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At the heart of Suzanne M. Bessenger’s rewarding book *Echoes of Enlightenment: The Life and Legacy of the Tibetan Saint Sönam Peldren* lies a puzzle. How did a figure like Sönam Peldren, an illiterate nomad woman in the fourteenth century whose biography depicts constant resistance and scorn from her community, become a saint whose legacy is carried on by a nunnery she is believed to have founded, claimed as a prior incarnation by later female practitioners, and written into the very landscape where she is said to have lived? Though such a question resists any final answer, Bessenger ably uses the new-found biography, the *Life*, of Sönam Peldren to pursue questions about gender, and embodiment, and about the literary creation of sainthood. She argues that we can uncover the layers embedded in Sönam Peldren’s biography to see the “intense social negotiations and literary maneuverings involved in the creation of a saint” (p. 210).

After an introduction that discusses the two manuscripts she is using, Bessenger dwells on questions of method and gives a general context of fourteenth-century Tibetan religion. She opens the first chapter with an overview of events in Sönam Peldren’s biography. Sönam Peldren emerges, in Bessenger’s telling, as a strong and idiosyncratic personality. She defied her father’s choice of a wealthy husband and instead picked the poor nomad Rinchen Pel, performed miracles and feats of strength, but attributed this to mere luck, and generally flouted convention. As she got older, she started to give speeches about religion and made predictions about the future, but she endured constant criticism from her community and doubt from her husband. It is only after she died at the age of forty-four and returned to him in splendid posthumous visions that he finally understood her as an emanation of the goddess Dorjé Pakmo.

In chapter 2, Bessenger draws out the way in which the *Life* took shape based on a literary analysis of the two available manuscripts of the text. Although the *Life* presents itself as orally composed by Rinchen Pel alone, Bessenger argues that the numerous “voices” she finds in the text reflect the contributions of many authors now mostly lost to history. Bessenger dwells on a problem that will be familiar to scholars of female saints in contexts where editorial choices are largely controlled by men: is it possible, among all of these voices, to find the voice of Sönam Peldren herself? Bessenger rightly cautions her readers about the limitations of such sources and what we can expect from them, but leaves open the possibility that readers of Sönam Peldren’s *Life* are encountering, in some small way, the imprint of this remarkable woman.
Next, in chapter 3, Bessenger poses the question of what comprises the “religion” of Sönam Peldren. This seemingly simple question is made difficult by the conspicuous lack of references to religious figures or lineages in Sönam Peldren’s *Life*. In contrast to many Tibetan saints, whose training, teachers, and lineages are carefully recounted in their *Lives* to demonstrate their qualifications, Sönam Peldren did not study with masters or at recognizable institutions; indeed, she touted her lack of religious training as a sign of her advanced realization! Bessenger helps the reader understand these claims in context; she adduces fleeting references in the text to practices like inner heat (Tib: *gtum mo*) or disciplined conduct (Tib: *brtul zhung spyod pa*), as well as episodes from the *Life* where Sönam Peldren engaged in deliberately bizarre behavior to show the way in which she drew on and developed themes found elsewhere in Tibetan Buddhism, such as unconventionality, “crazy wisdom,” the valorization of lay life, and spontaneity.

Gender, a prominent theme throughout the book, comes most directly into focus in chapter 4, which analyzes the representations of gender and the female body. Bessenger shows how the *Life* directly tackles Tibetan stereotypes of female birth as unfortunate and low status; whenever Sönam Peldren faced criticism about her gender or “ugly” body, she deconstructed these criticisms, arguing that they were more a reflection of the dualistic and ignorant mind of the speaker than a statement about her. For Sönam Peldren, her own “low birth” in no way inhibited her ability to have “high thought.” Of particular interest in this chapter is an extended comparison Bessenger makes between the *Lives* of Sönam Peldren and Machik Lapdrön. The two texts are revealed to have very different ways of representing their subjects’ experience of gender. While it is beyond the scope of this review to analyze this section in detail, it is valuable for the contribution it makes to our understanding of the diversity of representations of gender in Tibetan Buddhism.

The final chapter considers the way in which, after her death, Sönam Peldren has continued to influence communities down to the present. The chapter focuses on three moments in what Bessenger calls Sönam Peldren’s “posthumous career” to consider the ways in which different figures and communities have participated in the social construction of Sönam Peldren’s memory “from cantankerous troublemaker to pristine saint” (pp. 175, 177). Though the chapter is limited by the fact that we know so little about the literary history of the *Life*, Bessenger relates one encounter she had with nuns in the nunnery in eastern Tibet that considers itself to be founded by Sönam Peldren; it reveals some of the intriguing twists and turns taken by Sönam Peldren’s legacy. In spite of the *Life*’s repeated insistence that Sönam Peldren is an incarnation of the goddess Dorjé Pakmo, and of Sönam Peldren’s later incorporation into the reincarnation lineage of Samding Dorjé Pakmo, of the nuns she encountered, only one of whom had read the *Life* herself, “all expressed bafflement at the idea that there was any specific relationship between the saint and the goddess” (p. 207). Clearly, in spite of the laudable work done here by Bessenger there remain many missing pieces in the puzzle of Sönam Peldren, and much work that remains to be done.

One question that emerges out of Bessenger’s analysis is the figure of Sönam Peldren’s husband, Rinchen Pel. Though Sönam Peldren received no positive recognition during her life and was doubted by everyone, including her husband, his posthumous visions of her inspired him to spread her relics, to gather disciples, and to author the *Life*, which, according to Bessenger, has been transmitted along with Rinchen Pel’s own biography. Further investigation into this figure who forged a lasting religious community out of the memory of his dead wife would be a fascinating project.
Bessenger’s approach also raises a more theoretical question about how to approach the study of hagiographies. In *Echoes of Enlightenment*, she uses literary analysis to uncover the historical process of textual creation rather than to analyze the work purely in terms of the literary whole that results from this process. For example, when discussing Sönam Peldren’s unconventional background, Bessenger writes, “This positive portrayal of Sönam Peldren’s lack of religious education and practice is strategic” (p. 125). She continues further down the page, “the *Life’s* nearly exclusive reliance on this type of rhetoric likely also reflects the more obvious reality that its subject was not in fact well connected to institutionalized Buddhism ... and thus had little access to the more restricted forms of religion training ... [her] biographers used a convenient type of religious rhetoric to validate her lack of formalized Buddhist training” (pp. 125-126).

The picture that emerges here is thus one in which Sönam Peldren’s anonymous hagiographers had to work with a subject who had some difficult qualities that had to then be explained away. In this view, the texts’ authors valorized a lack of religious education because they had to advance the saintliness of a woman who lacked traditional training rather than because lack of religious education is intrinsically valuable. But we might still ask: why might a text, even without being compelled to, hold up a woman with no education and no followers up as an example to be emulated?

On the whole, Bessenger contributes to the growing subfield of Tibetan *Life* writing but also more broadly to the field of religion and gender. Scholars interested in the social construction of sainthood, literary analysis as a tool of historical study, and representations of gender in religious literature will find much that will be useful to them. Because of its general introduction and accessible prose, the book can also profitably be assigned, in addition to graduate students in the field, to graduate students interested in religion and gender in non-Buddhist contexts or to advanced undergraduates in a Buddhism and gender class. In short, I recommend this fine book and look forward to Bessenger’s future work on this and other projects.
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