
**Reviewed by** Jay Valentine (Troy University)

**Published on** H-Buddhism (October, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Lucia Galli

In *The Holy Madmen of Tibet*, David. M. DiValerio offers a wide-ranging, insightful analysis of the phenomenon of "holy madness," which grew in importance in the Himalayas during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and continues to capture the imagination of Buddhists and enthusiasts around the world today. This ambitious monograph constitutes a significant contribution to the study of Tibetan religion and culture in that it successfully dissects the alluring notion of "mad-sainthood" and offers a much-needed, alternative account of the holy madmen of Tibet. These goals are accomplished while simultaneously engaging in the perennial conversations regarding methodology that are relevant within the wider field of religious studies.

DiValerio observes that the prevailing understanding of the holy madmen is that their seemingly deviant behavior is actually a natural and spontaneous byproduct of mental liberation or enlightenment. Despite this nearly ubiquitous consensus regarding the nature of holy madness, DiValerio successfully argues that this interpretive model is unduly limiting because it requires one to irresponsibly ignore a wealth of biographical data in order to produce representations of the holy madmen as unidimensional, enlightened saints who react to each situation spontaneously and without ulterior motives. In nearly every chapter of the seven structuring the monograph, DiValerio offers an alternative perspective from which the activities of the holy madmen can be effectively interpreted.

The first five chapters consist of a series of thematic investigations regarding the lives and times of two central Tibetan religious patriarchs: Künga Zangpo (Kun dga' bzang po, 1458-1532) and Sangyé Gyeltsen (Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan, 1452-1507), who are known as the Madman of Ü and the Madman of Tsang, respectively. These figures are formally introduced in the first chapter through a pair of abridged biographies that excellently describe not only their well-known antinomian antics but also the broad trajectories of their religious careers that just as often feature ordinary episodes. Gastronomists will particularly en-
joy scenarios in which the madmen publicly feast on such delights as excrement or the rotting brains of smallpox victims, while others may be more drawn to their later activities as institution builders.

In the second chapter, DiValerio argues that although the activities of the madmen were shocking to their Tibetan contemporaries, many of the tantric scriptures prescribe "a time-delimited period of wandering homelessness" (p. 41), during which the practitioner might don clothing made from bone ornaments, carry implements associated with the wrathful deities of the tantras, and behave without regard for the distinction between purity and pollution. Whereas it was customary for Tibetans to interpret such canonical scriptures figuratively within the dominant, monastic culture of the period, the Madmen of Ü and Tsang chose a literal, fundamentalist reading of those passages. There is textual evidence that demonstrates that these two madmen were well versed in the relevant tantric scriptures and that they—at least according to their biographers—referred to these scriptures while defending their own conduct. DiValerio concludes that the antinomian activity of these specific madmen is best understood as demonstrating a "mastery of and strict adherence to the canon of Buddhist scriptures" (p. 76) and as constituting part of the path toward enlightenment rather than signifying its completion. From this perspective, it is difficult to maintain the position that their behavior was a spontaneous expression of enlightenment.

The socially constructed nature of "the enlightened Buddhist," or simply "sainthood," is thoroughly examined in the third chapter. DiValerio demonstrates that even in their own biographies, the madmen are not presented as individuals who were universally understood as enlightened masters. Their sainthood was frequently questioned, and sometimes the criticism even came from within their own religious order. This chapter analyzes the madmen as "saints in the making" by examining a wide range of activities by various agents who together encouraged the notion that the madmen were in fact enlightened saints. While DiValerio does not reject the view that their antinomian behavior was embraced as part of their earnest attempts to achieve enlightenment, he does argue that their motivations "were not so narrowly delimited" and that they were "quite aware of the sort of effect their actions would have in shaping others' perceptions of them, and the worldly ramifications those perceptions might engender" (p. 88). The madmen drew from a robust repertoire of behaviors that already represented enlightened activity in Tibet at the time and put themselves forward as enlightened beings. DiValerio also observes that the madmen did not indiscriminately embody every form of enlightened activity that was available in the cultural repertoire. It appears that the madmen "had a strong sense of corporate identity" (p. 98) and intentionally emphasized expressions of enlightenment that would validate a distinctively Kagyu form of sainthood and constitute an alternative to the prevailing Geluk version that emphasized scholasticism and monasticism.

The fourth chapter consists largely of a masterful account of the central Tibetan political and religious history of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The stated goal is to explore the connection between these circumstances and the decisions made by Künga Zangpo and Sangyé Gyeltsen to publicly cultivate personalities characterized by madness. Although DiValerio's conclusions are speculative in nature, he convincingly argues that presenting these individuals as if they "were unaware of or unconcerned about the larger dynamics of the time in which they lived, or of how their attention-grabbing activity would position them relative to those dynamics—culturally, politically, financially—is to portray them as somewhat naïve, blind to the workings of their own society and culture" (p. 149). DiValerio does not suggest that the madmen were disingenuous, but does conclude that it is reasonable to understand their
actions as being strategic in nature rather than purely spontaneous.

The fifth chapter analyzes a series of important accomplishments of the madmen later in life. While Künga Zangpo and Sangyé GyeltSEN clearly broke with the religious and cultural norms of their time during the formative stages of their careers, both eventually settled into familiar institution-building activities such as establishing religious communities, solidifying patronage relationships, and authoring biographical and instructive texts. Perhaps the most important of these later accomplishments is the authoring and printing of the well-known biography of Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1052-1135) by the Madman of Tsang. The common understanding of this foundational patriarch of the Kagyu as an enlightened hermit-saint was formalized by his well-known biography. DiValerio insightfully demonstrates that through the authoring and distribution of this text, the Madman of Tsang participated in the construction of a distinctive form of saintliness that would eventually characterize the common understanding of not only Milarepa but also the Madman of Tsang himself and many others whose profiles match that of the holy madmen.

The conversation regarding the socially constructed nature of holy madness continues in the sixth chapter through an analysis of the well-known Drukpa Künle ('Brug pa kun legs, b. 1455), who is celebrated as the Madman of the Drukpa. Due to his widespread fame, "his legacy has had a disproportionately large influence in shaping the way" both Tibetans and non-Tibetans understand mad-sainthood (p. 193). In popular memory, Drukpa Künle is presented as the ultimate holy madman, reanimating animals that he himself decapitated and desecrating Buddhist prayers by augmenting them with vulgar sexual language. DiValerio argues, however, that there is little evidence in Drukpa Künle's own voluminous writings that suggests that he publicly enacted antinomian behavior (e.g., wearing skeletal remains or consuming feces) or understood himself literally as a mad-saint. These early sources describe a Drukpa Künle who respected propriety, but due to "his own high standards for how Buddhism should be practiced," he embraced a "contrarian attitude" (p. 213). Unlike the Madmen of Ü and Tsang who apparently wanted to be conceived as actual mad saints, it seems that Drukpa Künle embraced the identity of "madman" either as a relatively meaningless pen name or as a way of classifying himself as a "critical outsider" (p. 216). DiValerio concludes that "the Drukpa Künle known and loved today is in these many ways a caricature of the original" (p. 217). Ironically, it is the later version of Drukpa Künle as a mischievous madman who "has come to speak for the entirety of the madman tradition," and this caricature has been employed by both Tibetans and Western scholars alike to interpret, or rather misinterpret, the wild antics of the Madmen of Ü and Tsang (p. 219).

Through a series of vignettes that introduce a larger collection of Tibetan madmen and madwomen, DiValerio is able to demonstrate in the seventh chapter that his observations regarding holy madness are not only applicable to Künga Zangpo, Sangyé GyeltSEN, and Drukpa Künle. He concludes that "regardless of whether or not 'holy madness' truly exists as an individualized state of mind, it is clear that the theme of 'holy madness' circulates within this literary culture" and that when this trope is employed, "one is, consciously or unconsciously, drawing from the past history of the term, while also contributing to that history" (p. 234).

In the closing pages of the chapter, DiValerio argues that Western scholars have tended to rely too heavily on "the notion of 'holy madness' in making sense of Tibet's (and India's) past" (p. 237). His insightful analysis focuses on the conduct, teachings, and influence of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoché (Chos rgyam drung pa, 1939-87), who established a network of Buddhist centers in North America during the final seventeen years of his
life. In a manner reminiscent of the Madmen of Ü and Tsang, Trungpa Rinpoche appears to have been actively involved "in creating the very categories through which he would be understood," including the notion of "crazy wisdom" (p. 240). This concept was then romanticized by Western scholars and employed, often inappropriately, to interpret Tibetan religious history.

In this monograph that examines the intersection of the repulsive and the religious, there are, predictably, many provocative passages. The stimulating subject matter is paired with an equally thought-provoking discussion of methodology. In both the introduction and the first chapter, DiValerio explicitly discusses the conceptual framework that has been designed to result in a more responsible and accurate analysis of the holy madmen. He suggests that it is best to interpret all supernatural episodes that are recorded in the textual sources as "pious fictions imagined by the hagiographers—or imagined by other contemporaries and repeated by the hagiographers—for the purpose of bolstering their masters' reputations" (p. 21). This approach is consistent with his stated goal of understanding these figures "as real people, as ordinary humans" (p. 11), whose actions are not the spontaneous products of unfathomable, enlightened states of mind, but individuals whose actions appear to be motivated by understandable, mundane objectives. DiValerio further suggests that the previous studies of the holy madmen that did not produce accurate, historical representations of these figures were flawed because they either "attempt[ed] to remain agnostic" (p. 21) or uncritically embraced the rhetoric of holy madness.

It should be acknowledged that while DiValerio's approach to the supernatural appears to be unorthodox on the surface, emphasis is carefully placed on the reasonable observation that—quite aside from the ontological quality of holiness that cannot be seen or measured—"holiness" as a social category is constructed by humans and the process by which it is manufactured, altered, and distributed can be productively studied. Because The Holy Madmen of Tibet is an insightful work that challenges the reader to reconsider not only how the mad saints themselves should be conceived but also how the category of the holy should be approached in responsible scholarship, this book would generate fruitful discussion as the centerpiece for a graduate-level seminar or a roundtable discussion.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism

**Citation:** Jay Valentine. Review of DiValerio, David M. *The Holy Madmen of Tibet*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. October, 2021.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56949

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.