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Symposium: Buddhism and Sexual Abuse

Deconstructing the Demoness: Tsepongza, Misogyny, and the Structural Implications of Telling Stories of Sexual Violence

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In conversation with survivor-centered discussions of sexual violence in Western Buddhist contexts, this piece examines the story of queen Tsepongza and her encounter with Vairocana to highlight the tension between key Tibetan historical narratives that construct women as demonesses in misogynist terms and the work of contemporary Tibetan female writers such as Jamyang Kyi that challenge such narratives and reclaim demonized Tibetan historical women as symbols of resistance and survivance. While rejecting the logics of misogyny by centering Tibetan women's voices, this analysis cautions against interpreting stories of sexual violence in a vacuum, reflecting instead on the ways in which such narratives may be inevitably shaped by and reinforce specific historical and contemporary structures of power.

Keywords: Tibetan literature; demonesses (*dremo* འདྲེ་མོ།); misogyny; Tibetan women writers; sexual transgression; survival and resistance

This piece advances survivor-centered discussions of violence related to religion, gender, and broader power structures by revisiting contested narratives of Queen Tsepongza (རྩེ་སྤོང་བཟའ།), the Tibetan wife of the eighth-century Yarlung dynasty king Trisong Detsen (ཁྲི་སྲོང་ལྡེའུ་བཙན།).[1] Drawing on Orgyen Lingpa (1986), which is Orgyen Lingpa's (ཨོ་རྒྱན་གླིང་པ།) fourteenth-century treasure text *Chronicles of the Queens* (བཙུན་མོ་བཀའི་ཐང་ཡིག) in *The Five Chronicles* (བཀའ་ཐང་སྡེ་ལྔ།) and Karma Chakmé (2010), which is Karma Chakmé's (ཀརྨ་ཆགས་མེད།) seventeeth-century ritual text *Synopsis of the Demonesses Karyé, Dzadö, and Gudö* (འདྲེ་མོ་བཀར་ཡས། འདྲེ་མོ་རྫ་མདོས། འདྲེ་མོ་དགུ་མདོས་ཀུན་གྱི་དོན་བསྡུས།), this commentary traces the historical construction of women as demonesses. Following feminist philosopher Kate Manne, I suggest that the story of Tsepongza within the mainstream Buddhist history of Tibet, and the narrative of demoness in general, operates as a logic of misogyny. In contrast, I draw on the work of the vocal Tibetan feminist writer and activist Jamyang Kyi (འཇམ་དབྱངས་སྐྱི།) to present an alternative narrative of Queen Tsepongza as a symbol of Tibetan resistance and survivance. Jamyang Kyi's reclamation and reconstruction of Tsepongza's story and her implicit critiques of the political economic structures affecting the complexities of contemporary Tibetan lives caution against taking stories of sexual violence in a vacuum and demonstrate instead that narratives of sexual violence are inevitably shaped by specific structures of power and social difference.

Chronicles of the Queens recounts a pivotal moment in which the Buddhist master Vairocana was preparing a journey to China as a representative of his teacher, Padmasambhava. But King Trisong Detsen was displeased and apprehensive about the potential loss to the nation from the departure of such a revered master. So, the

[1] This piece is part of my dissertation which explores questions of gender and religion in Tibetan literature. I would like to thank Sarah Jacoby, Holly Gayley, Gen Pema Bhum, and Phurwa Dolpopa for their feedback and/or for the conversations that informed various parts of this piece.

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king organized a grand ceremony at Samye Chimpu (བསམ་ཡས་མཆིམས་ཕུ།) to welcome Vairocana. Seeking to delay Vairocana's travel, the king implored him to stay at Samye for three years. Vairocana thus stayed in a secluded cave in the vicinity of Samye and routinely came down to the palace for meals.

One morning, when Vairocana came to the palace for breakfast, he found Queen Tsepongza alone, ready with the morning offerings. She had deliberately arranged for everyone including the king to be away so she could meet him in private. After the meal, the queen confessed her intense passion for Vairocana, embracing him with fervor. Vairocana was stunned and paralyzed with fear, like a child who just dropped an egg (བྱིས་པས་སྒོ་ངར་སྐྱུར་བ་བཞིན།). He devised a quick plan to rescue himself from the situation. He headed towards the door, assuring her that he will return right after closing the outer door. But he fled towards his hermitage, never to return. The queen stormed outside in frustration as soon as she realized he had fled. In a fit of rage, she broke the buttons of her clothes, tore up her dress, and scratched her own body to fabricate signs of struggle and harassment. Then, crying out for help, she falsely accused Vairocana of attempting to violate her. When the king returned, she wept and narrated her fabricated tale to him. Although the king was deeply disappointed, he and his council of ministers decided not to confront the master.

In time, Vairocana learned about the queen's deceit and the false accusations leveled against him. Deeply saddened, he cursed her and left the valley. The king, overcome with grief and a profound sense of loss, set out in pursuit of the master and resolved to offer him the queen in atonement. He implored the master to remain as his chief priest, but the master steadfastly refused, rejecting any attachment to the queen. In his response, Vairocana proclaimed:

> Women are deadly poison; whoever consumes them will meet their end. Women are karmic demonesses (ལས་ཀྱི་སྲིན་མོ།); whoever lingers near them is doomed. Women are the mire of hell that ensnares beings. Women are the prison of samsara; those tainted by them will never attain liberation. Women are the torment of evil; those bound to them will endure relentless suffering (Orgyen Lingpa ཨོ་རྒྱན་གླིང་པ། 1986: 251).

Having renounced his ties to the court, the master retreated to the Yerpa forest (ཡེར་པ་ནགས།). As a retribution (རམད་དུ།), he summoned a black water spirit (ནག་པོ་ཆུ།) and gave specific instructions to enter the body of the queen and afflict her with an uncurable disease (leprosy). He justified the resulting suffering as her negative karma. The tale concludes with the queen confessing her wrongdoing while the master is absolved of all accusations.

Here, my aim is not to determine the historical accuracy nor judge who is guilty, which can only be a conjecture at best. Rather, my focus lies in analyzing the social life and significance of the narratives of the demoness that have emerged from this incident, particularly how they shed light on questions of gender, Buddhism, and sexual transgression. The dominant narrative, inscribed in Tibetan Buddhist historiography, recounts Queen Tsepongza as a morally corrupt woman or *dremo* (འདྲེ་མོ།), a Tibetan cultural category of demoness. This is exemplified by Karma Chakmé's ritual text, which introduces the purpose and method of religious rituals aimed to allure and pacify various kinds of demonesses, including Tsepongza (Karma Chakmé 2010).

Chakmé characterizes *dremo* as *damsri* (དམ་སྲི།), or *samaya* violators, a term that explicitly denotes their primary transgression. It is worth differentiating between *dremo* and *srinmo* (the term used in Vairocana's proclamation above), both of which fall under the broader category of demoness. The concept and figure of the *srinmo* has been extensively explored in Tibetan studies and is represented in both positive and negative lights as a dharma protector (Gianotti 2004), albeit one that was ritually tamed, symbolizing the feminine ground of the land (Gyatso 1987). This piece focuses on the less explored concept of *dremo*, which is almost always represented as a negative force. Karma Chakmé outlines how *dremo* manifest through destructive actions and calamities, including the spread of plague (ཡམས་རྣ་བ་ག་མོ།) and the depletion of life and fortune, particularly

those of men (ཆོ་གཡང་དང་ཕོ་གཡང་ཟླ།). They are believed to manifest in female forms and inflict harm upon men, often resulting in a series of deaths. In Karma Chakmé's mandala of demonesses, the central demoness is surrounded by a host of other demonesses, including Tsepongza. The text underscores Tsepongza's principal evil karma: making the false accusation of sexual transgression against a bodhisattva. Chakmé portrays her malevolent aspirations as a catalyst for the subsequent degeneration of dharma in Tibet. He depicts Tsepongza as an evil force that leads beings toward lower rebirths and poses dire threats to humans, men in particular. The fall of Tsepongza from queen to demoness speaks to the process of making a *dremo*, some of whom are former dharma protectors that violated *samaya* (such as fallen angels in Judeo-Christian parlance).

Scholars often interpret human fear of powerful "Others" as the central reason rituals targeting demoness were developed and practiced. Ronald Hutton, for example, argues that fear from misfortune and the harms of "uncanny means" often materialized through the global figure of the "witch." Although the practice of witchcraft is complex and culturally diverse and there is no univocal concept of the witch, Hutton suggests that there are five globally recognizable characteristics of the "witch": they harm others through "uncanny means," cause "internal threat to a community," work "within a tradition," are "evil," and "can be resisted" (Hutton 2017: 10–35).

The construction of Tsepongza as a demoness can be interpretated as part of this global history of human fear, particularly the tendency to frame certain figures as sources of misfortune and destruction. Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Tsepongza is constructed as a classic case of a malevolent force that brings about calamities, death, and disruption. Vairocana reinforces this perception by drawing a direct correlation between demonesses and the category of women in general, depicting them as dangerous, demonic, and the root cause of samsara. Further, Karma Chakmé not only establishes these common characteristics of the *dremo* in Tibetan context, but his ritual text also functions as a mechanism to "resist" such perceived "evil" forces, much like the practice of witch-hunting in the Euro-American context.

I now move away from the perspectives of men toward those of women, the "targets" and "victims" of misogyny. Kate Manne defines misogyny as the "law enforcement branch of patriarchal order" that has the function of "policing and enforcing its governing ideology," ultimately helping maintain the patriarchal order and normalize gendered social expectations (Manne 2018: 63). Manne argues that, in the patriarchal system, women are socially positioned as "human givers" to "men who look to them for various kinds of moral support, admiration, attention, and so on" (Manne 2018: xxi). When she fails to live up to this social role of giving, "there is a risk of misogynist resentment, punishment, and indignation" (Manne 2018: xxi). The story of Tsepongza and the narrative of demoness in general can be understood as an example of this misogynist politics of resentment.

In the Tibetan tradition, demonesses are often portrayed as powerful female agents who transgress Buddhist vows and/or societal conventions. Tsepongza's failure or refusal to conform to the multiple gendered roles of loyal wife, devout disciple, and ethical patron underscores the narrative of her demoness-ness and the severity of her subsequent punishment. Her story reflects not only the consequences of defying these prescribed roles on subversive women but also the enduring cultural imagination that transformed a historically powerful Buddhist patron into a key figure of the demoness. The story of Tsepongza thus may be more complex than the "himpathic" way it is told in the mainstream Tibetan Buddhist history. Manne coined the term "himpathy" to describe "the excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence" (Manne 2018: 197). From a survivor-centered perspective of Tsepongza, one could well argue, following Kate Mann and Ronald Hutton, that Tsepongza's resolve to speak out turned her into a demoness worth deserving of condemnation, social exclusion, and even physical punishment.

In addition to Buddhist literature, the construction of the demoness is also reflected in Bonpo treasure literature (གཏེར་མ།) from the tenth to the fourteenth century. Notably, the story of Tsepongza and Vairocana resonates with an identical narrative found in Bonpo treasure texts. For example, the *Sutra of Piercing Eyes* (མདོ་གཟེར་མིག), a middle-length account of Shenrab Miwo (གཤེན་རབ་མི་མོ།), renowned as the founder of Tibet's Bon religion recounts the tale of Queen Ghulang Mati (རྒྱ་ལང་མ་ཀྱི།) of the Hö (ཧོར།), who was afflicted with leprosy as a retribution for her acts of seducing and falsely accusing Yungdrung Tsukshen Gyalwa (གཡུང་དྲུང་གཙུག་གཤེན་རྒྱལ་བ།) of sexual assault Trangje Tsunpa Zermik (Trangje Tsunpa Zermik དྲང་རྗེ་བཙུན་པ་གཟེར་མིག 2016). The parallels between the story of Tsepongza and that of Ghulang Mati extend beyond structural and thematic similarities to the very language employed in their narration. Scholars have expressed skepticism regarding the originality or the historical accuracy of the incidents recorded in these texts due to the common practice of inter-textual copying and borrowing of narratives between Bonpo and Buddhist treasure sources over the centuries (Gurung 2011: 99–108). Yet despite this valid concern, these texts are valuable resources to understand the social significance of these contested narratives.

In contrast to the dominant narratives presented above, other twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources, such as *The Essence of the Flower, the Elixir of Honey* (ཆོས་འབྱུང་ཨེ་ཏེ་ཀ་སྙིང་པོ་སྦྲང་རྩིའི་བཏུས།) and *The Great Masked Biography of Vairocana* (ནི་རོའི་རྣམ་ཐར་འདུ་འཁགས་ཆེན་མོ།) provide fragmented references to the conflict between Vairocana and Tsepongza and offer a critical alternative interpretation that views Tsepongza as standing up for her Indigenous practices and sovereignty in an early moment of Buddhist transmission into Tibet. These alternative narratives portray her, along with a few other ministers, as challenging the king's endorsement and patronage of Buddhism (Rab-rgyas, mTsho, and Wei-bin 2022). It is within this line of alternative narratology that contemporary Tibetan writers, such as Jamyang Kyi, reconstruct and celebrate Tsepongza as a symbol of Tibet's Indigenous resistance.

> Tsepongza Metokdron recognized the shifting identities of the Tibetans: the king bowed his head to the toes of those who studied Buddhist teachings, while the subjects began to prioritize foreign cultures over their own. The primary cause of this shift was the influence of Indian missionaries. Following ancestral traditions, she upheld the principle of prioritizing politics while placing the dharma in a secondary role. Collaborating with esteemed ministers, she devised strategies to prevent adverse situations. Later, when the state's power waned like a fading moon, she drew upon the tool and brilliance of women to confront Vairocana in defense of the nation. She ultimately sacrificed herself for her country and its people. Yet, rather than receiving respect, some historians—lacking insight into causality and the spirit of equality—subjected her to insult and criticism. Her (Jamyang, Kyi འཇམ་དབྱངས་སྐྱིད། 2008: 59–60).

The reclamation of Tsepongza as a symbol of resistance resonates with the marginalized realities of Tibetan societies, not to mention the inspirations it offers for imagining and advancing forms of Indigenous survivance, a term that Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (2008) defines as alternative narratives of continuation and presence that draw on both ancestral and emergent stories. For Tibetans like Jamyang Kyi, the story of Tsepongza cannot be separated from the question of collective survival. In other words, the social life of the story of Queen Tsepongza's sexual transgression reveals that narratives of sexual violence extend beyond individual experience; they also carry collective social experiences and meanings and, in this context, have implications for asserting collective survival and future. As conversations about sexual violence take place in academic settings in "the West", it is crucial to center the voices and experiences of the survivors rather than those of perpetrators. Thus, only the survivors such as Queen Tsepongza can do justice to their own story. At the same time, as the social life and significance of Queen Tsepongza's story illustrate, it is also

essential to address the historical and contemporary specificities of power that shape particular narratives of violence and their implications.

Editorial note: (August 25, 2026.) At the request of the author, the article has been lightly edited since its original publication. No change has been made to the substance of the argument.

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