

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JETSUN LOCHEN RINPOCHE, A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH REPORT*

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Jetsun Lochén Rinpoche was one of the most famous female religious masters in traditional Tibet.¹ Among her various religious roles were those of pilgrim, *mani pa*, *gcod pa* and healer,² *das log*,³ *yoginī*, nun, lineage-holder, visionary, performer of miracles (*siddha*),⁴ emanation,⁵ *gter ston ma*,⁶ religious teacher, and head of a nunnery.⁷ In short, she had all the signs and charisma of a holy person. She was popularly known as Jetsun or Ani Lochén (A ne Lo chen),⁸ and among her several other names Rigdzin Chonyi Sangmo (Rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo)⁹ was frequently used.

Her mother was Tsentsar Penpa Drolma (mTshan mtshar spen pa sgron ma) who came from Saugang (Sa'u gangs)¹⁰ in Nepal and descended from the famous tantric master (*sngags 'chang*) Shakya Sangpo (Shakya bZang po, 1518-1584).¹¹ Before she met Lochén's father, she

* I wish to thank Prof. Per Kværne, Lobsang Shastri (LTWA), Tashi Tsering (senior researcher LTWA) and Mag.art. Rindzin Thargyal (Oslo) who in various ways have helped during the preparations of this paper. I also want to thank the Fritjof Nansen Foundation, Oslo for financial support.

¹ See Taring 1978: 165,166,167,173,227,269; Lobsang Lhalungpa, *Parabola*, 3,4, 1978: 49 and *Tibet – the Sacred Realm; Photographs 1880-1950*. New York 1983: 33.

² *rJe btsun nam thar* 137,138,139.

³ *Ibid.* 279,286,435.

⁴ There are several references to Lochén's magical powers, e.g. she made water come out from cliffs (*ibid.* 250,6 and 280,3-4), walked on water (*ibid.* 213,2 and 248,4), and moved miraculously in space (*ibid.* 214,6 and 283,5-6) etc.

⁵ Of Ma geig lab sgron, (1055-1149), (*ibid.* 378), see footnote below.

⁶ Jetsun Lochén «received» ritual texts mentally (*dgongs gter*). Birch bark and red paint for writing were miraculously provided, but her teacher kicked her head and the visions stopped (*ibid.* 144). She made a treasure-door (*gter sgo*) on which a big letter *hri* was written in red paint (*ibid.* 368).

⁷ Semnyid Togden Rinpoche (Sems nyid rtog ldan rin po che) was regarded as the head of Shugseb and he hoped that Ogyen Chodzom (O rgyan chos 'dzom) would succeed him (*rJe btsun nam thar* 366,1 and 388,4-5). When Semnyid died (c. 1927-28), Lochén Rinpoche was requested by Tshagu Rinpoche (Tsha gu rin po che) and the senior religious practitioners to stay at Shugseb as his heir (*ibid.* 410,2-3). Ogyen Chodzom became the consort of Dzogchen Khenpo Ngawang Norbu (rDzogs chen mkhan po Ngag dbang nor bu), she became sick (1932) and died (*ibid.* 424, 425).

⁸ Jetsun Lochén relates that '*Lo chen*' generally means 'great translator', but in Western Tibet it means '*mani* beggar' (*ibid.* 472).

⁹ The name is used i.e. in the title of *rJe btsun nam thar*. She was given this name at an occasion when she received the complete religious teachings of Shabkar (*ibid.* 194, 3-4). Horkhang states that her name was Rig 'dzin chos dbyings bzang mo (1989: 128).

¹⁰ Shakya bzang po founded a monastery called Tsauda'i dgon pa in Yol mo (see next footnote). It is possible that Sau gang is a derivation from the name of this monastery.

¹¹ See *Kong sprul gter ston brgya rtsa'i nam thar*, publ. by Tseten Dorje 1973 (no place of publ.) pp. 325-328, 339-

had been the consort of a Bhutanese lama named Khaliwa (Kha li ba). Lochen's father's name was Dondrup Namgyal (Don grub nam rgyal) or Thonglek Tashi (mThong legs bkra shis) and he came from the noble Kheme (Khe smad) family of Chongye ('Phyong rgyas).¹² His father was the landlord (*sde pa*) Rinchen Phuntshog (Rin chen phun tshogs).

Jetsun Lochen was born at Tsopema (mTsho padma), Himachal Pradesh. In the early part of her life, she travelled extensively as a pilgrim and *mani pa* with her parents, primarily her mother, throughout Central and Western Tibet, and the Himalayan border areas of India¹³ and Nepal.¹⁴ At the turn of the century, after the death of her root-lama Pema Gyatso (Padma rgya mtsho),¹⁵ she settled at Shugseb (Shug gseb), below Longchen Rabjampa's (Klong chen rab 'byams pa, 1308-1363) hermitage at Gangri Thokar (Gangs ri thod dkar) in the Nyephu (sNyi phu) valley south of Lhasa. Here some 300 female hermits and nuns practiced meditation, and Lochen tells us that several thousand were her disciples.¹⁶ Among them were several noble families of Lhasa. Her hermitage-monastery at Shugseb was ruined during the Cultural Revolution, but was rebuilt in the early 1980s. There are presently c. 250 nuns.

Sources

The main textual source regarding Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche's life is her autobiography.¹⁷ Lochen was repeatedly requested by her disciples to tell her life-story, but only in the fire-ox year (*me glang*, 1937), when she was requested by Drubchen Dawa Dorje (Grub chen zla ba rdo rje rin po che), whom she recognized as the reincarnation of her root-lama Pema Gyatso, did she consent. Although she started telling her life-story in 1937, she abandoned the project and apparently did not take it up again until about twelve years later, on the 5th day of the 2nd month of the earth-ox year (*sa glang*, 1949), when she again was requested by Drubchen Dawa Dorje and four named diciples.¹⁸ Lochen told the story of her life up to the 25th day of the 11th month of the earth-ox year (1949).¹⁹ Gen Thrinlay (rGan 'phrin las) wrote the draft and it was

343 and 'Phreng po gter chen Shes rab 'od zer alias 'Gro 'dul gling pa 1518-1584, one of the most revered masters of the Nyingma tradition, publ. by Gonpo Tseten, Gangtok (no year). Cf. *A Catalogue of the US Library of Congress Collection of Tibetan Literature in Microfiche Part II*, 1988; Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. Its Fundamentals and History*. Boston, Wisdom Publ. 1991:806 and Ricard 1994:610.

¹² This is the name of their original estate in the Yar stod district, while their house in Lhasa is called Kun bzang rtse. See Luciano Petech, *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet 1728-1959*. Roma:ls.M.E.O. 1973:92-95.

¹³ Ladakh, Sanskar, Lahoul, Spiti, the Kulu valley.

¹⁴ Mustang, Nubri, the Kathmandu valley, Helambu.

¹⁵ He died in Lhasa, possibly in 1889, see *rJe btsun nam thar* 196 where the date is given, but not the year. Tulku Thondup (1996: 252) suggests that he died in 1890.

¹⁶ *rJe btsun nam thar* 411. Jigme Dorje Rinpoche, the present lama at Shugseb, informed me that there used to be 500 nuns at Shugseb. In *Record of Nyingma Monasteries in Tibet* (no year of public. p.56) Lama Paltul Jampal Lodoe writes that there were 410 nuns and one *sprul sku* at Shugseb.

¹⁷ *Autobiography of the Shug gseb rje btsun rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo. Gangs shug ma ni lo chen rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo'i nam par thar pa nam mkhyen bde ster. The Autobiographical Reminiscences of the Famed Religious Master and Reinbodiment of Klong chen pa Shug gseb rje btsun Rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo. The Ngagyur Nyingmay Sungrab series Vol. 22, Gangtok 1975 (abbr. rJe btsun nam thar)*

¹⁸ The four were, rGan dPal ldan phrin las chos sgron, Lho brag sprul sku Karma 'jam dbyangs, Sems sprul rin po che's relative Rig 'dzin lags and rNal 'byor pa bDe chen chos 'phel (*ibid.* 8 and 561)

¹⁹ «The short biography is about this (my life) up to the 25th day of the 11th month of the earth-ox year 1949, still the biography can be continued up to hundred years (my hundreth year), but for the time being, it is just about this»

completed by Drubchen Dawa Dorje Rinpoche.²⁰ I am presently working on a project that I have called *The Religious Ideal for Women in Tibetan Biographical Literature*. My objective is, based on the autobiography of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche, to discuss the religious ideals for Tibetan nuns and female ascetics (and thus for all religious Tibetan women), and to investigate in what ways Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche realized these ideals.²¹ In the following I will give a preliminary research report, I will describe the structure and content of the autobiography, and I will address the problem of the dating of Lochen Rinpoche's life.

Sacred biography as a genre encompasses both oral and written literature and has its own structure and rules.²² The Tibetan term '*nam thar*' means 'liberation (story)'. This is the term used in Lochen's autobiography, but '*rang gi nam thar*' 'own liberation story' may be used to distinguish autobiographies from biographies.²³ In the following I use the terms *nam thar*, sacred biography, hagiography, biography and autobiography as synonyms, but the text in question is an autobiography.²⁴

The writing of biographies was widespread in Tibet and Janet Gyatso maintains that the extent and popularity of this genre of sacred literature is unique to this tradition. She has identified 103 long autobiographies to have survived the Cultural Revolution, but suggests that the number may be as high as 150. Among the 103, Gyatso has been able to identify only three autobiographies of female masters.²⁵ It was rare in the religious history of Tibet to commit the life of a woman to writing, and the fact that an autobiography was written reflects Lochen's fame and status.²⁶

The existence in Tibet of autobiographies and biographies of female religious masters, although few in number, is a welcome addition to a body of scarce literature, and gives us opportunity to fill out our picture of female religiosity in Buddhism in general and in Tibet in particular.²⁷ There is a growing interest in the hagiographic tradition of Tibetan women in the

(*ibid.* 557,5-6)

²⁰ *Ibid.* 561,2. rGan dPal ldan phrin las chos sgron was, after Lochen Rinpoche, one of the most highly respected nuns in Shugseb. She was imprisoned by the Chinese and died in Drapchi. (Interviews with Ani Rigdzin Chosang, Ngawang Pemo and Yudronla who were nuns at Shugseb).

²¹ Apart from giving an idealized portrayal of the life of a nun and yogini, *rJe btsun nam thar* gives information about the religious practice of nuns and *yoginis*, their motivation, their self-portrayal, their status and role in Tibetan society.

²² See William R. LaFleur, «Biography» in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* 2, New York, MacMillan 1987: 220-224.

²³ For a discussion of the blurring of genres, see Gyatso 1992: 465-479.

²⁴ I will not discuss whether the term 'hagiography' is appropriate in the Tibetan context, nor deal with differences between hagiographic genres of various religious traditions.

²⁵ Gyatso (1992) does not identify these autobiographies. Tashi Tsering mentions two autobiographies, that of Jetsun Lochan and an autobiography of Sera mkha' 'gro Kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo (1892-?) (unpubl. paper).

²⁶ The autobiography was furthermore considered sufficiently valuable to be rescued from the Cultural Revolution, hidden in Tibet and also taken into exile. This text may be seen as part of the institutionalization of this female saint, it supports her cult and has served to maintain the memory of her.

²⁷ Articles on female religious specialists in Tibet only started to get published in the second half of the 1980s, but since then the academic interest has increased, and lately more encompassing works on Tibetan religious women have been published i.e. by Françoise Pommaret, *Les revenants de l'Au-delà dans le monde tibétain*. Paris, CNRS 1989, Havnevik 1990, Kollmar-Paulenz 1992, Anne Chayet, *La femme au temps des Dalai-lamas*. Stock-L. Pernoud, 1993, Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy; A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany, State Univ. of New York Press 1993; Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment; Women in Tantric Buddhism*.

West, and some such biographies and biographical sketches have been translated to English, e.g. by Eva Dargyay 1977,²⁸ Keith Dowman 1984,²⁹ Tsultrim Allione 1984,³⁰ Françoise Pom-maret 1989, and Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz 1992, but the academic study of the biographical material on women is only in its beginning.

Through holy biographies we learn how religious ideals are established, how they are maintained, and how they can be changed. The historical dimension is of secondary importance, as history and myth are not separate categories. Holy biographies are mainly concerned to show how the sacred is made manifest in the profane, and the main function of the holy biography is to give the disciples a model to follow. The biographies are thus liberation-stories and the biographies themselves are part of the work for liberation.

In the hagiographic genre, certain themes (*topoi*) often reccur, resulting in some biographies being very stereotype, containing little specific information about the person in question. In the case of Jetsun Lochen's autobiography we certainly find similar themes or *topoi* as those elaborated in many Tibetan biographies.³¹ There are numerous examples in the *nam thar*. Thus there were miraculous signs at Lochen's birth, she grew faster than ordinary children,³² was drawn towards religion exceptionally early, had supernatural abilities in learning³³ and could communicate with and pacify wild animals³⁴ etc. Like most Tibetan autobiographies the important themes in Lochen's *nam thar* are the pilgrimages, accounts of meritorious religious deeds such as the building of religious monuments, the printing of sacred texts etc., the encounters with important lamas, religious teachings received and given, meditational retreats, visions and miracles. As such Lochen's biography follows the standard pattern.

The recurring *topoi* of biographies are the despair of historians, but we may understand repetitions of certain themes, i.e. the stock of relatively standard miracles and the standard thematical construction of hagiographies, as means for religious communities (laypeople outside the monastic domain), who predominantly rely on oral traditions, to retain a collective memory. Paul Connerton states,

«The narrative tells of historical events – but of historical events transfigured by mythicisation into unchanging and unchangeable substances.» (1992: 42)³⁵

Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994 and Anne Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen; Buddhists, Feminists and the Art of the Self*. Boston, Beacon Press 1995.

²⁸ «Hagiography of the Female Discoverer Jo-mo-sman-mo, the consecrated Consort of Guru Chos-dbang», in *The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass 1977: 119-123.

²⁹ *Sky Dancer; The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1984.

³⁰ *Women of Wisdom*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1984.

³¹ These are common themes also in Christian hagiography, see D. Weinstein and R.M. Bell, *Saints and Society; The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1982.

³² The same *topos* is found in other Tibetan biographies. In the biography of Shabkar we read the following, «Causing my mother little pain, I was born in the year called Pharwa, the Female Iron Ox. Just after birth, I opened my eyes and thereafter grew faster than most infants» (Ricard 1994: 16), and in that of Nangsa Obum, «Every month she grew as much as a normal baby grows in a year» (Allione 1984: 68).

³³ Jetsun Lochen knew religious texts, Sanskrit and other languages without ever having studied them (*r/e btsun nam thar*, 282).

³⁴ *Ibid.* 205-209.

³⁵ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press 1989.

Behind the hagiographies committed to writing, there was in Tibet a living and flourishing oral tradition telling 'the lives' of sacred women and men. Generally, only important male lamas had their biographies written. Nevertheless, there are many 'lives' of female Tibetan saints narrated orally, and a few of these have been written down recently, e.g. that of Ayu Khandro, an accomplished female master from Eastern Tibet, whose life story has been recorded by Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche,³⁶ and the biography of Gomchen Yeshe Drolma (sGom chen Ye shes sgrol ma, b. 1908).³⁷ It is interesting to note that the 'oral biographies' closely follow the standard *nam thar* pattern. When it comes to Tibetans' memory of Jetsun Lochen, only a few of my informants had read the *nam thar*, but fragments of the story of her life circulated orally. It seems that only Lochen's disciples and people with a relation to the Shugseb nunnery knew that the *nam thar* existed.

Nevertheless, the degree of individuality is high in Lochen's *nam thar*, particularly in the description of her childhood. We hear about her father's drinking problem, her anxieties because of his aggressive nature, their poverty, her problems of being accepted by her lama. Later on, we hear about Lochen's depressions after her lama's³⁸ and her mother's deaths.³⁹ In the second half of the biography, when Lochen is established as a religious master, the *nam thar* conforms more to that of other religious masters. The last part of the text is more of a summary of important religious teachings received and given.

The closeness to the main actor of this hagiography is due I believe, to several factors. First of all it is an autobiography and thus a first-hand source to a woman's life, no matter how idealized. Many sacred biographies in Tibet have been written down only long after the death of the saint in question, and these biographies tend to be very mythologized. Secondly, our biography is told from the mouth of a person outside the scholastic and monastic milieu, hence its oral, straightforward style. I tend to believe that a *nam thar* written in a scholastic environment would be subjected to more censorship and to a higher degree be molded to fit a standard pattern. Furthermore, since the text gives the story of the life of a woman, it does not tell of sanctity already achieved in former lives, so typical, according to Giuseppe Tucci, of most Tibetan (i.e. male) biographies.⁴⁰ Women in the Tibetan tradition were hardly acknowledged as incarnations of highly realized beings. Being born a woman has, in Buddhism generally, but also in Tibet, been conceived as an inferior birth.⁴¹

The religious status of Lochen and her female colleagues was achieved only after a long life of arduous religious practice, and not ascribed as the case was for many Tibetan male saints, who were often recognized and installed as incarnations of high lamas from an early age. Through Lochen's text we learn about her problems of obtaining authorization to settle in a run-down monastery (Shugseb), and about self-doubt concerning her status as an emanation of Machig Labdron.⁴² We also hear of the struggles of poverty in one of the larger nunneries in

³⁶ Allione 1994: 223.

³⁷ Havnevik 1990: 239-251; see also *Chö Yang* 6: 83-87, 1994.

³⁸ *rJe btsun nam thar* 408-409.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 370-372.

⁴⁰ Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*. 1949; Reduced facsimile edition, 2 vols., Kyoto, Rinsen, 1980, Vol. 1: 152.

⁴¹ An idea maintained by segments of Buddhists and also by many Tibetan women themselves.

⁴² It had been prophesised by several lamas that Lochen Rinpoche was the emanation of Machig Labdron (*rJe btsun*

Tibet. After she had settled at Shugseb, at a time when she was quite famous, she and her fellow *yoginīs*/nuns were extremely poor. They had hardly any food and no butter and therefore had to eat the offering-cakes and beg for the butter in other people's tea.⁴³ I suspect that a male master of Lochen's qualities and experience would more readily obtain offerings from lay people and in larger quantities. The text thus does give us a glimpse into the daily life of religious women, their hardships, aspirations and successes, and how they were received in society and by the religious establishment. To get access to particular gender-specific experiences one has at times to read between the lines, but many such experiences are also openly stated in the text.

In addition to being a sacred text outlining the ideal life of a holy person for the disciples to follow, the *mam thar* gives abundant information on Tibetan culture from the mid-nineteenth to the mid- twentieth century. Among interesting details is for instance that when Lochen and her mother meditated in Western Tibet near Kailash⁴⁴ they were given tea as donations. Not familiar with tea, the mother and daughter boiled the leaves, threw out the juice and ate the tea-leaves believing they were vegetables.⁴⁵ Also of interest is that Tibetans were early aware of the health-damages of using tobacco. We learn that Lochen was told by Trulshig Rinpoche ('Khrul zhig rin po che) to explain about the faults (*nyes dmigs*) of using tobacco (*tha ma kha*)⁴⁶ and she therefore sent two nuns from Shugseb to Lhasa to instruct the monks of the upper Tantric monastery on this subject. A throne had been erected, a *thanka* set up and all the monks were gathered in their bright yellow robes (*chos gos*). Arriving there however, the two nuns were petrified and fled, and Lochen herself had to go to teach the monks. Many monks were said to give up snuffing and gave away their snuff-boxes and promised to recite Avalokiteśvara's *mantra*.⁴⁷

The text

I will now discuss some technicalities of the text in question. In the preface to the edition of the autobiography published by Sonam T. Kazi in Gangtok in 1975, it is stated that it was completed in 1949, and presumably ready for printing in 1951. The Gangtok edition has been reproduced from a tracing of a print of the Central Tibetan blocks and is published in the *Ngagyur Nyingmay Sungrab* series. Sonam Kazi and his wife were disciples of Lochen Rinpoche, and their daughter has been recognized by several religious masters in exile to be her reincarnation.⁴⁸ There is also a reincarnation of Jetsun Lochen in Lhasa, Dorje Rabden (b. 1953), who is the son of Chime Taring.⁴⁹ He was recognized as the legitimate incarnation of Jetsun Lochen by Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro (1893-1959) in 1955 and this was confirmed by

mam thar 378,394,398), but only when she became sick in old age did she gain certainty that she was her emanation (*ibid.* 458).

⁴³ *Ibid.* 363,3.

⁴⁴ Probably around 1880.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 141,1-2.

⁴⁶ Ricard (1994: 607) mentions that Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigdral Yeshe Dorje wrote the text *The Harmful Effects of Tobacco*. Konchog Tenzin (transl.), St Leon-sur Vézère, Editions Padmakara 1978.

⁴⁷ *rJe btsun mam thar* 451,452.

⁴⁸ See the preface of *rJe btsun mam thar*.

⁴⁹ See R. D. Taring 1978: 82,83,94,98,101-3,123-4,170,174,213,269.

H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama.⁵⁰ Dorje Rabden is married; he presently works for a radio station in Lhasa and only occasionally visits Shugseb.⁵¹

Jetsun Lochen told her life-story orally, Gen Trinley wrote the draft and subsequently the text was completed by Drubchen Dawa Dorje Rinpoche.⁵² Thus the biography may be seen as a co-production between Lochen, one of the most important nun teachers at Shugseb and a male lama. As Drubchen Rinpoche had the last hand on the work, we may suspect some «male» editing.⁵³ In an extended sense Tibetan autobiographies may be understood as joint productions of lamas and their disciples, as the main purpose of a *nam thar* is to provide examples for the disciples to follow.⁵⁴

The Gangtok edition of Lochen's *nam thar* consists of 271 folios. However, the Tibetan numbering of the folios is mixed up so that the folio following folio 42 is numberd 33, thus ten folios are counted twice, making it a total of 281 folios.⁵⁵ Making a large autobiography in traditional Tibet was an arduous and expensive process and Lochen names altogether 23 persons involved as donators, copyists and carvers.⁵⁶ One copy of Lochen's autobiography is presently kept in the rebuilt Shugseb nunnery in Tibet, but I have not had the opportunity to compare this one with the Gangtok edition.⁵⁷

In addition to the long autobiography, a biographical sketch (2½ pages) is given by Khetsun Sangpo in *Biographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism* (LTWA 1973, vol. 4, pp. 528-530). A short biography of nine pages was published by Horkhang Sonam Pelbar in *Bod ljongs Zhib 'jug* no.1, 1989: 124-133. Horkhang does not mention the *nam thar* as a source, only that his short biography is based on material collected when Jetsun Lochen was alive.⁵⁸ By and large the main lines of Horkhang's short biography are in accordance with the *nam thar*, but as it is short, it leaves out much information. It is interesting to note that Lochen's mother, who has a prominent role in the *nam thar*, is only briefly mentioned by Horkhang, nor does he

⁵⁰ See *Tibetan Culture*, Vol.16 no.4 Winter 1992: 32. Info. confirmed by Yudronla (b.c.1923), nun at Shugseb from 1930-1951.

⁵¹ The Shugseb nun Rindzin Chosang (b. 1929) told me that there used to be three incarnations of Lochen Rinpoche, Dorje Rabden, the incarnation of mind, Jetsun Pema, the incarnation of speech, and a daughter in the Kabsho Family (Ka shod?) in Lhasa, the incarnation of body. This girl, however, died. K. Sangpo informed me that the consort of his root-lama Geshe Sogyal Rinpoche, Sangye Wangmo (Sangmo Ani) from Lhasa, gave birth to a daughter who was said to be the incarnation of Lochen Rinpoche. This girl died.

⁵² *rJe btsun nam thar* 561.

⁵³ The question of male participation in female stories has been dealt with by K. Børresen in her discussion of Christian hagiography in K.E. Børresen and K. Vogt, *Women's Studies of the Christian and Islamic Traditions; Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Foremothers*. Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers 1993: 42-55.

⁵⁴ As Lila Abu-Lughod states, «A story is always situated; it has both a teller and an audience. Its perspective is partial (in both senses of the word) and its telling is motivated», in *Writing Women's Worlds; Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley, Univ. of Calif. Press 1993: 15. For further discussion of the erasing of the distance between teller-author and listener-reader, see Gyatso 1992.

⁵⁵ When referring to pages in the *nam thar*, I refer to Western page nos.

⁵⁶ *rJe btsun nam thar* 561.

⁵⁷ I have been informed that two other biographies of Jetsun Lochen, written by 'Bri gung mkhan po dge bshes A babs and Lha thog mChog spral legs bshad zla ba, were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. I have no other information about these biographies.

⁵⁸ Horkhang 1989: 133.

mention an important lama in Lochen's life, Semnyid Rinpoche. Horkhang concentrates on the Central Tibetan scene and leaves out religious teachers from Kham. Furthermore, Horkhang supplies dates that are not found in the *rnam thar* and he gives some information about Lochen's death. In *Chö Yang* 1991 (the Year of Tibet Volume), Kim Yeshe and Acharya Tashi Tsering give a summary in English of the Gangtok autobiography. This summary is meant for a broad circle of readers, but unfortunately it is inaccurate when it comes to dates and the names of persons and places. Tulku Thondup has recently published a five page biographical summary of Jetsun Lochen's life in *Masters of Meditation and Miracles; The Longchen Nyingthig Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism* 1996, which is mainly based on the *rnam thar*.

There are also other short references to Lochen Rinpoche by Rinchen Drolma Taring (1978), Lobsang Lhalungpa (1978, 1983),⁵⁹ Janice Willis (1989),⁶⁰ Havnevik (1990),⁶¹ Rita Gross (1993)⁶² and Matthieu Ricard (1994).⁶³ I have obtained additional information about Jetsun Lochen's life from interviews with her contemporaries in exile in India and Nepal and from a visit to the re-established Shugseb Nunnery in Tibet in May 1994.⁶⁴

Style

In the introduction and at the end of *rJe btsun rnam thar* Lochen states that she told whatever she remembered from her life.⁶⁵ The language of the prose parts of the text is thus oral, with a simple syntax and presumably close to the colloquial language of Central Tibet. However, there is frequent use of local terms and idioms hard to identify.⁶⁶ The intention is to tell chronologically from birth up till the time of telling/recording, i.e. the 25th day of the 11th month of the earth ox year, i.e. 1949.⁶⁷ At times the chronology is broken by retrospective glances,⁶⁸ and at times the reader is taken into a maze of more or less important details. Only in the second half of the text are we given exact dates of significant events. Lochen died (according to the most reliable sources) about fifteen months after she completed telling her story,⁶⁹ and the story of her death has not been added to the biography by her disciples as is often the case with other Tibetan *rnam thar*.

⁵⁹ See footnote above.

⁶⁰ «Tibetan Ani-s: The Nun's Life in Tibet», in *Feminine Ground; Essays on Women and Tibet*. Ed. J. Willis. Ithaca, Snow Lion Publ. 1989: 105-109.

⁶¹ Havnevik 1990: 76-78.

⁶² Gross 1993: 86,90.

⁶³ Ricard 1994: 574, 576n.26, 578,592.

⁶⁴ My study is based on the autobiography, but I use other biographical material on her life and information from her contemporaries to fill out the picture and when the main text is ambiguous or unclear.

⁶⁵ *rJe btsun rnam thar* 8 and 561.

⁶⁶ Lochen's mother was born in Yol mo and did not know Tibetan well (*ibid.* 28,6.) and we can assume that Lochen picked up local dialects on her extensive travels in the Himalayan border-areas. Although the *rnam thar* was put into writing by a nun from Central Tibet, it was completed by a lama from Kham.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 557.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 558. This page does not fit here.

⁶⁹ Or after the completion of the draft.

The autobiography is not divided into chapters, but sections of prose are followed by visionary songs, advice, prayers and poems that constitute about one half of the text. These parts are written in a poetic and often learned style. A few of the songs are composed on alphabetical rhyme (*ka bshad* or *ka rtsom*).⁷⁰ Lochen states that many of the verses came to her spontaneously and several of the poems are triggered by emotional states such as compassion for living beings (often animals), the feeling of joy, her own and others' suffering or fear and grief at deaths. Some of the songs are poetic repetitions of the prose, some contain the repertoire of the *manī pa* and have a didactic purpose, while others are answers to requests offered by lamas and disciples, while some verses describe Lochen's own thoughts, visions and miracles. In the poetic verses we are introduced to Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist doctrines and at times the language of these parts is quite stilted and important Buddhist concepts are written in Sanskrit. Both in the verses and in the prose are we presented with standard descriptions of Buddhist cosmology and iconographic descriptions of various deities and Bodhisattvas.

Although Lochen states that many of the songs came to her spontaneously, I suggest that the prose parts of the autobiography are primary, from the mouth of Lochen, while at least some of the songs are worked out later, either by Lochen herself, the editors/copyists, or both, for the simple reason that composing poems of this genre is time-consuming. I base this assumption of multiple authorship on difference in style and the fact that Lochen's religious education was rudimentary. A systematic analysis of the use of honorifics and personal pronouns in the poems and the prose may give further indications about different authorship. Furthermore, the long poetic repetitions of sections of the prose, for instance her birth story,⁷¹ are almost word for word identical with the prose and may have seemed awkward in the oral setting.

Dating

I will now address the problem of the dating of Lochen Rinpoche's life. When it comes to her age, there is much bewilderment. The most common assumptions are that she lived to be approximately 100 years. This is supported by K. Sangpo (1973),⁷² S. P. Horkhang (1998), K. Yeshi and Acharya T. Tsering (1991), and it is stated at least thrice in the *nam thar*.⁷³ L. Lhalungpa writes that she became either 113 or 115,⁷⁴ while R. D. Taring and the present lama at Shugseb, Jigme Dorje Rinpoche (b.c. 1929), maintained that she became over 130 years old.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ A poetic style where each line begins with a different letter in alphabetical order, see *rJe btsun nam thar* 101 and 438.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 23-28.

⁷² In a personal interview with K. Sangpo (Oct. 1995) he stated that Tibetans think that Lochen Rinpoche lived to be more than one hundred years, but he personally believes that she died in her early eighties.

⁷³ *rJe btsun nam thar* 21, 462, 557.

⁷⁴ L. Lhalungpa 1983: 178.

⁷⁵ He also stated that Lochen lived until the age of 132, that she was born in the year of the pig and that she died in the iron year 1951. This does not give much sense, because if she became 132 years she would be born either in 1818 or 1819 (depending on whether the year of conception is counted), but neither of these are pig years, but earth-tiger and earth-hare. If she was born in a pig year this gives us the following possibilities: 1827 (*me mo phag*), 1839 (*sa mo phag*), 1851 (*lcags mo phag*) and 1863 (*chu mo phag*). R. D. Taring, too, writes that Lochen became over 130 years old and that she was born c.1820. (*Op.cit.*: facing page 225,165).

Lochen herself seem to have contributed greatly to the uncertainty about her age and when people asked, she gave either elusive or inconsistent replies. When the regent Reting visited her at Shugseb⁷⁶ and inquired about her age she said,

«When I first came, I hardly had teeth in my mouth and my head was black, now there are no teeth in my mouth and my head has become white.»⁷⁷

Jigme Dorje Rinpoche, who lived in the same house as Lochen for eighteen years, told me that when Lochen was asked about her age she could give answers that varied by thirty years, sometimes she said she was fifty and sometimes eighty. Both traditional Tibetan as well as Indian literature and historiography show little interest in accurate dating and it was common that people in Tibet ignored or forgot their birth dates. Apparently Lochen Rinpoche herself did not know the exact date of her birth. An ex-nun from Shugseb, Ngawang Pemo (b.c.1922) informed me that once when she visited Lochen Rinpoche, she was asked to count the years her master had lived. The reckoning was based on Lochen's travels and her periods of meditation at various sites. Ngawang Pemo counted on her rosary and when she came to 111 years there were no more beads.

Year of birth

Concerning the dates of Lochen's birth there are various suggestions. K. Sangpo writes that she was born in the 14th *rab byung*, on the 15th day of the fourth month of the iron-ox year (*lcags mo glang*), i.e. 1841.⁷⁸ K. Sangpo is the only of my sources to give the year of birth 1841, however, his rendering of the day and the month of her birth is consistent with that given in the autobiography. K. Yeshi and Acharya T. Tsering write that Lochen was born in 1852, and here also, the day and the month of her birth is the same as that of the autobiography.⁷⁹ However, our text does not say that she was born in 1852, only that she was conceived in the fourth month of that year.⁸⁰

When we go to the autobiography, there are several passages referring to her birth, and we are given two alternatives, either 1853 or 1865. In the text (*rJe btsun nam thar*, 21,4) it says that she entered her mother's womb on the 5th day in the fourth month of the water-rat year (*chu byi*) i.e.1852, and thus she should have been born in the first month of the water-ox year (*chu glang*), i.e. 1853. However, an event occurring ten days before her birth is mentioned (*ibid.* 22,3), and the date given is the fifth day of the first month of the wood-ox year (*shing glang*), i.e. 1865. On the same page (*ibid.* 22,5-6) it is stated that Lochen was born in the morning of the 15th day, implying the same month and year.

A few pages down (*ibid.* 26,4), in a song that repeats the prose (from pages 21-22), it is stated that she entered her mother's womb on the fifth day of the fourth month of the wood-rat year (*shing byi*) i.e.1864, then several months passed (*ibid.* 26,5) and when the birth was near,

⁷⁶ In 1934 according to Horkhang (*op.cit.*: 131) but according to the chronology of *rJe btsun nam thar* I would suggest 1938/1939. K. Yeshi and Acharya T. Tsering write 1938 (*op.cit.*: 142).

⁷⁷ *rJe btsun nam thar* 450-451.

⁷⁸ K. Sangpo *op.cit.*: 528.

⁷⁹ Ricard also gives the dates 1852-1953 for Lochen Rinpoche (1994: 576).

⁸⁰ K. Yeshi and Acharya T. Tsering are obviously confused by inconsistent information in *rJe btsun nam thar*. They write, «On the fifteenth day of the first month of the wood-ox year (1852) Pemba Dolma gave birth in Tso Pema to a female child» (1991: 131). However the wood-ox year is 1865.

the same event as that related in the prose is repeated, and the child is born on the 15th day (*ibid.* 27,3). 1852 as the year of conception is mentioned only once in the prose, 1864 as the year of conception is mentioned once in a song (*ibid.* 26,4) and 1865 as the year of birth is mentioned once in the prose (*ibid.* 22,3) and alluded to once in a song (*ibid.* 27,3).

When we take a closer look at the text, where Lochen is said to have been conceived in 1852 (*chu byi*) (*ibid.* 21,4), it appears that some editing has been done. The first part of the composite word for the year appears to have been changed, *chu* may have been inserted (making it *chu byi*) possibly instead of *shing byi*, which is the year of conception given twice (*ibid.* 22 and 26). As the years of conception and birth 1864/1865 are given several times in the text and 1852 as the year of conception only once⁸¹ and this year seems to have been edited, we must, based on the *nam thar*, settle for 1865 as the year of birth. I thus agree with Tashi Tsering (LTWA) who suggests 1865 as Lochen's year of birth in the unpublished paper referred to above.

When discussing her age, Jigme Dorje Rinpoche also informed me that they usually counted Lochen's age from the fact that she was about fifty years old when the Imperial forces invaded Tibet. This must refer to February 1910 when c. 2000 troops arrived in Lhasa. If Lochen was c. 50 years in 1910-12, she would have been born in the beginning of the 1860s, hence it is not unlikely that the year 1865 given in the autobiography is correct. Horkhang, however, writes that Lochen was fifty-one years old when the Younghusband forces invaded Tibet in 1904 (in the tree-dragon year, *shing 'brug*) and that she was sixty years when the Manchu soldiers came in the water-rat (*chu byi*) year 1912.⁸²

Why the year of conception has been changed in our text (*rJe btsun nam thar* 21), I suspect is because Lochen, while sick at the end of her life gains confidence that she is the emanation of Machig Labdron⁸³ and she promised her disciples the following,

«In the past I stayed as Machig for hundred years, therefore, disguised as her incarnation I promise to stay for hundred years.»⁸⁴

When Lochen died probably in 1951 the editors had to make up for the inconsistency and therefore changed the year of birth (*ibid.* 21). We are left, however, with the question why the year of conception/birth 1864/1865 given a few pages further down was not changed. This may be due to multiple author- or editorship or simply to the incongruity having been overlooked. In the preface of the Gangtok edition of the text, the publishers state that Lochen was born either in 1853 or in 1865, not favouring either year. Horkhang counts her age from 1853.

⁸¹ But there are several references to her reaching 100 years of age, which would support the year of conception as 1852, see footnote below.

⁸² Horkhang *op.cit.*: 130.

⁸³ *rJe btsun nam thar* 462.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 462. Her intention to live to the age of 100 is repeated on page 557 where she says, «The short biography is about this (my life) up to the 25th day of the 11th month of the earth-ox year (1949), still the biography up to hundred years (my hundreth year) can be continued.» Apparently there was a popular conception that Machig Labdron lived 100 years. For a discussion of the dates of Machig Labdron, see Kollmar-Paulenz 1993: 101-102. Cf. Gyatso, «The Development of the Gcod Tradition», in *PIATS Columbia* 1982: 320-342; Giacomella Orofino, «Contributo allo Studio dell'Insegnamento di Ma gcig lab sgron», in *Istituto Universitario Orientale*, Supplemento n. 53 agli Annali Vol. 47, fasc. 4, Napoli 1987: 1-87 and Erberto Lo Bue, «A case of mistaken identity: Ma-gcig Labs-sgron and Ma-gcig Zha-ma», in *PIATS Fagernes* 1992: 481-491.

Year of death

When it comes to the exact dating of Lochen's death, we are left with no information from the autobiography, as it ends in 1949. K. Sangpo writes that she died on the thirteenth day of the third month of the iron-dragon (*lcags 'brug*) year, which is 1940.⁸⁵ S.P. Horkhang writes that she died on the 13th day of the third month of the iron-hare year, which is 1951. These two authors thus agree on the date and month, but give different iron years. Jigme Dorje told me that she died in the iron year 1951. He also told me details about her death not known from other sources.⁸⁶ As Jigme Dorje stayed at Shugseb and his information coincides with that given by Horkhang, we can be reasonably sure that this is correct. Tashi Tsering, too, in the unpublished paper referred to above, agrees with 1951 as the year of death. Tulku Thondup writes that Lochen Rinpoche died at the end of the year of the Water Dragon 1953, and this information was given to him by a close disciple of Lochen, Cham Wangmola of Lukhang House. (1996: 255, 375n280). Others also state that she died in the early 1950s. R. D. Taring writes that she died in 1950,⁸⁷ while K. Yeshe and Acharya T. Tsering give the year 1953.

Based on the available material I find it reasonable to accept that Lochen was born on the 15th day of the first month of 1865 and that she died on the 3rd day of the third month of 1951; thus she became 86 years old. From this we can work out tentative dates of the important events of the *nam thar*, and dates of Lochen's close lamas and companions, several of whom are hardly known from other sources. Several highly interesting female adepts are also mentioned in the story of Lochen's life, among them, Gyagari Dorje Phagmo (rGya gar ri rDo rje phag mo, who flourished 1886-1890),⁸⁸ Ogyen Chodzom (O rgyan chos 'dzom, d.c. 1932),⁸⁹ who was the prospective heir of Shugseb, and Lochen's mother Tsentsar Pema Drolma. A discussion of their lives, however, lies outside the scope of this short paper and will be treated elsewhere.

⁸⁵ In an interview K. Sangpo stated that it is difficult to decide the dates of Lochen Rinpoche, but he thinks that she died c. 1940. K. Sangpo went to Shugseb the last time together with Sogyal Rinpoche and his consort before the Chinese came to this area (i.e. c. 1950) and Jetsun Lochen had expired long time before this.

⁸⁶ Jigme Dorje Rinpoche was recognized by Jetsun Lochen as the re-incarnation of one of her lamas, Semnyid Togden Rinpoche (*rJe btsun nam thar* 431).

⁸⁷ R.D. Taring 1978, p. facing p. 225.

⁸⁸ *rJe btsun nam thar* 188, 200, see also T. Tsering, unpubl. paper.

⁸⁹ *rJe btsun nam thar* 388, 389, 424, 425, 432.

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