

Research Article



***The Fantastic Stories of Könchok  
Paldrön and Her Enlightened Children:  
The Literary Impact of a Strong Female  
Voice in Blazing Splendor***

Joel Gruber, *University of San Diego*

During the twelfth century, innovative developments in Tibetan Buddhist spiritual biography helped provide new narrative license to describe the lives and practices of revered saints with a level of detail and sophistication that far surpassed the preceding minimalist approach to biography. This article draws attention to several of the key literary techniques employed by authors to compose spiritual biographies. By comparing two recently published works of this genre, *Brilliant Moon: The Autobiography of Dilgo Khyentse* (2008) and *Blazing Splendor: The Memoirs of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche* (2005), I argue that the latter text's persistent breaks from established literary precedence are reflective of Könchok Paldrön's influence on her grandson, Tulku Urgyen. In addition, I argue that these breaks provide scholars with novel information pertaining to the family dynamic that exists between saints who have been recognized, as children, as reincarnations of enlightened masters (*tulkus*), the mothers who gave birth to them, and the religious institutions that raised them.

**Keywords:** *tulku*, *tertön*, *termas*, Nyingma, biography, gender, Könchok Paldrön, Tulku Urgyen, Dilgo Khyentse, fantasy, mimesis, women in Tibet



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The literature of the Nyingma (Ancient) tradition, the “eldest” of Tibet’s four major sects, stretches back thirteen hundred years, with its core teachings and practices traceable to some of the oldest Tibetan Buddhist texts, which date to the eighth century. During the twelfth century, the Tibetan sects known as the Sarma, or the New Schools, claimed that the Nyingma sect’s most revered tantras were inauthentic Buddhadharma. Because the texts in question lacked a clear Indic pedigree,

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Corresponding author: Joel Gruber, University of San Diego, [joelgruber@sandiego.edu](mailto:joelgruber@sandiego.edu)



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the Sarma insisted these core Nyingma works did not meet the requisite criterion of the time to be considered authentic Buddhist teachings.<sup>1</sup>

Between the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, as part of a concerted effort by several loosely organized Nyingma lineages to establish the Indic pedigree of their tantric texts, Indian Buddhists known to have traveled to Tibet during the early dissemination of Buddhism were persistently linked with Nyingma lineages.<sup>2</sup> Nyingma authors created or altered textual colophons of their foundational Buddhist scriptures to include claims that the texts had been translated and/or composed by renowned eighth-century Indian saints (rather than by Tibetan authors). In addition, they created biographical histories highlighting the tradition's secret, previously unknown Indic origins. It was these innovative developments in biography that provided new narrative license for pan-Tibetan Buddhist lineages to describe the lives and practices of their revered saints with a level of detail and sophistication that far surpassed the preceding minimalist approach to Tibetan biography.

These early twelfth- through fourteenth-century biographical works included effective—and in many ways ingenious—narrative-based arguments that were utilized to defend the tradition from accusations regarding the authenticity of the lineage's most cherished texts. Because these biographies were central to establishing the religious and political legitimacy of the burgeoning Nyingma tradition, the next seven to nine hundred years of biographical literature remained structured around a literary blueprint based on the originals. Over the years, a majority of the changes to the tone, content, and structure of Nyingma spiritual biographies have been quite modest.

Some of the more recently composed works have veered from traditional literary forms—perhaps none more so than *Blazing Splendor: The Memoirs of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche* (2005). Though Tulku Urgyen's memoir is innovative and compelling for numerous reasons, this article specifically addresses the literary influence of Tulku's grandmother, a remarkable woman named Könchok Paldrön. By comparing *Blazing Splendor* with another recently-composed Nyingma spiritual biography, *Brilliant Moon: The Autobiography of Dilgo Khyentse* (2008), this article explains why *Blazing Splendor's* breaks from established literary precedence provide scholars with novel information regarding several under-analyzed social realities, especially in relation to the family dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> The name “Nyingma,” or “Ancient,” refers to Tibet's oldest living Buddhist tradition, with a lineage based on tantras from the early translation period of the eighth and ninth centuries. Their core teachings are based on the inner tantras of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga (Dzokchen). The three main Sarma, or “New Schools,” base their teachings on the “new” translations, texts imported from India during the tenth through twelfth centuries.

<sup>2</sup> Because their Dzokchen tantras lacked a clear Indic pedigree, the Nyingma tradition created one, claiming the teachings emerged from the primordial Buddha known as Samantabhadra. They were passed down from the celestial bodhisattva Vajrasattva to the first human, a tantric master named Garab Dorjé (d.u.), who then passed the esoteric teachings to Mañjuśrīmitra (d.u.). They were taught to Śrī Siṃha (d.u.), who in turn taught the practices to Jñānasūtra (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> c.), Padmasambhava (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> c.), Vimalamitra (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> c.), and Vairotsana (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> c.).

between children recognized as reincarnations of enlightened masters (*tulkus*), the mothers who gave birth to them, and the religious institutions that raised them.

### ***Tulkus, Terma, and Tibetan Women***

The Nyingma tradition has historically been the least monastic-oriented of Tibet's Buddhist sects. Prior to the founding of several major monasteries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the tradition was largely composed of pockets of tantric communities, a majority of which were surrounded by loosely organized satellite conglomerates of village priests, healers, and itinerant yogis. The leaders of these communities were often members of esteemed religious families, political nobility, and/or they were charismatic visionaries who rose to fame as *tertöns* (treasure-revealers) after “revealing” previously concealed *terma* (treasure texts), works purportedly composed centuries earlier by enlightened masters.

Among the hundreds of *tertöns* mentioned in the storied annals of Nyingma history, a nineteenth-century visionary named Chokgyur Lingpa has been called “the universal monarch of all *tertöns*” (Urgyen, 2005: 28). His numerous spiritual accomplishments have been documented in multiple biographical texts and prominently featured in contemporary Nyingma histories. Most of these accounts have remained consistent with a more traditional Nyingma approach to biography, which often includes framing spiritual accomplishments as the fulfillment of prophecy, or at the least, as the reenactment of deeds performed by past saints. For example, Chokgyur Lingpa's achievements are compared to the enlightened activity of the eighth-century Indian saint Padmasambhava, a figure so renowned in the Nyingma sect that he is called the “Second Buddha.”<sup>3</sup> Some narratives also claim that Chokgyur Lingpa's wife, Dechen Dhödrön,<sup>4</sup> was the emanation of Padmasambhava's spiritual consort, Yeshe Tsogyal. In

<sup>3</sup> According to Nyingma historians, Padmasambhava was able to extend his life, conceal thousands of treasures, and emanate throughout Tibetan history, across the Tibetan plateau: “Accomplished practitioners of Great Perfection can transform their bodies into a *vajra*-body called the body of great transformation by specific practices and will be able to remain as long as they wish without death. They will be visible to others as they wish or as it is appropriate. So Guru Padmasambhava lived for about a thousand years before he came to Tibet, and it was possible only because of his spiritual attainment ... he concealed thousands of *termas* in many places for the benefit of future followers” (Thondup, 1986: 52–53).

<sup>4</sup> Tulku Urgyen provides a humorous story that offers the reader a glimpse into the life and personality of Dechen Dhödrön, otherwise known as Lady Degah: “On several occasions, she set her will against the great *tertön*—not too seriously ... but she was strong-headed and liked to have a drink now and then, which didn't bother Chokgyur Lingpa. But he didn't appreciate her drinking from a *garuḍa* claw that he had discovered when revealing a *terma*. One day, he said, ‘I didn't go to the trouble of recovering this rare *garuḍa* claw for you to use as a shot glass! I won't stand for you pouring liquor into it—it's only for sacred substances!’ Lady Degah retorted, ‘Whether it's made from a *garuḍa*'s claw or a yak's horn, it holds a drink pretty well! And that's what I'm going to use it for!’ And she immediately poured herself a drink. Chokgyur Lingpa fired back, ‘How easy do you think it is to come by the claw of a real *garuḍa*? Such a bird lives only on the summit of the fabulous Mount Sumeru. Padmasambhava concealed it in a *terma* for the benefit

addition, the couple's male children were recognized as the reincarnations of recently deceased (or in some instances, long deceased) saints,<sup>5</sup> and their daughter, Könchok Paldrön, has been called a prophesied emanation of a famed dharma protector—the fierce and powerful bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi. Yet, despite Könchok Paldrön's many personal accomplishments, her legacy has been suppressed by the genitive particle, reduced to a relation defined by prominent men, e.g., 'wife of', 'daughter of', or 'mother of'.<sup>6</sup>

To better understand the reason Tibetan women such as Könchok Paldrön are rarely discussed outside of their relationship with saintly men, it should first be noted that Tibetan women have rarely, at any point in Tibetan history, been regarded as equals. As a result, they have seldom participated in the political and religious establishments that govern Tibetan society and produce its history.<sup>7</sup> Yet the consistency with which female contributions have been overlooked cannot be thoroughly explained as a product of gender inequality. The purport, structure, and strategies employed for narrating saintly biographies and religious histories, whether intentional or not, have also largely prevented women from being prominently featured in the annals of Tibetan history.

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of this time. Its real purpose is to help cure epidemics caused by *nāga* spirits. But day and night, you with your brazen attitude use it for nothing better than having a drink' " (2005: 38–39).

<sup>5</sup> Both Chokgyur Lingpa and Dechen Dhödrön were descendents of Tibetan nobility with ties to esteemed religious lineages from both 'blood' (matrilineal descent) and 'bone' (patrilineal descent).

<sup>6</sup> If Könchok Paldrön is mentioned in these works, it is often by name alone within the segment of the biography devoted to tracing the familial bloodlines of Chokgyur Lingpa and his revered progeny.

<sup>7</sup> Kapstein has succinctly summarized the economic condition of Tibetan women, who did enjoy more autonomy than their female neighbors: "It has often been asserted that Tibetan women were generally unencumbered by the disadvantages burdening women in many other traditional Asian societies ... however, it is only because women's circumstances throughout much of Asia were deplorable. In Tibet, certainly, women did enjoy significant rights with respect to their wealth ... as economic autonomy must be regarded as the basis for the autonomy of the individual in society overall, by this standard Tibetan women frequently did enjoy some measure of freedom. At the same time, however, there were often customary restrictions limiting the kinds of wealth women might control" (2006: 199). Yet several Chinese histories offer more information in regards to the lives of Chinese women and their families than the information available in the far more extensive collection of texts that were produced by their prolific neighbors, the Tibetans. While a detailed survey of world literature is beyond the scope of this present study, with Kapstein's summation in mind, it is enough to note that there have likely been cultures with values less conducive to female autonomy that also possess a body of literature that contains more detailed information about the lives of women than has been provided by Nyingma biographical and historical literature. For more information regarding the opportunities available to Tibetan women, see Kapstein (2006: 199–204).

## Fantasy and Mimesis

Rather than highlighting a saint's one-of-a-kind story, Tibetan religious cultures, as expressed through narrative, often paid homage to the individual through homogenization. Though each saintly biography was personalized to a degree, the biographical subject's path, attainments, and activities were framed to appear more *like* the spiritual accomplishments of esteemed lineal figures of the past. Concurrently, a significant percentage of Tibetan Buddhist biographies have been systematically arranged around succinct and to-the-point narratives that function like a Tibetan saint's spiritual *curriculum vitae*. In this way, they are formulated to highlight "job-related" accomplishments in favor of personal attributes and interests, often mimicking the strategies first applied during the twelfth through fourteenth centuries to document the spiritual achievements of the Nyingma tradition's founding figures.<sup>8</sup> This conservative approach to maintaining a traditional structure for narration also includes the deployment of similar descriptive content regarding a saint's (1) auspicious birth; (2) signs of accomplishment as a child; (3) spiritual education; (4) encounters with the guru; (5) preferred teachings and practices; (6) obstacles overcome; (7) advanced spiritual attainments; (8) revelation of treasure texts; (9) methods of teaching disciples; (10) performance of enlightened and miraculous deeds; and (11) parinirvāṇa, or signs of accomplishment at the moment of death.<sup>9</sup>

The somewhat rigid format utilized to construct these biographies has not prevented talented authors from breaking from the genre's standard writing conventions to create fantastic literature. But preconceived genre expectations do offer meaningful incentives for biographers to follow established guidelines, prompting them to skillfully mold departures from literary precedence around established socio-literary writing conventions.

Kathryn Hume, a scholar of fantasy fiction literature, has argued that the two most prominent authorial impulses in Western literature are (1) creating fantasy and (2) utilizing narrative mimesis to ensure that fantasy appears believable and relatable. Hume defines fantasy as a "departure from consensus reality," a "desire to change givens and alter reality," and an attempt to present content that might otherwise be perceived to be impossible as being possible (1984: 20–21). She defines mimesis as "the desire to

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<sup>8</sup> Just as a modern-day academic C.V. would not include much (if any) information in regards to the job-seeker's hobbies, and just as the document would not contain details regarding personal and familial relationships, Nyingma spiritual biographies did not include much in regards to either. And just as a contemporary *vitae* would have job qualifications arranged in a predictable fashion, these biographies were often organized in ways that enabled the reader to quickly locate a saint's particular lineages, practices, teachings, and accomplishments.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the earliest Nyingma saints have at times been given identical birth narratives, or their lives are described according to recycled variants of prophecies offered by bodhisattvas preceding their births, and structurally, the stories of meeting their guru and their spiritual accomplishments can be quite similar, as well. For example, a comparison of several of the early iterations of the biographical narratives detailing the lives of Vimalamitra and Garab Dorjé reveals that at one point they shared an almost identical birth narrative.

imitate, [and] to describe events, people, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share [the] experience.”<sup>10</sup> In short, Hume argues that many fantasy-related “departures” are overlooked and under-examined because they have been disguised through narrative mimesis. As the influential fantasy author J. R. R. Tolkien explains, the use of mimesis helps the author ensure the fantasy elements of the story are accepted as realistic possibilities, no matter how seemingly strange they might appear (1947: 83–84). In order to appear more realistic, Tolkien explains that the more fantastic elements of fantasy fiction should be presented within a consistent, somewhat predictable, and “logical” world the reader can recognize and understand (1947: 83–84). By disguising and/or contextualizing “departures” from conventional reality through the use of mimetic descriptions of events, people, and objects from the reader’s own social realities, the author creates a sense of familiarity or normalcy that enables fiction to be read “with such verisimilitude that others can share [the] experience” (Hume, 1984: 20–21).

From the twelfth century to the present day, there has not been a point in history when Tibetans engaged with spiritual biographies as though they were works of fantasy fiction. For this reason (and others), these Buddhist biographies are clearly distinct from literature composed by authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien. Yet, similar to the Hollywood blockbuster tag, “based on a true story,” the oldest Nyingma spiritual biographies are, in essence, historical fictions that bear only a slight resemblance to the lives and teachings of their biographical subjects. For example, one of the oldest biographies of the Indian saint Vimalamitra (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> c.) within the *Great History of Dzokchen Nyingtik* (ca. 12<sup>th</sup> c.) is disproportionately focused on Vimalamitra’s acquisition, translation, and transmission of texts he could not have possibly composed. When the *Great History of Dzokchen Nyingtik* (Anonymous, 1999) is compared to a second twelfth-century biography of Vimalamitra within the *Copper Palace Chronicles* (Nyangral Nyima Öser, 2007–2008), it becomes evident there are a number of conflicting presentations of the Indian saint’s most rudimentary biographical details—including the century in which he was born, his birthplace, the location where he studied, and the country he returned to after departing Tibet. These contradictions are not the product of confusion regarding the historicity of Vimalamitra. Instead, they are the result of competing attempts to utilize the Vimalamitra mythos to provide Indic precedence for tantric texts that rival schools claimed were apocryphal because Tibetans (rather than Indians) composed them.

Though the biographical content within these texts, particularly that of the *Great History of Dzokchen Nyingtik*, is largely fictive, it was presented to its Tibetan audience as historical fact. Because this type of “fiction” is quite different than the type composed by fantasy fiction authors, the mimesis utilized is distinct as well. By comparing the miraculous stories of more contemporary enlightened masters with the enlightened activity of revered religious persons such as Vimalamitra, subsequent biographers utilized quasi-mimetic techniques that drew upon events detailed in well-known saintly biographies. By doing so, they re-instantiated the “reality” of a founding figure’s

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<sup>10</sup> The terms “fantasy” and “mimesis” have long, contentious, and hotly debated histories, yet there is no need to detail this history in this article. Instead, these terms are being employed, as defined by Hume, to highlight literary techniques and draw attention to underanalyzed and underexplored features of Nyingma biographical literature.

enlightened activity, and in the process, contemporary biographies also appeared more plausible to their target audience.

In contrast, the mimesis employed by authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien is often predicated on the authorial decision to highlight the protagonist's human qualities (including personality foibles), while drawing attention to social relationships the reader also recognizes as being familiar. With the exception of Buddhist autobiographies, where admission of shortcomings is more common, and even regarded as a sign of humility, Tibetan biographers seldom detailed the biographical subject's personality defects. Also, they rarely discuss a saint's social relationships outside of those involving his teachers, students, and religious affiliations. One of the most likely reasons Tibetan audiences maintain faith in the historicity of these spiritual biographies is that Buddhist saints are regarded as being wholly different than "ordinary" Tibetans. Bridging the gap between the extraordinary lives of saints and those of ordinary persons by detailing saintly flaws and describing family relationships might potentially undermine the significance of the saint's spiritual accomplishments (in the eyes of the reader). Once the legitimacy of a saint's miraculous deeds is called into question, the historicity of the narrative could appear suspect as well.

### Conventions, Expectations, and Precedent

*Brilliant Moon* is the life story of a twentieth-century Nyingma saint named Dilgo Khyentse,<sup>11</sup> and like many works within the genre, this (auto)biography often focuses on Khyentse's miraculous *terma*-related transcriptions and revelation of previously concealed esoteric teachings. To "prove" the enlightened ability of Dilgo Khyentse and establish the authenticity of the treasure texts (*terma*) he reveals, Khyentse's accomplishments are described in a style similar to the one employed in the following passage:<sup>12</sup>

Chokgyur Lingpa's daughter Könchok Paldrön inherited a yellow parchment *terma* of her father's. When she passed away, it was given to her grandson, Tulku Urgyen, who subsequently gave it to his uncle Tersey Tulku. As Tersey Tulku had never been able to decode and write it down, he asked Dilgo Khyentse to decode it. Dilgo Khyentse replied, "I'll try." They both then went to the temple containing the enshrined remains of Chokgyur Lingpa and locked the doors. First they performed a feast offering and then soaked the yellow parchment in nectar water. Upon looking at it, the text wasn't yet clear enough. After making many supplications to

<sup>11</sup> The translator of *Brilliant Moon* refers to the text as an autobiography, yet significant portions of the work are not autobiographical, including the details added by Khyentse's students, as well as the other oral accounts recorded by family members.

<sup>12</sup> While it is not necessary for a saint to be a treasure-revealing *tertön* in order to be lionized by Nyingma textual biographies and histories, and while the narratives detailing the life stories of *tertöns* are not required to prominently feature *terma*-related events, a significant majority of the tradition's most esteemed saints, as well as a large number of the most revered spiritual biographies, are indeed about *tertöns* revealing *terma*.

Guru Rinpoche and Chokgyur Lingpa, they again looked and found the text beginning to manifest. At some point, Khyentse Rinpoche asked for some paper, pen, and ink. He was given about forty folios of blank paper, and within a few hours, Khyentse Rinpoche filled them all up, writing effortlessly without pause, as if reading from the yellow parchment ... Later on he commented, “There were three possible versions for this text—extensive, medium, and condensed. In accord with the amount of paper I was given, I wrote the medium-length version” (Rabsel Dawa, 2008: 204–205).

The unique elements of this passage are limited to (1) the specific names of historical persons involved and (2) the determinant for the revelation’s page length being the number of pieces of paper available for Khyentse to transcribe the text upon. Though it is interesting that neither Chokgyur Lingpa nor his family members were able to decode the work themselves, this scenario is hardly unique within Nyingma biography. *Terma* fragments were frequently passed down from generation to generation until the miraculous moment in which they were finally deciphered.

To uncover the content of a hidden teaching encoded in this mysterious and difficult-to-decipher encrypted yellow *terma* scroll,<sup>13</sup> Khyentse performs the standard preparatory rituals, propitiates reliquaries of past masters, bows down to an image of the eighth-century Indian saint Padmasambhava,<sup>14</sup> and offers a “feast” of ritually prepared food and alcohol<sup>15</sup> to a host of tantric deities. The rituals performed are considered efficacious in part because they worked in the past and are modeled after deeds enacted by previous enlightened masters. Through Khyentse’s ritual re-enactment, he receives the blessings from past masters/enlightened deities required in order to transform the alcohol offered into a high-tech elixir, which in an “activated” state functions like the chemicals used by forensic departments to uncover hidden clues at a murder scene. Instead of blood spatter and fingerprints, this esoteric substance illuminates a previously indecipherable treasure text. The end result, the production of a revelatory-based text, is

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<sup>13</sup> *Terma* are often found on “yellow scrolls” or “parchment” marked by symbolic scripts. See Tulku Thondup (1986: 70). For a well-organized outline of the relationship between *terma* and *tertöns*, *dākinīs*, and *dākinī*-script, see Thondup (1986). Also see Gyatso (1998), Aris (1989), and Doctor (2005).

<sup>14</sup> The Nyingma tradition’s histories and biographies have argued that the Indian saint Padmasambhava, a figure whom even the Nyingma sect’s most vociferous rivals believe to be a bodhisattva-like being, is (1) more than capable of composing efficacious and authentic Buddhadharma and (2) realized enough to at least theoretically possess the requisite foresight to intricately account for the seemingly incalculable numbers of karmic conditions one must take into consideration to construct texts that function like fine-tuned ticking karma-bombs with incredible half-lives that are able to explode in the form of covertly-concealed time-capsules from the past that were designed to save a future whose fate is largely dependent upon the success of benevolent bodhisattva espionage-like activity.

<sup>15</sup> *Brilliant Moon* does not actually state that the substance in which the text was dipped into was alcohol, but during tantric feasts and other similar rituals, practitioners offer alcohol to deities, and it seems most likely that the magical elixir referenced in this work was some form of spirit.



to be interpreted as further proof that a master such as Khyentse has attained realizations comparable to the great figures of the past.

### Könchok Paldrön & Co.

Tulku Urgyen's *Blazing Splendor* includes several stories featuring figures from the aforementioned passage detailed in *Brilliant Moon*, including Dilgo Khyentse, Chokgyur Lingpa, Tersey Tulku, and Könchok Paldrön. *Blazing Splendor* utilizes traditional literary strategies akin to those found within *Brilliant Moon*, but the former text's approach is often supplemented by a very different strategy regarding storytelling. Though it might be tempting to reduce *Blazing Splendor*'s literary innovations to Tulku Urgyen's contact with Western culture, or to the compiling/editing work done by his Western students, to do so would be shortsighted. Multiple contemporaneous Nyingma biographies, including *Brilliant Moon*, have been compiled, edited, and formatted by Westerners to ensure they are more appealing to Western audiences. Yet, these works are still not like *Blazing Splendor* (for reasons to be discussed shortly). For this reason, writing off the more unique elements of Tulku Urgyen's memoirs as the product of Western influence would, once again, diminish the creative writing ability of non-Western authors. It would also diminish the literary impact of a female voice in Tibetan literature. As I will demonstrate, the driving force behind Tulku Urgyen's narrative innovations was his grandmother, Könchok Paldrön.

As a young adult, Könchok Paldrön travelled extensively throughout the Tibetan plateau with her famed father and "King of all *Tertöns*," Chokgyur Lingpa, which allowed her to witness her father's miraculous deeds, as well as to spend significant time with several of the most prominent saints and *tertöns* of the contemporary Nyingma tradition. As a result, Könchok Paldrön became a living historian, or at the least, a valuable resource to consult regarding the Nyingma tradition's more recent history. But Könchok Paldrön's innovations came when she settled down and started a family of her own, passing down these stories to her children and grandchildren.<sup>16</sup> Instead of merely hagiographically embellishing her stories to fit the expectations typical of the genre, Könchok Paldrön detailed saintly personal foibles, questioned the legitimacy of tantric accomplishments, and described the politics surrounding *tulkus*, *tertöns*, and *terma* with a matter-of-fact frankness that was relatively unique for a Tibetan woman.

The demonstrable boldness of Könchok Paldrön, as well as her unwillingness to kowtow to religious authority, is made particularly evident in the following story. Originally narrated by Könchok Paldrön, it was recorded for print by her grandson, Tulku Urgyen. He writes:<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Among her progeny, Tulku Urgyen was said to be most unique in that he inherited his grandmother's exceptional memory and elocutionary gifts.

<sup>17</sup> *Blazing Splendor* contains other stories that demonstrate Könchok Paldrön's spiritual accomplishments: "Samten Gyatso told me that he was amazed by his mother's level of meditation ... the local people trusted her deeply. They would often ask for some grains of barley she had blessed, to carry in a small amulet bag on their body. They would also tie her protection

When my father was very young, he was recognized as a *tulku*, the fourth incarnation of the master Sönam Yeshe of Tsangsar. One day, some lamas rode up to the Tsangsar family home; they were from the monastery where, in his previous incarnation, my father had been head lama. They demanded to see my grandmother and then asked her to hand the child over to them. Their arrival happened to coincide with the passing away of my great-grandmother, Lady Degah. “This is a time of mourning,” she told the monks. “My mother has just passed away and I’m very busy with funeral arrangements. Please don’t ask me about my son right now. I probably will have to hand him over to you—how can I ignore the Karmapa and his regent’s command?—but this is not the time ... come back when the funeral ceremonies are complete. In the meantime, the *tulku* stays with me.”

The emissary was very pushy and—let’s not shy away from the word—*insensitive*. “Heh, heh,” he laughed condescendingly. “We are discussing a *vajra* command: there is only one thing for you to say and that is ‘yes.’ I will not accept any other answer from you. I cannot and I will not return to the monastery empty-handed,” he added emphatically ... “This matter must be settled today,” he continued. “I have come too far to return without the *tulku*. I won’t accept any postponement.”

“Dear lama,” Grandmother cautioned, “don’t be so brazen. I already told you I would give you my son—but this day is not right for an auspicious beginning ... according to normal social conventions, people don’t speak so rudely as you to someone they respect. You don’t have to act like this. And remember, a mother always has the final say in the well-being of her own child.”

“That doesn’t make the slightest difference,” the lama retorted ... [But] Grandmother was the kind of person who stuck to her word. She wouldn’t budge. “I told you no! I’m not going to hand my son over to you and I’m certainly not going to your monastery for a celebration. And one more thing: I am not afraid of you, nor should I be. You may be somebody important where you are from, but here I am somebody important. Why should I defer to you? You will gain nothing by being so aggressive!” They got into a quarrel and it turned a bit nasty. Finally, Grandmother exclaimed, “Now I’m absolutely certain ... I shall never hand my son over to someone like you! As he is my child, he is in my care! You will never get him—so you might as well get out!” The lama responded with spite, “Well, if that’s the case, then we definitely don’t want this *tulku* at all!” ...

Not long after the funeral, Grandmother had to travel to Tsikey. As her party came out of a narrow pass, they suddenly confronted twenty-five monks on horseback. The monks blocked the trail; except for the absence of rifles, it was like facing a

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amulets around the necks of their goats and sheep. Some people even tested whether her protection actually worked by shooting rifles at their goats. ‘Each time I hit the goat,’ one of them told me, ‘after the impact it would cry out in pain, Baaaaah! But upon closer inspection, I couldn’t find a bullet wound anywhere. The amulet made my goat bulletproof—I’m not lying!’ ” (Urgyen, 2005: 82).

division of an opposing army ready for battle. They demanded Grandmother hand her son over to them right then and there ... during this confrontation, Grandmother's attendants had their hands on their knives. "We can at least kill a few of them," they whispered to her. "What do you want us to do?"

"No, today there is no need to shed blood," my grandmother cautioned. "Anyway, there are twenty-five of them; you would be lucky to overcome eight or ten. They have the upper hand, so they win this round. Rainbows don't appear every day—let's be patient. Our day will come ..." this is how my father was "invited" to his monastery as a reincarnated lama.

My grandmother was far from happy about this turn of events, and decided to leave her husband and the family estate. "There is no way in the world I will remain here any longer," she proclaimed. "I will go and live near Tsikey Chokling." So she moved to the seat of her father and brothers ... after five years had passed, her son insisted on seeing his mother. By now the manager at my father's monastery felt confident that since my father was eight it would be safe to escort him to see his mother for a short visit and then bring him back. Everyone at his monastery thought that the disagreement had been settled long ago, and now everything was just fine and dandy. So they allowed him to go see his mother at Tsikey, escorted by ten monks. But after five or six days, Könchok Paldrön told them, "The ten of you can return now—but without my son." And she kept Chimey Dorje there ...

[When the monks returned to their monastery, they yelled out], "They kept our *tulku*!" And just then that brazen old lama who had started the whole affair fell out a window. It was all very inauspicious ... in the end, it was decided that Chimey Dorje could stay in his mother's care (Urgyen, 2005: 103–107).

In addition to paradigmatically exemplifying Könchok Paldrön's willingness to stand up to the religious authorities of her region, the passage quoted above provides valuable information regarding the seldom-recorded social tensions between a mother, a child recognized as a *tulku*, and the monastery who raises him. Moreover, the story is a beautiful (if not a painful) expression of the seldom-documented emotions experienced by women who are unwillingly forced to release their children to the care of a monastery. It poignantly demonstrates that no matter a mother's devotion to Buddhism, and regardless of whether she believes her son will have a better life (particularly if the family was poor), most Tibetan mothers endured hardship when losing their sons. In this particular instance, the clergy kidnapped a mother's son, and because the monastery's power came with a real threat of violence, Könchok Paldrön had to wait years to plot her revenge, which to be fair, was hardly revenge. She simply wanted her child back.

Könchok Paldrön passed on the bravado and self-confidence needed to speak in such an "unedited manner" to her progeny, emboldening them to also breach social conventions and normatively enforced literary traditions. As Tulku Urgyen writes: "My grandmother was a very self-assured lady ... [and] ... it was from her that I heard most of the tales that I will tell ..." (2005: 4). To the credit of Könchok Paldrön, her approach was compelling

enough that her son (Samten Gyatso) and grandson (Tulku Urgyen) found it worthy of emulating.<sup>18</sup> The first of Könchok Paldrön's kin to translate Könchok Paldrön's style into literary form was her son, Samten Gyatso, who was Tulku Urgyen's uncle, as well as his root guru.

Samten Gyatso was an accomplished practitioner and an intimidating figure capable of commanding the respect of prominent members of the Nyingma community, both young and old. As a revered (and even feared) leader, he exerted his significant influence on esteemed recognized reincarnations. In the following excerpt from *Blazing Splendor*, Samten Gyatso admonishes a young but respected *tulku* named Tsikey Chokling for composing an early iteration of Chokgyur Lingpa's biography that Samten Gyatso found staid and disingenuous. Uninterested in praising the young *tulku*'s use of quasi-mimetic narrative tropes intended to frame Chokgyur Lingpa's life and teachings in a manner that ensured they appeared more like events detailed in "old scriptures," Samten Gyatso ordered Tsikey Chokling to rewrite the biography with assistance from his mother, Könchok Paldrön:<sup>19</sup>

Samten Gyatso encouraged the second Tsikey Chokling to compile a life story of Chokgyur Lingpa. This Chokling Tulku was extremely learned and well-spoken and embellished many statements with quotations from the old scriptures. But the end product didn't completely please Samten Gyatso; instead, Tsikey Chokling got rebuked for neglecting to consult Könchok Paldrön ... "The real story you can hear from my mother" (Urgyen, 2005: 372 n. 6).

As evident in *Blazing Splendor*, Tulku Urgyen followed Samten Gyatso's advice, employing Könchok Paldrön's distinct approach to narration. With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that *Blazing Splendor* begins with a story featuring Könchok Paldrön. After growing impatient while awaiting the return of her son, a revered lama known as Tersey Tulku, Könchok Paldrön insisted her family escort her to central Tibet so that she could

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<sup>18</sup> The content that is emphasized in the text and the distinctly humorous, and even irreverent, narrative voice of Tulku Urgyen sets the tone for *Blazing Splendor*. Even if his approach was significantly influenced by novel electronic technologies such as a tape recorder, and even if the text's structure and content were altered by the techniques that he and his students utilized to compile it, we must be careful not to reduce the distinct differences in his approach to the result of Western technologies, the influence of oral approaches to storytelling in Tibet, or the impact of his Western students. While it is indeed tempting to interpret *Blazing Splendor*'s unique qualities as being the result of a hybrid synthesis of Tibetan and Western biographical literary forms, an approach comparable to Tulku Urgyen's method for narrating saintly biographies was attempted prior to his family's prolonged contact with the West and before Tibetans departed en masse from their homeland to escape Chinese occupation.

<sup>19</sup> This story does not diminish the impact Tulku Urgyen's Western students had on the final product, but it does prevent the unique features of the text from being reduced to the text's Western editors.

“fetch him” herself.<sup>20</sup> To ensure that all those listening understood she was entirely serious, she unleashes the following diatribe:

During my father’s short life, his fame and glory, his influence and the number of his disciples seemed to surpass even those of the eminent Karmapa. Yet for all that, he left his body behind and me along with it ... [Now] my youngest child, Tersey Tulku, has discarded me to stay with his illustrious master in Central Tibet. People say he is unfurling the four enlightened activities among the nobles in Lhasa. Even the king of Bhutan caters to him—the king gave my Tersey so many presents that fifty pack animals were needed to carry them. He nurtures a flock of eight hundred disciples—but he leaves me, his mother, all alone here in Kham ... I hear all kinds of stories about the so-called great deeds of Tersey Tulku, yet compared to the activities of his grandfather, they seem like no more than foam on water (Urgyen, 2005: 3).

In this excerpt, Könchok Paldrön speaks of her father with the utmost reverence, but her praise also sets the table for a subsequent punch line, a joke made at the expense of a revered Nyingma lama. This somewhat veiled insult is followed by a creative comparison that she presents in the form of a not-so-veiled insult. In short, when Könchok Paldrön refers to her son’s purported “enlightened activities” as being “no more than foam on water,” his accomplishments are analogized as being the equivalent to “foam,” a naturally occurring phenomenon that “lacks any significant substance” and “is noticeable only on the surface” of water. The meaning of this particular analogy is easy enough for readers to comprehend, but more importantly, Könchok Paldrön’s admonishments of Tersey Tulku provide text-based evidence of at least one instance in which a disappointed mother chastises a recognized reincarnation, who according to the tradition, is to be regarded as an enlightened being.<sup>21</sup> In so doing, Könchok Paldrön provides rare literary proof that mothers of *tulkus* are not always of the silent, obedient, and reverential type most frequently depicted in Nyingma literature.

Rather than exclusively presenting stories of revelation as tantric acts of repetition consistent with the deeds of saints from the past, Tulku Urgyen’s work captures the humanity of saintly personas through highlighting their complex relationships with family members, for better or for worse.<sup>22</sup> As a result of the added detail, we are

<sup>20</sup> Tulku Urgyen was born during the family’s journey to find Tersey Tulku (Urgyen, 2005: 4).

<sup>21</sup> Tulku Urgyen speaks of Tersey Tulku with reverence and regards his uncle as being more than deserving of the religious authority bestowed upon him, but the passage wherein his “grandmother” insults “Uncle Tersey” is not the only instance in which he is described in a less than ideal manner.

<sup>22</sup> The preferred methods in this unique text for highlighting typically ignored, and even intentionally omitted “mundane” saintly foibles, are evident from the very beginning of the text. In contradistinction to a majority of texts within its genre, *Blazing Splendor* reads more like a family history that features a colorful cast of characters related by blood. It is a spiritual memoir because a majority of the family members are *tulkus*, *tertöns*, or otherwise accomplished religious persons committed to a life of visionary-based practice and study. Tulku Urgyen’s skillful use of self-deprecating humor, when coupled with the authorial/editorial decisions to feature

provided with valuable insight into familial relationships and the role of Tibetan women in the lives of these saints.

### Revisiting *Brilliant Moon*

Throughout *Blazing Splendor*, Tulku Urgyen's memoirs describe the type of enlightened activity featured in *Brilliant Moon*, including the revelation of *terma* by *tulkus* and *tertöns*, but in the former work the stories are presented alongside saintly gossiping, backbiting, and misadventure. These additions, similar to the previously quoted passages from *Blazing Splendor*, provide the audience a peak behind the curtain of otherwise secretive processes, enabling them an insider's access to revelation and some of the more mundane elements of enlightened activity.<sup>23</sup> As the editors of *Blazing Splendor* note, the audience is able to "see [Tulku Urgyen's] world—and a fascinating pantheon of characters—just as he does: with blunt, often wry, candor" (Urgyen, 2005: xiv).

By comparing *Brilliant Moon* with *Blazing Splendor*'s description of the same event quoted earlier in the article, namely Dilgo Khyentse's transcription of the yellow scroll passed down from Chokgyur Lingpa to Könchok Paldrön to Tersey Tulku, several of *Blazing Splendor*'s unique narrative strategies become even more evident. To begin, Khyentse's revelation is presented in a far less tidy manner and, among other things, the reader is informed that *tulkus* can accidentally lose *termas* and that revered *tertöns* are at times unable to decode treasure texts. As a result, Tulku Urgyen's account of the events leading up to, during, and subsequent to the act of revelation also allows the reader to better understand the complexities of *terma*.<sup>24</sup>

After Könchok Paldrön had passed away, her special possessions were given to family members. I received a yellow parchment that was written in the coded language of the *ḍākinīs*. Afraid I might lose it, I entrusted it to Uncle Tersey's safe

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family-centric drama, and even utilize this dynamic as a means to create a connective thread stringing together dozens of distinct *vitae*-like stories, produced a text that is quite distinct.

<sup>23</sup> Tulku Urgyen's Western students recorded his stories over roughly a decade and then masterfully wove them together into a cohesive narrative. Although the methods for compiling the work and the background of the editors have each clearly influenced the structure and content of his memoirs, there is ample evidence that the most significant differences between *Blazing Splendor* and other works of its genre are the product of the intentional efforts of Tulku Urgyen, which included dictating stories that would later be printed.

<sup>24</sup> Tersey Tulku came into possession of the scroll because Tulku Urgyen was afraid that he might somehow lose a revered piece of the tradition's history. Tulku Urgyen also explicitly reveals that Tersey Tulku, whose title implies that he might be an individual able to reveal treasure—Nyingma *tulkus* are often expected to reveal *terma*—does not decipher the parchment because he has never been able to do so. When Tersey Tulku inquires as to whether one of the greatest nineteenth-century *tertöns*, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820–1892), might decipher the parchment, Khyentse explains that sometimes he can do so and at other times he cannot. Once the text is actually transcribed, Khyentse remains unsure of the legitimacy of his transcription and explains that he needs to have the process authenticated by his teacher, expressing a lack of confidence in his own revelation that is not mentioned in *Brilliant Moon*.

hands. Only realized beings who are treasure revealers can decipher this secret language. Rabsel Dawa was such an individual ... Uncle Tersey showed [Khyentse] that small piece of yellow parchment with *ḍākinī* script. Unfortunately the great master Chokgyur Lingpa had never decoded it himself, but he had told Könchok Paldrön that it contained a lot of teachings. [Uncle Tersey said,] “People say that you can read sign script ... I don’t have this ability myself. Is this true—can you really decode the script of the *ḍākinīs*?” The Khyentse *tulku* replied, “It depends. Sometimes I can, sometimes I can’t. There’s no guarantee.”

Uncle Tersey showed him the piece parchment from Chokgyur Lingpa, telling him it supposedly contained a *terma* that the great *tertön* never succeeded in writing down, and asked if he would be willing to give it a try. Dilgo Khyentse replied, “Since you are a descendant of Chokgyur Lingpa, we could try working together to perform the *sādhana* of Padmasambhava—Chokgyur Lingpa’s pure form—and then see what happens. We should do it together in the shrine room where the body of the great treasure revealer is enshrined. Let’s wait a couple days and go there on the tenth day of lunar month”...

Just the two of them, sitting together, performed the *sādhana* with a lavish feast offering. This is a unique *sādhana* that had been revealed by the great Khyentse as a mind treasure after Chokgyur Lingpa passed away. To allow them to concentrate on the *ḍākinī* script undisturbed, at some point Tersey went and locked the main door so that no one could enter. “The yellow parchment needs to be soaked in *amṛta* made of the five nectars,” Dilgo Khyentse then said. “Dissolve some sacred *mendrub* medicine in barley wine, then place the parchment on top of it.” Interestingly, *terma* paper doesn’t react to liquids in the same way normal paper does. It never gets damaged. They then began the *sādhana* in front of the golden *stūpa* and continued all the way to the recitation, which took about an hour. At that point, Dilgo Khyentse asked the *amṛta* vessel containing the parchment to be brought over to him. “Do you see anything?” Tersey asked. “Not a thing.” So they continued the practice ...

After a while, Dilgo Khyentse said, “Let’s take another look.” As they removed the lid, he exclaimed, “Now I can see! Bring over some paper to write on” ... when Dilgo Khyentse was done writing, he told Uncle Tersey, “It appears you must be the primary recipient of this teaching, since you are the reincarnation of the *tertön*’s son. I have merely acted as his assistant. Chokgyur Lingpa’s *terma* parchment is authentic and in my vision I received his complete blessing for this task. This *terma* has three levels of details: extensive, medium and condensed. If I had written down the extensive version, it would have filled a large volume, which is more than needed these days. I wrote down the medium version, complete as it is. Now the time is up and the script is no longer visible. So let’s complete the *sādhana*.” With that, they continued with the feast offering and concluded with the dedication of merit. Then Tersey requested Dilgo Khyentse to give him the empowerment. “Now that you have decoded the script, it should be put to use for the benefit of Dharma and all sentient beings. So, please give me the empowerment for it right now.”

Dilgo Khyentse replied, “I will surely do so, don’t worry. But first we need to have it verified by my guru, Dzongsar Khyentse, who is the lord of the Dharma in our age. Even though I have no doubts about the authenticity of the parchment, I am not fully confident in my ability to decode it. So first let me show it to him. If he confirms that it is a true Dharma teaching and gives his consent for propagating it, then I will certainly come back and offer you the empowerment and reading transmission. Otherwise, it is not enough just to have decoded a *terma*, as I cannot justify authenticating it on my own” ...

This is how Chokgyur Lingpa’s *terma* on the eight consorts was established in written form. Uncle Tersey later told me, “There is no question that Dilgo Khyentse knows the symbolic script! I haven’t the slightest doubt about it.” Dilgo Khyentse took the text with him to show Dzongsar Khyentse, but he never got the opportunity to give empowerment to Uncle Tersey. However, this story gives us a glimpse of Dilgo Khyentse’s capacity. Wasn’t he just amazing! He was unique, truly incredible, a master in the truest sense of the word (Urgyen: 2005: 281–284).

Though some might argue that the primary differences between the passages detailing Khyentse’s revelation in *Blazing Splendor* and *Brilliant Moon* are the result of a difference in page length (with *Blazing Splendor* being the lengthier of the two), this explanation is not satisfactory for two important reasons. First, this same event is narrated a second time in *Brilliant Moon*, and in the more “detailed version,” the additional information almost exclusively consists of more extensive lists of deities, names of prominent saints, and references to sacred locations.<sup>25</sup> Second, the unique details provided by Tulku Urgyen have been included in large part because the narrator (Tulku Urgyen) and his editors (Western students) consciously eschewed several of the genre-based conventions aimed at framing a contemporary narrative to appear more consistent with those detailing the enlightened activity of idealized (and often fictive) saintly portraits of the past.

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<sup>25</sup> The second account in its entirety reads: “Then I went to Mindrol Norbu Ling, where I met the Chokling Tulku and offered him the most profound longevity blessings from the *Heart Essence of the Immortal Ārya*. I got a close look at Terchen Chokling’s possessions, empowerment articles, and representation of Guru Rinpoche. In front of Terchen Chokling’s precious remains I made offerings along with the *Seven-Chapter Supplication* and the *Clearing the Obstacles of the Path* supplication and performed the feast offering of the *Heart Practice Dispelling All Obstacles* in full detail. After the great *tertön* Chokgyur Lingpa had passed away, the omniscient Khyentse Wangpo divided his *terma* objects among the *tertön*’s consort, sons, and daughters. The share that he said belonged to the *tertön*’s daughter Könchok Paldrön was a sheet of yellow parchment of the female deities from the *Eight Sādhana Teachings* inside a silver tube. Tersey Tulku told me to decode whatever it contained and gave it to me along with a pure white undergarment of Ratna Shri Tara. It contained a collection of outer, inner, and secret *sādhana*s of the nine *heruka* consorts from the *Eight Sādhana Teachings* and of Dutro Mamo, the guardian of the teachings, which I wrote down and asked him to examine. Tersey Tulku said, ‘None of the Khyentse choktruls were able to see it, but now you have seen it accurately! I feel so relieved!’ and was delighted” (Rabsel Dawa, 2008: 123).



## Conclusion

The literary strategies employed by Tulku Urgyen and co. may be similar to those of an otherwise undocumented but preexistent oratory style. Or, departures from writing conventions common to the genre may be, in part, a result of interaction with the West. Yet, regardless of whether *Blazing Splendor*'s more distinct features were influenced by a preexistent oral tradition and/or contact with the West, the fact remains that it is a Nyingma biography that is different from the others. Thus, Könchok Paldrön must be given credit for her influence on the genre, which, as documented in Tulku Urgyen's memoirs, is twofold: (1) her willingness to disregard well-established social conventions led to the creation of a text that frequently broke from genre strictures, and (2) these breaks provided readers a rare glimpse into contemporary saints' familial relationships, including those with their mother. In the process, the reader is also able to better understand the politics of revelation, as well as some of the less-than-flattering politics that often surround saintly persons. The question that has hereto now remained unasked is whether including this type of detail causes the miraculous events described to appear less credible to the target audience.

In *Brilliant Moon*, the authors/editors rely on strategies of repetition and mimicry intended to remind Tibetans of deeds performed in the past. The purpose of doing so is, at least in part, to ensure that readers do not experience a "moment [wherein] disbelief arises [and] the spell is broken," wherein, as Tolkien warns, "the author has failed" to present a believable account of fantastic and miraculous enlightened deeds. Though traditional strategies for detailing revelation in works such as *Brilliant Moon* (which also veers slightly from established conventions) are fascinating, the portrayal of the main figures involved in these narratives might be seen as a bit one-dimensional. In addition, the details that build plot, create suspense—and enable a Western reader to relate to the biographical subjects, comprehend the "logic" of their world, and understand the significance of revelation—are at times lacking, preventing readers without extensive knowledge of Nyingma *terma* traditions from successfully comprehending the motivation of the Nyingma *tertön*. This is not to discount the fact that *Brilliant Moon* is an excellent piece of literature that successfully demonstrates the manner in which Dilgo Khyentse's revelations are consistent with past revelations. It is to instead point out that this type of traditional account, which might meet the expectations of a Tibetan audience, most likely does not read nearly as well for Westerners. In fact, the same literary conventions used to signify the greatness of a saint to a Tibetan audience create obstacles for non-Tibetan readers, a majority of whom have neither been to Tibet, nor to the Tibetan exile communities of India. Because these readers lack the comparable experiences and familiarity with the tradition to understand the laws dictating the *tertön*'s world, the stories told in nonfiction biographies such as *Brilliant Moon* may seem, as a colleague of mine once noted, less plausible than the protagonist's heroics described by fantasy novels.

In contrast, Tulku Urgyen and his editors' approach to detailing the lives and deeds of his family and spiritual acquaintances provide the reader with otherwise largely unavailable detail uncharacteristic of the genre. By utilizing a literary style that at times almost appears to flaunt the flawed personalities of these saints, Tulku Urgyen employs a type

of quasi-mimesis that enables Western readers to relate with the characters in a way that might not otherwise be possible. It is these details that enable a Westerner unfamiliar with the tradition to, at the least, formulate thoughts that more closely approximate the world and the worldview of the text's main characters. Even readers who might refuse to take these stories seriously because they do not read *like* Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or secular-scientific biographies would most likely find Khyentse's revelation to be more interesting and easier to read in *Blazing Splendor*. But do added details of saintly foibles encourage the reader to believe in the world of Nyingma *tulkus*, *tertöns*, and *tema* because they make it appear more familiar, similar to how they encourage readers to suspend disbelief and engage in science-fiction/fantasy worlds when reading works of fiction?

A majority of the Western readers purchasing *Blazing Splendor* did so because they were looking to engage with, and learn more about, the world of contemporary Nyingma saints. Based on a somewhat rudimentary, preliminary analysis of their response to the purchase, which I have based on reading book reviews from several online sites, it is evident that many readers shared an experience similar to the one described by Susan Law (Hudson Valley, NY):<sup>26</sup>

In recent years, at least a small portion of the most important works in the vast Tibetan Buddhist literature has been translated and made available in English. The rate of publication is increasing as more people become able to translate Tibetan. Against this background, *Blazing Splendor* stands out—it is unique, a book that may mark a watershed in the understanding of Tibetan Buddhism by westerners. *Blazing Splendor* is the memoirs of one of the greatest Tibetan Yogis of recent years—Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche. A collection of stories gathered over many years by his translators, its personal approach makes it different from either history or the formal biographies of great Lamas and masters of the past. Its intimate tone brings the reader right into the lives of Buddhist practitioners ... cumulatively, the effect of so many detailed stories and personal memories is to give the reader a rich awareness of life in a culture that was centered on the Dharma. Nothing else I've read over the years has had such a profound effect on me.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, fifty years from now the publication of *Blazing Splendor* will most likely *not* be retrospectively considered a “watershed” moment in which Tibetan Buddhism was “successfully” transmitted to the West. But regardless of its cultural impact, Kōnchok Paldrön's influence on Nyingma biographical literature will remain relevant—if for no

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<sup>26</sup> Law's review represents a synthesis of the most common sentiments expressed in the other reviews of *Blazing Splendor*. I have gauged responses through Amazon.com, where *Blazing Splendor* has earned fourteen five-star reviews and four four-star ratings, with no reviews lower than four stars. On Goodreads.com, it has been rated seventy-one times and has an average rating of 4.65/5: <https://www.goodreads.com/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&query=blazing+splendor>.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Law (Hudson Valley, NY) wrote the review titled “Splendor Indeed” for the Amazon.com website on January 4, 2006: [http://www.amazon.com/Blazing-Splendor-Memoirs-Urgyen-Rinpoche/product-reviews/9627341568/ref=dp\\_top\\_cm\\_cr\\_acr\\_txt?showViewpoints=1](http://www.amazon.com/Blazing-Splendor-Memoirs-Urgyen-Rinpoche/product-reviews/9627341568/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?showViewpoints=1)

other reason than the fact that she has been prominently featured, thereby providing several novel insights into the lives of Tibetan women. Furthermore, Könchok Paldrön's unique style prompted her grandson to document several previously under-analyzed details of saintly life and treasure revelation.

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