönam Khyeudren (14th c.). She was the biological link that connected her son to his Degyin Hor father and his Dopawa maternal uncle. Although *The Ray of Sunlight* maintains that she taught her son to read and write, it is silent regarding any of her other contributions. Nevertheless, given the fact that Gödem Truchen's father died before he could learn the family trade required to support the family, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Lady Sönam would not have been involved in arranging the training of her young child. These observations lead one to speculate regarding the nature of the relationship between the Degyin Hor and Sé clans in general and Lady

²⁵ Although the term Ritropa (ri khrod pa) is a general title that can be bestowed upon anyone who retreats to mountain hermitages for extended practice sessions, it is possible that in this case the title may also signify membership in a practice community at the Glorious Mountain (shri ri), the primary haunt of Ritropa Zangpo. As further evidence toward such a theory, a practice center at the Glorious Mountain emerges as the second most important seat of the Northern Treasure Tradition as early as the third generation of masters during the fifteenth century. For example, see: *The Garland of Light*, 186.

²⁶ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 90-91.

²⁷ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 91-92.

²⁸ Nyima Zangpo, *The Ray of Sunlight*, 97.

²⁹ Mary Pat Fisher, *Women in Religion* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 24.

³⁰ Karen Pechilis, "Chosen Moments: Mediation and Direct Experience in the Life of the Classical Tamil Saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24: 13.

Sönam and the Sé brothers in particular. There is no clarification of how these two groups came to be so intimately associated. One possible explanation is that Lady Sönam remarried one or both of the Sé brothers after the death of her husband. While this is only a hypothesis, it would explain the sudden appearance of the Sé brothers in the biography and may also explain why the Mount Trazang temple complex, which was founded by Gödem Truchen, eventually became the seat for the Sétön incarnation lineage. Regardless, it is safe to conclude that a more detailed account of Lady Sönam's life would undoubtedly reveal significant information regarding the foundations of the Northern Treasure Tradition.

The Transmission of Authority: Family and Disciples

Tradition maintains that Gödem Truchen's treasures were disseminated through three different branches: the lineages of the son, the mother (i.e., Gödem Truchen's wife), and the disciples. As demonstrated below, these lineages began to braid together in the early generations after the death of the tradition's founder. Interestingly, this three-fold model of transmission does not include the Sé patriarchs. Not only did this clan supply Gödem Truchen with his father's tantric legacy, but many of his devotees were also from this clan. Nevertheless, the lineages of the son, mother, and disciples are often highlighted because it is their combined legacy that is eventually invested in the incarnation lineage of Gödem Truchen and integrated into the ritual program of the celebrated Dorjé Drak Monastery in Central Tibet.

The Family Lineage

As one might expect, the most prestigious of the lineages is the one that begins with Gödem Truchen's son, Namgyel Gönpö (1399-1424). Unfortunately, Namgyel Gönpö lived only to the age of twenty five. Despite the support of the community demanding that he be their leader before he even reached the age of ten, it is not clear if Namgyel Gönpö lived long enough to fully emerge from the shadows cast by his mother, Master Pema (b. 14th c.), and his paternal cousin, Dorjé Pel (c. 1360-1430), both leaders in the community.

The lineage of the mother, commonly known as the Secret Mother (gsang yum) lineage, is difficult to trace because of the secretive nature of its transmission. *The Garland of Light* discusses Master Pema's transmission lineage as if it were a mere copy of her son's, received simply because the young child was in her care.³¹ Her importance is also minimized by the fact that her biography—if one was ever written—does not appear in *The Garland of Light*, despite the fact that she was clearly the most revered matriarch of the tradition. While her significance has been largely limited in this collection of biographies to her role as a mother, there is evidence scattered throughout the collection that suggests she was a master of the tradition in her own right.³² Moreover,

³¹ "bla ma rnams kyi rnam thar 'od kyi 'phreng ba." (circa late-15th c.) In *byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*. TBRC W27866. 1 vols. Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltsen and Lama Dawa, 1983, 176-177.

³² See, for example, her role as a master in the life of Tsenden Jampa Shényen, *The Garland of Light*, 186-187.

the tradition maintains that the three lineages (son, mother, and disciple) were united much later in the seventeenth century, which suggests that Master Pema's secret transmission persisted despite the fact that the transactions do not appear in the written records. It is indeed one of the great tragedies of Tibetan history that so few biographies of female adepts like Master Pema are extant. Much could have been learned through a full account of her role as a master at a time when her family abided at the center of the Northern Treasure Tradition.

By contrast, the exploits of Dorjé Pel, Gödem Truchen's paternal nephew, are more thoroughly celebrated in *The Garland of Light*. As the primary ritual attendant for both his beloved uncle, Gödem Truchen, and his cousin, Namgyel Gönpö, he received the complete transmission of the Northern Treasure Tradition numerous times.³³ Although he is considered to have been Namgyel Gönpö's disciple, he is also described as a senior master who functioned as the actual patriarch of the lineage throughout the young heir's short life.³⁴ It should be noted, however, that while Dorjé Pel was Gödem Truchen's paternal nephew, he was not of the Degyin Hor clan; he was the son of Gödem Truchen's sister, who married a suitor from the Biri clan. Nevertheless, the relationship between these leaders demonstrates the family nature of the early Northern Treasure Tradition that transcended strict patrilineal clan customs.

Despite efforts to keep this lineage within the family, Dorjé Pel passes on his mantle of authority to Tsenden Jampa Shényen (c. 1399-1467). He was from a tribe of nomads and was not a part of Gödem Truchen's extended family or any regionally significant clan. In *The Garland of Light*, however, he is portrayed as the recipient of the family lineage as he was a direct disciple of Master Pema, Namgyel Gönpö, and Dorjé Pel (i.e., Gödem Truchen's wife, son, and nephew).³⁵ He is also later identified as the primary master residing at the Glorious Mountain practice center.³⁶ While *The Garland of Light* is explicitly concerned elsewhere with the importance of keeping the leadership of the tradition within a small group of families, Jampa Shényen's status as a family outsider does not appear problematic, perhaps because of his nomadic heritage. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this tradition was experiencing a shortage of prospective leaders directly related to the core group of founding families. Thus, Jampa Shényen's successor, to be discussed below, was also a clan outsider.

The Disciple Lineage

Two of Gödem Truchen's most significant and direct disciples, who were not part of his extended family, were the brothers Dorjé Gönpö (c. 1360-1438) and Rinchen Drakpa (14th c.). While both were involved with the Northern Treasure Tradition from its earliest days, Dorjé Gönpö was the more noteworthy patriarch as he was present when the

³³ *The Garland of Light*, 183-184.

³⁴ For an example of a moment when Dorjé Pel is clearly represented as a more senior patriarch than Namgyel Gönpö, see *The Garland of Light*, 179-180.

³⁵ *The Garland of Light*, 186.

³⁶ *The Garland of Light*, 198.

scriptures were revealed, took part in the translation of the encoded treasure scrolls, and lived much longer than his brother.³⁷ Dorjé Gönpo is presented as a co-creator of the Northern Treasure Tradition and the source of a transmission lineage that parallels the family lineage discussed above.

It should be noted, however, that although Dorjé Gönpo and Rinchen Drakpa were disciples (i.e., not part of Gödem Truchen's extended family), their lineage was still a family-based tradition. They are in fact identified as constituting the second family of legitimate patriarchs of the Northern Treasure Tradition.³⁸ Thus, after the death of his brother, Dorjé Gönpo trained his nephew, Tsenden Ngakwang Drakpa (15th c.), to be the next head of their lineage. Interestingly, their clan information is not included in the biography since the brothers were orphans.

Unification and Reincarnation: Sangyé Pelzang

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the Northern Treasure Tradition had two patriarchs, Tsenden Jampa Shényen and Tsenden Ngakwang Drakpa, who were recipients of separate lineages that began with Gödem Truchen. These patriarchs were also seated at different locations. Tsenden Ngakwang Drakpa was enthroned at Mount Trazang, which was established by Gödem Truchen in Western Tibet, and Tsenden Jampa Shényen resided at the Glorious Mountain to the south, which was associated with the treasure tradition before the materials were transmitted to Gödem Truchen.

These two branches of the tradition were merged by Sangyé Pelzang (15th c.), who was the primary disciple of both Tsenden patriarchs. The biographer presents Sangyé Pelzang in semi-autobiographical passages as if he were aware of his precarious position as the head of a family-based tradition, while he himself was an outsider.³⁹ Both of the strategies employed to buttress his authority refer to the biography of the ill-fated Namgyel Gönpo, the son of Gödem Truchen. The first involves the precedent of community involvement in succession. Just as the community came together and requested that the young Namgyel Gönpo be empowered as his father's successor, it was implied that the community should now support Sangyé Pelzang as their leader.⁴⁰ *The Garland of Light* confirms this status by referring to Sangyé Pelzang's family as the third important clan of the Northern Treasure Tradition.⁴¹

In the most provocative section of the biography, a second strategy is employed that is also related to Namgyel Gönpo. This one involves the transmission of authority through reincarnation:

³⁷ *The Garland of Light*, 189-190.

³⁸ *The Garland of Light*, 193.

³⁹ *The Garland of Light*, 192.

⁴⁰ *The Garland of Light*, 192.

⁴¹ Despite the importance of Sangyé Pelzang's family, his clan affiliation is not identified. His father, Gendün Gyeltsen, came from a long line of Nyingmapa masters seated at a place called Chingar (spyi'i ngar). For further details, see: *The Garland of Light*, 193.

When Sangyé Pelzang reached the age of three, he remembered his previous lives. He uttered such statements as, "This is not my father! My father is the Lama Lineage-Holder (i.e., Gödem Truchen)! My mother is Semo Pema Zangpo (i.e., Gödem Truchen's wife)." It is telling that he spoke these things spontaneously.⁴²

Sangyé Pelzang thus circumvented the requirement for clan-bones by claiming to be the reincarnation of Namgyel Gönpö. Although he did not receive Gödem Truchen's biological legacy in the traditional manner, he was effectively the "second coming" of the intended heir of the Northern Treasure Tradition. Nevertheless, Sangyé Pelzang's status as a rebirth of Namgyel Gönpö is a significant detail within the context of *The Garland of Light* that has been left out of the later biographical traditions that focus on the successive rebirths of Gödem Truchen himself. Moreover, while reincarnation is employed in *The Garland of Light* to secure Sangyé Pelzang's position as a lineage patriarch, there is nothing to suggest that he intended to return serially as a patriarch of the tradition. His authority is grounded in the fact that he was a direct disciple of both Tsenden patriarchs and also a reincarnation of Namgyel Gönpö. Perhaps as a result of being written before his death, *The Garland of Light* does not identify Sangyé Pelzang's successor. Because he identifies his own family as the third to carry the Northern Treasure Tradition, it would appear that he intended to pass authority not to his reincarnation, but to the next generation of his kin. Nevertheless, tradition maintains that Sangyé Pelzang was succeeded by his greatest disciple, Namkha Gyeltsen (1454-1542), who was not related through bones, flesh, or even reincarnation to the previous patriarchs of the tradition.⁴³ Thus, it appears that succession was ultimately decided meritocratically.

The Development of Incarnation Lineages in the Nyingmapa Treasure Traditions

Now that the Northern Treasure Tradition's line of succession has been traced through the first century of its existence, it will be helpful to widen the inquiry to include other Nyingmapa treasure traditions. The goal is to identify any apparent trends regarding family, succession, or reincarnation in these visionary traditions. Perhaps the most relevant observations regarding treasure revealers and their immediate successors have been set forth by Jann Ronis. His study of the Nyingmapa monastery of Katok (f. 1159) in the Degé region of Kham in eastern Tibet focuses on the treasure revealer known as Longsel Nyingpo (1625-1692), whose appointment as abbot by the secular rulers of the region dramatically transformed the traditions of that monastery.⁴⁴ One of Longsel Nyingpo's immediate successors was his son, Sönam Deutsen (c. 1673-1723), who was

⁴² *The Garland of Light*, 194.

⁴³ For more information on Namkha Gyeltsen, see: "thugs sras nam mkha' rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar mthong ba don ldan ma rig mun sel," (circa late-16th c.) in *byang gter lugs kyi rnam thar dang mang 'ongs lung bstan*. TBRC W27866. 1 vols. (Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyeltsen and Lama Dawa, 1983), 207-234.

⁴⁴ Jann Ronis, *Celibacy, Revelations, and Reincarnated lamas: Contestation and synthesis in the growth of monasticism at katok monastery from the 17th through 19th centuries*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Virginia, 2009)

known as the reincarnation of the treasure revealer Dündul Dorjé (1615-1672).⁴⁵ Ronis determines, however, that this instance of reincarnation was "nominal" or "ceremonial" and did not constitute the beginnings of rule by incarnation at Katok.⁴⁶ Sönam Deutsen inherited neither the estate nor the religious authority of his previous incarnation, both of which would have been expected within the context of the institution of rule by incarnation.⁴⁷ According to Ronis, however, the circumstances regarding Dündul Dorjé's succession point to a larger trend among treasure revealers:

It is my observation that most treasure revealers, regardless of fame, do not usually give rise to reincarnation lines upon their deaths. Rather, a given tertön's treasures are maintained by their blood relatives and prophesied "treasure masters" (chos bdag), which limits the need to establish a reincarnation for the purpose of the propagation of the treasures or personal property.⁴⁸

If we accept Ronis' observation as factual, then we can further conclude that many of the incarnation lineages that trace themselves through the great treasure revealers were created retroactively as these patriarchs understood themselves to be passing religious authority to biological heirs, favored disciples, or both, but not to future incarnations. Dündul Dorjé in particular transmitted his spiritual legacy to a number of elite students during his lifetime, including Longsel Nyingpo, and his reincarnation appears to have been identified irrespective of the social institution of rule by incarnation. The distinction between the two applications of reincarnation, however, is too easily obscured. In the case of Katok, for example, Drimé Zhingkyong Gönpö (1724-1786) is later identified as the reincarnation of Sönam Deutsen, who we know as the "nominal" incarnation of Dündul Dorjé. Ronis accepts Drimé Zhingkyong Gönpö as the first indisputable case of rule by incarnation at Katok because he was identified as a reincarnation of a previous patriarch of the monastic institution while still a youth. He was then trained by its religious leaders, including descendants of Longsel Nyingpo.⁴⁹ However, if we are then to recognize the treasure revealer Dündul Dorjé as the first incarnation in this series, the significant theological and social differences between these instances of reincarnation are thoroughly obscured.

Daniel Hirshberg has identified a similar situation regarding the first "great" treasure revealer Nyang-rel Nyima Özer (1124-1192). Interestingly, Nyang-rel identified his own life as his final rebirth and intended for his descendants to transmit his teachings.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Guru Chöwang (1212-1270) still presented himself as the reincarnation of Nyang-rel, and his incarnation lineage is still active today.⁵¹ Hirshberg recognizes,

⁴⁵ In this case, Longsel Nyingpo's son is recognized as the reincarnation of his father's most significant teacher.

⁴⁶ I would suggest that the words "nominal" and "ceremonial" likely minimize the importance of a custom among lay treasure traditions involving reincarnation that precedes rule by incarnation.

⁴⁷ Ronis, *Celibacy, Revelations, and Reincarnated Lamas*, 107-108.

⁴⁸ Ronis, *Celibacy, Revelations, and Reincarnated Lamas*, 108.

⁴⁹ Ronis, *Celibacy, Revelations, and Reincarnated Lamas*, 107-108.

⁵⁰ Hirshberg, *Delivering the Lotus-born*, 66.

⁵¹ Hirshberg, *Delivering the Lotus-born*, 27.

however, that "there is no evidence that Guru Chöwang used his claim to acquire Nyang-rel's material wealth and/or the abbacy of [Nyang-rel's primary seat]."⁵² But, Guru Chöwang clearly intended to acquire the scriptural authority of his previous incarnation and was even recognized as legitimate by some of Nyang-rel's living descendants.⁵³ We can conclude, therefore, that Nyang-rel's incarnation lineage was also retroactively constructed.

As I have argued elsewhere, there is no indication in Gödem Truchen's earliest biography that he was expected to return in human form.⁵⁴ In this article, his succession has been traced through the fifteenth century, and it has been found that the tradition was primarily guided by his blood relatives and the families of his disciples. Although I have not yet determined exactly when the system of rule by incarnation was instituted within the Northern Treasure Tradition, it is clearly well established by the time that Pema Trinlé (1641-1717) was recognized as a child and enthroned and trained at Dorjé Drak Monastery in Central Tibet. But, as in the cases of Dündul Dorjé and Nyang-rel, it is too easy to overlook the distinction between the contemporary tradition's representation of its own spiritual heritage and the history of the social institution of rule by incarnation within these specific traditions. Frankly, while the distinction is very interesting from a theoretical perspective, as it identifies a significant shift in socio-religious practices, I am not sure the distinction is important from the emic perspective. It is therefore unsurprising that the distinction is blurred in traditional hagiographic and historiographic sources.

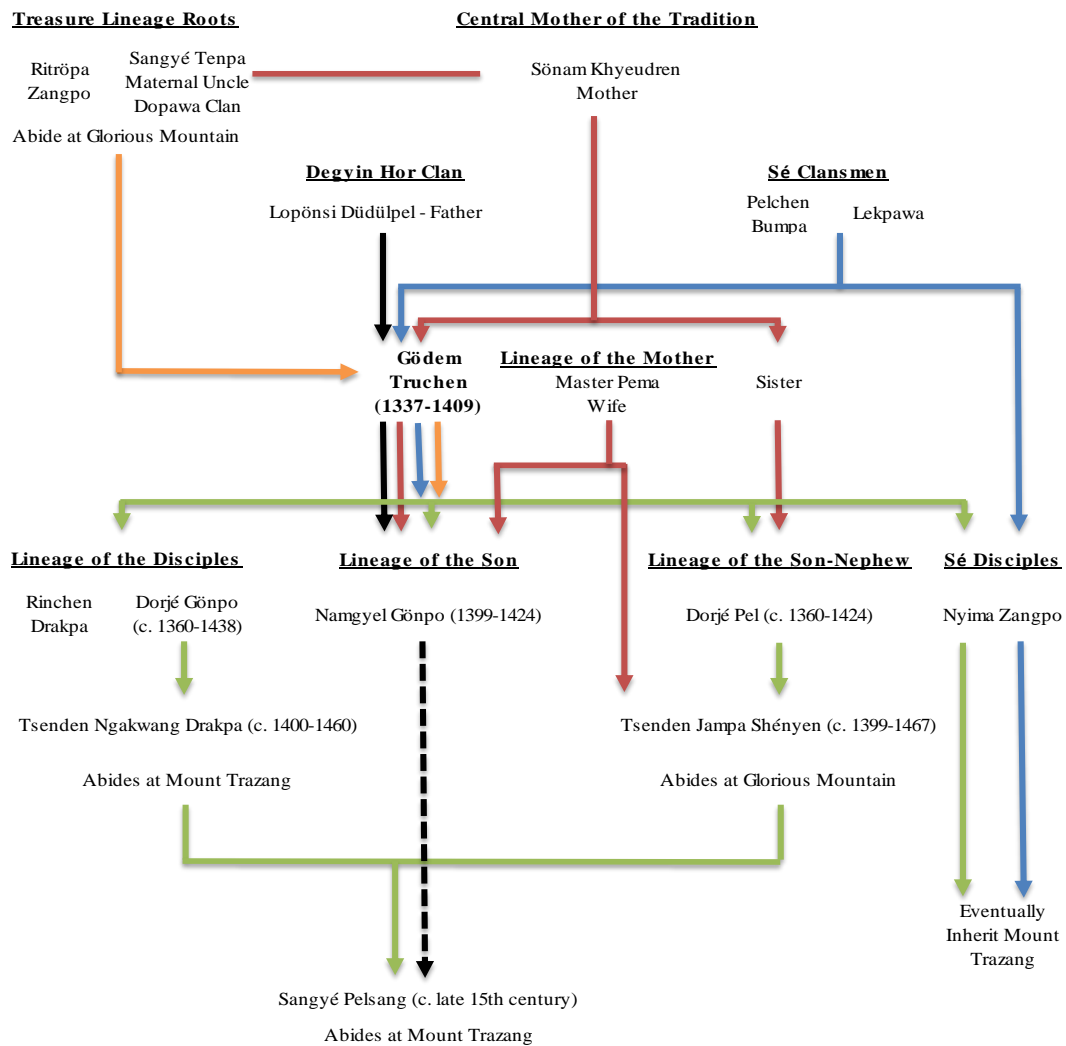
Concluding Remarks

It can readily be observed that both religious authority and spiritual blessings are often represented as flowing through single-file continuums of patriarchs in the Tibetan context. Perhaps as a result, religious history is also often condensed into unidimensional summaries that must necessarily exaggerate the importance of the few at the expense of the many. In recognition of the fact that women are the most obvious causalities of this androcentric practice, the following table (see **Table 2**) has been arranged to draw attention to the prominent positions of Gödem Truchen's mother and wife by placing them along the central, vertical axis. From this perspective it is evident that Lady Sönam's brother, husband, son, daughter, and two of her grandsons were all important figures in the early Northern Treasure Tradition. While there is unfortunately no evidence regarding her direct involvement in the tantric arts, it is difficult to dismiss her relevance to this lineage that was populated by so many of her kin. Master Pema, on the other hand, was important not only as a wife and a mother but also as a master and lineage-holder. While the details of her transmission lineage are difficult to discern because of its secretive nature, it is clearly valued as a direct link to Gödem Truchen.

⁵² Hirshberg, *Delivering the Lotus-born*, 70.

⁵³ Hirshberg, *Delivering the Lotus-born*, 69-70.

⁵⁴ See chapters one and three of Valentine (2013).

Table 2: The Early History of the Northern Treasure Tradition

There were other important women about whom we know even less. Gödem Truchen's unnamed sister, for example, supplies the tradition with an heir, Dorjé Pel, who greatly surpasses his short-lived cousin, Namgyel Gönpo. The wife of Rinden Drakpa and the matriarchs of the Sé clan, however, do not even receive passing mention. While the absence of significant data regarding these women is disappointing, it should also be counted as a minor success that the recognition of these historiographic gaps resulted from an analysis that focused on family relationships. The simple acknowledgement of these blank pages in history does not fill them with content, but it is a step in the right direction.

The preceding exploration has also demonstrated that in the process of exalting the qualities of Gödem Truchen, the biographers of the tradition have minimized the importance of not only the women of the tradition, but also other men who significantly contributed to the development of the Northern Treasure Tradition. While Gödem Truchen certainly deserves to be revered as a founding patriarch, it is evident that the elders of at least three clans (the Dogyin Hor, the Sé, and the Dopawa) were instrumental

in his success. This tradition was not created *ex nihilo* by a single person within a social and spiritual vacuum.

The perspective that is offered in the table above also highlights the web of relationships that supported Gödem Truchen's authority and subsequent transmission lineages. From this perspective, it is evident that there were three families that maintained the tradition after the death of Gödem Truchen: the lineages of his immediate family, his disciples, and his Sé benefactors. While these groups were not all from the same clan, they were all householder traditions. From the perspective of historiographic analysis, it is important to acknowledge that in none of the available sources do we find a discussion of the Sé heritage alongside the three lineages that are usually associated with Gödem Truchen. This suggests that the authority of the tradition may have been split between these two groups from the very beginning. Hopefully, future research will shed light on the lineage of the Northern Treasure Tradition that remained at Trazang long after the establishment of Dorjé Drak in Central Tibet.

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