Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers
Women's Renunciation in South Asia

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How Buddhist Renunciation Produces Difference

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The last time I saw Yeshe, the oldest member of Karshas Tibetan Buddhist nunnery, she cried as I left. It was not my departure she was bemoaning, but the long Himalayan winter ahead. She had explained earlier that she was worried about finding someone to gather enough dung to heat her small cell over the next six months. Although still sprightly and fit at 76, she could no longer run up and down the steep slopes collecting yak dung like she used to. Like other elderly nuns, she relied heavily on the help of young nuns to assist her in building up a store of dried dung patties every autumn. Unlike many of the other nuns, however, she received almost no help from her immediate family in this onerous task. Abbi Yeshe had weathered many hardships in her life, but her family had caused her the greatest distress.

Yeshe was born in the year of the Tiger (1926) in Zangskar, a Himalayan region the size of Rhode Island, located in the southeastern corner of Indian Jammu and Kashmir. Raised in a middle-income household in one of Zangskar’s largest and wealthiest villages, Karsha, Yeshe was courted by the son of Zangskar’s most prominent official, the Zildawar, or revenue official. To her suitor’s dismay, she rejected his advances and instead moved in with his aunt, Yangdzom, who lived as a renouncer on the cliff above Karsha village. Soon afterward, Yeshe and Yangdzom set off on a lengthy pilgrimage several thousand kilometers from Kashmir to Tibet, where they were both ordained as novices by one of the highest ranking monks in the land, the head of the Dalai Lama’s own ruling Gelugpa sect. When they returned, the two nuns had sufficient religious clout to found a fledgling community of nuns in Karsha. One by one, other women joined them, built their own cells, and took part in the joint meditation and devotional practices. After Yangdzom passed away, Yeshe continued to organize many of the nunnery’s longer-term projects such as building an assembly hall, finding the funding for an incipient Great Prayer festival and other rituals, and organizing teachers from Karsha monastery who came to instruct the nuns in basic Tantric rites and meditations.

Initially, Yeshe received plenty of assistance from her parents. Her father held a village-wide begging beer (dri chang) to raise funds to build her cell.1 Every household in Karsha was invited to send one member to an evening of beer drinking. At such events, hosts cleverly serve no food and wait for the inevitable inebriation to set in. The hosts then invite the collected guests to stand and pledge gifts to the upcoming ritual event he is stewarding. The public nature of the pledges insures a kind of competitive generosity in which guests strive to outdo their neighbours. Yeshe recalled that her kin and neighbours gave their labour and many of the supplies needed to build her cell. While her parents allowed her the use of several fields during her life at the nunnery, she fared less well after their death and that of her eldest brother.

When her brother’s son inherited the family estate, he was still a young recruit in the Indian Army who only returned home a few weeks each summer while on leave. As a result,

1. Gutschow (2004) describes the myriad uses of Zangskar’s most common religious fund-raising vehicle, the begging beer.
Yeshe spent her days working with his wife, a woman who never warmed to Yeshe’s controlling manner. After one too many bursts of Yeshe’s sharp tongue, the young wife gradually made it clear that Yeshe’s help was no longer needed on the family farm. For years, Yeshe found work in exchange for food at various local houses. After decades of working tirelessly for the man who had once courted her, she had a falling out with his wife. Yeshe then found a family to till the fields her father had loaned her. In a rather unusual arrangement, Yeshe kept the grain from the field in exchange for paying him with the straw and alfalfa the field produced as well as doing some light work on the family’s farm. To supplement her meager income, she asked her closest friend at Karsha’s monastery, for help. Tashi, a former abbot or Zurba (zur ba) at the monastery, had asked for Yeshe’s aid decades earlier when he had served as monastic steward. Because Tashi was too busy to care for the monastery’s yaks and cows, he had asked Yeshe to spend her summers at the monastery’s high pasture huts tending and milking the herd.

Zurba Tashi, like other elderly monks at Karsha’s male monastery, is the frequent recipient of local gifts of butter, milk, and other supplies. He too, like Yeshe, no longer receives much help from his family. But he earns a tidy income from gifts and payments made for his ritual services. Zurba Tashi is highly versed in Tantric rituals, specifically those that propitiate the underground klu spirits that rule over fertility, snowfall, and water. He travels across Zangskar performing rites to

2. Tibetan Buddhism relies heavily on Tantric meditations and ritual performances, which have both philosophical and pragmatic aspects. Although ultimately, Tantric practices are dedicated to help individuals achieve enlightenment through the transcendence of mundane reality and duality, they also have a wide range of practical uses in village religion including the preservation of health and wealth within the community. Samuel (1993) offers an excellent analysis of the tension between the clerical and shamanic aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, while Gutschow (2004); Crook and Osmaston (1994); and Rjaboff (1997) analyze Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in Zangskar from both pragmatic and Tantric perspectives.

avert drought, cause snowfall, and restore failing springs. His propitiation of the klu spirits is believed to secure village and household purity and prosperity. As a result, Tashi’s services are so much in demand that he can satisfy only a fraction of his ritual requests. His patrons curry his favour with spontaneous gifts throughout the year. He receives so much that he can afford to spread these gifts among his kin and friends. In contrast, and for reasons described below, Yeshe and the other nuns at Karsha earn little from ritual services because they are rarely asked to perform the pragmatic rituals to ward off disaster or disease.

Renouncing Without Rejecting Kin

This brief story implies a significant difference in the material circumstances of Zangskari nuns and monks. This essay seeks to elucidate the factors that have led villagers to call monks for ritual services and nuns for rather menial services in the village economy. While the disparity in wealth and prestige between monks and nuns has been documented, the role of kinship in sustaining this disparity has not. I will explain how reciprocal relations between kin and Buddhist renouncers help shape the disparity in wealth and prestige between the female and male monastic orders. Gender discrimination is produced and reproduced through a range of reciprocal practices between Buddhist renouncers, their kin, and community. Each member in this equation performs roles complicit with the denigration of nuns. Buddhist renunciation upholds nonreciprocity as an ideal. Yet the practice of renunciation relies on obligatory exchanges and mutual services that produce a profound hierarchy between monks and nuns.

From a strictly textual basis, Buddhist renunciation appears to require a renunciation of those forms of reciprocity most

shaped by kinship. The Buddhist monastic code or Vinaya specifies that ordained monks and nuns must reject sex, marriage, procreation, and individual inheritance, all of which are regulated by kinship norms in many societies. As anthropologist Stanley Tambiah (1970:68) confirms, Buddhist philosophical texts have described monkhood as “an initiation that offers a man a way out of reciprocity, a way for a man to become himself living in but not dependent upon society.” Yet these textual ideals conflict with the lived reality in many Tibetan societies and the Indian Himalayas today. Although many Himalayan Buddhist communities support the odd isolated meditator on an isolated retreat, most are far more engaged in daily transactions with village monks and nuns. This essay is dedicated to showing how Buddhist monks and nuns are intertwined with their local kin and communities.

In this view, Buddhist renunciation is less a rejection of kinship than its re-envisioning. Buddhist renouncers remain as closely embedded in kin relations as Hindu renouncers (Hausner and Khandelwal, this volume) or Bauls (Knight and Hanssen, this volume). Yet I will argue that there is a crucial difference in how kinship relations operate for Buddhist nuns and monks. More significantly, the difference in how nuns and monks maintain reciprocity helps explain the considerable disparity in wealth and power between the two orders.

The study of kinship has taken on new salience within gender and practice theories. Kinship is better understood as a set of strategic and contested practices and relationships than a set of algebraic rules or systematic structures determining those relationships. More recent anthropological perspectives have stressed the strategic, contingent, and gendered nature of kinship systems and their reciprocities. While practice theories have highlighted the flexible and strategic nature of kinship, gender theories have sought to analyze its adaptation to sexual and cultural circumstances. Let us consider how Buddhist nuns and monks use and adapt kinship practices and terms. The result offers a modest rethinking of both Buddhist practice and kinship.

Kinship and Monasticism in Zangskar

Lying on the western edge of the Tibetan plateau, Zangskar is largely unpopulated due to its arid and inhospitable landscape of snowfields, glaciers, and steep rocky slopes. The sparse landscape supports an economy short of both food and labour. Most Zangskari households own enough land to produce a slight surplus of three staple crops—barley, wheat, and peas—as well as dairy supplies from their livestock herds. Grain, fodder, and dairy supplies are stockpiled as insurance against drought when not donated to the monastery in alms. In years of drought, the cattle may be killed for lack of fodder and loans will be taken from the monastery, the richest institution in the land. Households are nearly self-sufficient in grains although most households rely on wage labour or government jobs for supplemental incomes. The growing numbers of young men taking distant jobs in the military or government service have left many farms almost bereft of labour. As the population has expanded so has the total farmland. Yet the lack of mechanization has left households desperately searching for labour. Old people complain that “by the next generation there

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4. The Indian Himalayan regions of Ladakh and Zangskar have proved excellent locations to study the social and economic basis of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism (see Gutschow 1998, 2004; Riaboff 1997; Crook and Osmaston 1994; Tsatong 1987; and Grimshaw 1983). For historic Tibet, Carrasco (1959:124) describes that while monks earned a share of the income of the monastery, hostel (kham tshan), or college (griwa tshan) to which they belonged, this income was usually supplemented by economic activity and family support. Carrasco notes that the economic relations of support that families provided to monks is best documented for Spit, although he fails to mention the data for neighboring Ladakh and Zangskar.

5. Dumont (1980) and Levi-Strauss (1969) epitomize the more structuralist approaches to kinship and exchange, while Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Sherry Ortner (1996), Susan McKinnon (1991), and Mary Steedly (1992) have described kinship in terms of strategic, fluid, and gendered practices.
will be nobody but us old ones around in Zangskar" (*mtho rna
gs nga tsho ga ma ma ni med zangs dkar nang la yod*).

An assortment of marriage patterns including patrilocal
monogamy, polyandry, and polygyny are flexibly oriented
toward keeping household landholdings intact. Many
households still practice primogeniture as the eldest son
inherits the entire estate. The younger sons who are disenfran-
chised may cohabit with their eldest brother, settle new lands,
marry out, become monks, or take up other occupations. In
recent years, younger brothers are less inclined to remain
dutifully in their elder brother's house and marriage. These
younger sons have begun to claim their legal share of the
family land, building new houses, and taking up wage jobs to
supplement their dwindling farm incomes. For daughters, who
are married out, the picture looks slightly different. Daughters
do not ordinarily inherit any family property despite their legal
right to an equal share. Customarily, brothers insist that their
sisters forfeit their share of the family property upon marriage.
Daughters inherit their mother's jeweled headress (*pe stag*)
and an extensive dowry from their extended kin on their
wedding day. Locals deem these gifts a substitute for the
daughter's share of the family land. As an exception, women
can inherit the family farm if they have no brothers. Even in
this case, however, the property will rarely be placed in the
daughter's name, but simply be transferred directly from her
father to her first son. In sum, all daughters are effectively
disinherited while younger sons are no longer quite as
disenfranchised as they once were.

How do these kinship practices relate to the motivations
for renunciation? Eldest daughters and sons rarely become

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6. Goldstein (1971) describes the monomarital principle as a practice
whereby there was only one marriage in each generation in order to
avoid splitting the family property. Zangskari marriage and residence
patterns are analyzed in Gutschow (1995, 2004) and Crook and Osmaston
in Nubri, and Aziz's (1978) account of marriage and residence patterns in
historic Dingri.

monks or nuns because they receive the family estate or jewels.
Indeed, not one of the 140 nuns and monks I interviewed in
Zangskar in the last 15 years was an eldest daughter or son
from a legitimate marriage. Most nuns and monks in Zangskar
are younger siblings unless they are stepchildren, children of
divorce, or born out of wedlock. Ruptures in kin relations such
as being orphaned, adopted, or born from an illegitimate union
quite frequently destine a child for the monastery or nunner.
However, such difficult circumstances hardly sustain a child's
entrance and career in the monastic order. Women do not
arrive at the nunnery gate "by accident" because of unfortunate
childhoods or marital circumstances. Instead, most young girls
who remain in the monastic order must show significant
religious devotion or aptitude during their apprentice years.
The lengthy apprenticeship under the surveillance of the elder
nuns turns many prospective applicants away long before
novice ordination.

Overall, the number of monks appears to have leveled off
due to changing economic conditions and shifting inheritance
patterns. Younger sons have far less incentive to become
monks now that they can claim their share of the family land
and pursue salaried jobs or wage labour in the growing cash
economy. Additionally, new forms of wealth and prestige have
undermined the preeminence of monks. For the younger
generation, the worldly swagger of money and military
uniforms are prized far more highly than meditative prowess.
Yet daughters have not been able to claim their rightful share
of family property, nor have they been as successful in
obtaining jobs in the civil service and military. Outside of the
fields of education and medicine, women have faced stiff
competition for government jobs given the rapidly expanding
number of candidates and only slight increases in available
jobs. As a result, the nunnery remains a desirable career option for women who wish to pursue education, service, and travel. The rising number of applicants at existing nunneries and construction of many new nunneries in the region in the 1990s implies the rising demand for renunciation among women. In 1998, five percent of Zangskar’s 12,000 inhabitants were monks and nuns, mostly of the Gelugpa and Drugpa Kadyud schools of Tibetan Buddhism.⁸

The monastery still offers far more opportunity for social mobility than the nunnery does. Those monks from higher social and economic ranks can rely on family status to facilitate their rise through the monastic bureaucracy. Alternatively, for those monks from humble origins, the monastic profession offers travel and educational opportunities unavailable to most laymen. Today as in the past, Zangskar’s poorest monks have benefited from reserved seats at the great Gelugpa monastic colleges. Before 1959, Zangskari monks made the arduous journey to Tibet to continue their studies. Nowadays, young monks take buses and trains to Karnataka State, where the Gelugpa colleges have relocated in exile. The exposure to India’s cosmopolitan culture, popular media, and foreign tourists lures some monks out of robes and makes many more sophisticated purveyors of their religion. Those monks who advance furthest in the transnational religious scene may find themselves making mandalas for audiences in far-flung cities like Sydney and Boston. These opportunities are rare for nuns. First, there are no reserved seats for Himalayan nuns at Tibetan nunneries. Second, most Himalayan nuns do not have as

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8. Gutschow (2004:274) reports that Zangskar’s ten nunneries housed a 125 nuns while its eight monasteries housed over 300 monks. In 2003, there were roughly 85 monks and 23 nuns in Karsha. Although 95% of Zangskar’s inhabitants are Tibetan Buddhists, there is a small minority of Sunni Muslims who have settled mostly in the central valley around Padum, the administrative center. These families are descendants of Muslims who came in the wake of the Dogra conquest in the nineteenth century and, more recently, with the influx of government servants from the Kashmir valley.

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extensive a network of foreign sponsorship as monks do.⁹ While nuns may go on pilgrimage to Dharamsala, Nepal, and South India, only the luckiest manage to remain for purposes of study. Even then, only a few select nunneries teach the arts of mandala making, the most likely vehicle for sending nuns abroad.

**If You Want a Servant, Make Your Daughter a Nun**

Despite the rapidly changing economic and social climate of Ladakh and Zangskar, nuns and monks still rely on their kin in many traditional ways. While nuns often ask their families for money, monks are more likely to offer their families financial help. As a result, most families view a daughter becoming a nun somewhat differently than they do a son becoming a monk. A Tibetan proverb explains: “If you want a servant, make your daughter a nun. If you want to serve, make your son a monk.” When parents send a child to the nunnery, they earn her labour for the foreseeable future. When they send a son to the monastery, they will serve his needs in exchange for ample payback from his ritual and religious career. Sending a son to the monastery is like enrolling him in an Ivy League or Oxbridge University on a full scholarship. His elite education guarantees ample opportunities for privilege and profit for the rest of his life. By contrast, sending a daughter to the nunnery is like sending her to a state university, without scholarship. She must pay her own way, but she will remain near enough to be of use on the family farm. As a result, nuns are both a burden and a benefit to their natal household. They require a share of the household’s limited food supply even

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9. Several of the most avant garde nunneries in Kathmandu have begun to teach mandala making and have sent their nuns abroad, as described by Kerin (2004). Gutschow’s (2004) last chapter details the effects of the rising tide of international aid at Zangskar’s and Ladakh’s nunneries. While this aid has contributed to substantial improvements in the economic conditions of nuns, it has proved much harder to change social attitudes toward nuns in the region.
as they offer assistance through their frequent labour contributions.

Nuns use and are used by their kin. Customarily, nuns are expected to contribute their share of labour to the family estate long after they join the assembly of nuns. Those families who send a daughter to the nunnery earn a lifelong adult labourer without children or a husband. Nuns can strategize to work as wage labourers, but only if there is no pressing need at home. During the busiest agrarian seasons—plowing, first watering (sgrol chu), and harvest—nuns work for only little compensation. Other villagers can sell their labour to the highest bidder and look for work elsewhere if the wages or treatment are undesirable. But nuns may hesitate to offend the families to whom they are beholden. However, nuns are not unaware of their predicament. I asked my roommate, Garkyid, how she could sit cross-legged all day, when my knees were aching. She quipped, “How can I complain! The Buddha has given us a holiday [from chores at home].” Some of the younger nuns at Karsha marshaled a subtle transcript of resistance when they refused to make breads for local wedding feasts one year. They decided that laywomen were as capable and more suitable for this onerous chore. After their Tibetan philosophy teacher lobbied on their behalf, most of the younger nuns stopped going to bake breads. Yet a few elderly nuns continued this customary duty, noting that they could not abandon villagers who had helped them so often in times of need.

Like most nuns Garkyid spends many of her days at her natal household, working for her elderly mother, a widower. She walks to her mother’s house several times a week to help her mother work in the fields, feed or milk the livestock, wash, roast, and grind the grains, churn butter, collect dung, spin wool and make clothes or boots, bake breads, or make barley beer for upcoming village and household festivals. In exchange, she returns each evening to the nunnery bearing a bit of roasted barley flour, butter, milk, or yogurt. She explained, “Because my father and eldest brother are dead and my [other] brother has only small children, my mother needs my help. I can ask my mother for grain, flour, milk, butter, meat, and yogurt, but I’d be ashamed to ask others for such food.” While there is no shame in asking kin for food, it is considered impolite to ask strangers for food in Zangskar, Garkyid cannot ask her second brother for much help because he has no salary and can barely feed his own large family. When not working on her mother’s fields, Garkyid works for her cousin, who earns a comfortable government salary, or as a wage labourer on local fields.

While monks are largely exempt from household labour exchanges, it is common for nuns to represent their family in village work projects—repairing irrigation channels, shepherding animals, or planting willows. Those nuns who live alone with elderly parents or single mothers are most affected by the chronic shortage of labour. One of the nuns at Karsha, Tsomo, spent most of her days taking care of her aged mother and her mother’s ailing sister, who was also a nun. Although Tsomo and her aunt had a spacious cell at the nunnery, they hardly had a chance to enjoy it, as they spent their days in the cramped house with Tsomo’s mother. During her mother’s turn to watch the neighborhood flock, Tsomo was the one called to race after the nimble goats and sheep. Typically, up to one-third of the nun’s assembly is absent from the trimonthly ritual ceremonies due to labour obligations elsewhere. During the harvest season, the nunnery may be abandoned by all but the weakest or most elderly nuns.

Nuns are in a double bind. If they ignore their family demands, they lose the means of subsistence. Yet they also incur outrage if they neglect their duties to the community of nuns. An inescapable cycle of expectation and guilt binds nuns to their families and their assembly. One spring morning just after dawn, Garkyid’s elderly mother paid her a rare visit at her cell. The nuns had been out collecting limestone for the annual plastering and whitewashing of the assembly hall. Garkyid was rather surprised to see her mother at the nunnery, whose arthritis had kept her away for months. Her mother
was desperate for Garkyid to come home that minute to read
the sacred texts at a village-wide ritual her household was
sponsoring. Garkyid flatly refused because she did not want
to forfeit her obligations at the nunnery. Yet she promised
to help her mother and dashed off to the monastery to find a
monk to do the reading. The next day, Garkyid arose in the
predawn darkness to check that the ritual reading of the text
had been completed. By daybreak, she’d returned to finish
helping the nuns whitewash the hall.

In exchange for her services, a nun can expect to receive
the basic necessities of food and shelter, even in times of
shortage. She may be given stockpiles of grain and other foods
as well as clothing, utensils, bedding, furnishings, and cash.
Either the nun or her family can terminate these reciprocal
relations due to disputes, albeit not without cost. Because nuns
spend most of their days working for their families, they tend
to join a nunnery located within walking distance of their
home. Those few families that do send a daughter to a more
distant nunnery usually find a nearby household to “adopt”
their daughter in exchange for her labour. This adoptive
relationship relies on a fictive or distant kinship, in which the
nun pledges her labour and loyalty in exchange for material
support. The nun will address and be addressed by the
members of this household as if they were her kin.

In some ways, nuns are like unmarried daughters who
reside in their natal households until death. Both nuns and
unmarried daughters provide valuable labour services to their
families in exchange for daily economic support, unlike
daughters who get married and rely on their in-laws. Yet while
aged spinsters reside in their natal household either with their
elder brother or their aged parents, nuns do not remain at
home permanently, nor do they rely solely on their family for
material support. After joining the assembly, most nuns build,
buy, or borrow a stone cell at the nunnery where they will
live until death. The importance of this shift in residence is
marked by the phrase for joining the monastic assembly,
namely “dwelling on the cliff” (ri la bzhugs byes). Although
nuns do gain some agency by having this “room of their own,”
their autonomy is constrained by social and economic
pressures. Nuns have as much difficulty in earning incomes
as the Victorian women described by Virginia Woolf (1929).
Their meager income from ritual duties may be supplemented
by household and wage labour. Yet they cannot neglect their
family’s and society’s expectations without considerable cost.

The nuns’ assembly functions like an extended family bound
by a fictive kinship. Younger nuns who answer to niece or
granddaughter (tsa mo) call the elder nuns grandmother (a
phyi) or auntie (a ni). Agemates or peers call each other older
sister (a che) or younger sister (no mo), depending on age.
The affection among the nuns transcends kinship and
customary ties among agemates in the village. I have spoken
to many laywomen who envy the deep solidarity that nuns
build in the company of women. Close friendships are
sanctioned, but sexual intimacies are avoided. While I have
been privy to a host of village scandals including abortions
and rapes, I have yet to hear of lesbian relations among nuns.
Although local banter suggests that monks do sneak into village
bedrooms, there is less talk of sexually frustrated nuns.

A tacit and mutual web of reciprocity rules over the
community, as nuns are expected to help each other in
numerous ways. The elder nuns train and tutor the younger
nuns during the apprenticeship period in ritual duties as well
as mundane chores like cooking and serving tea for the
assembly. In exchange, younger nuns serve the elders long
after their apprenticeship is complete by fetching water and
dung during the winter months and performing much of the
heavier labour for the community. It is common for apprentice
nuns to live with their tutors. Yet joint living arrangements
between unrelated nuns are discouraged after the
apprenticeship is complete. Relatives like sisters or aunts and
nieces usually cohabit and work together, but even unrelated
nuns are obligated to help one another as if they were family.
Most nunneries have a few peer groups of nuns bound by
age and friendship. These groups require loyalty and mutual
assistance. Peers often exchange days on each other’s family fields, while they eat together in the mornings and nights.

As nuns age and their family ties dissolve, they rely on their own monastic community more and more. Women begin and end their life at the nunnery in an infant-like dependence on others. When Yeshe recently fell dreadfully ill with hepatitis, she was forced to rely on Zurba Tashi and other nuns rather than her immediate family, who had rejected her. During her ailment, her nephew’s wife and family never paid a visit although Tashi and other villagers offered their consolation. Thuje, a younger nun who had studied Tibetan medicine with her father and trained as a community health worker, nursed Yeshe back to health all winter. Yet Thuje was far more than a nurse as she spent the winter gathering dung, cooking, and fetching water for Yeshe. In gratitude, Yeshe spent months during her recovery making Thuje a woolen jacket and boots.

For ordained nuns, belonging to a monastic community can mean the difference between mild and severe destitution. A friend once took me to meet an elderly, unordained renouncer who lived in a cave above Padum. She was too weak to look for dung or beg for food. In a voice faint with despair and malnutrition, she told me that she had eaten only barley gruel that week. I saw little sign of food in her cave, only a few broken kettles, and a single stone pot sitting on a cold hearth with no firewood, kerosene, or matches in evidence. It was not clear how her situation would improve as her immediate family had long since passed away. While we brought her supplies that day, my friend soon organized the local woman’s group to provide her with a more steady source of rations.

The Economics of Renunciation for Nuns and Monks

Nuns depend on their kin for daily food because their institutions do not have adequate economic resources. By contrast, monks can rely on their monastery’s vast endowments of land, livestock, and capital. Monks also receive more alms, ritual donations, and ritual service payments than nuns do. In what I’ve called an “economy of merit,” both social and symbolic capital concentrate among monks and monasteries (Gutschow 2004).

Historically, permanent endowments of land and livestock were given predominantly to monasteries and prominent monks. By the turn of the twentieth century, monasteries were the wealthiest landholders in Zangskar. While monasteries held one-tenth of all cultivated land in Zangskar, most nunneries owned no land or livestock. In 1994, Zangskar’s largest monastery, in Karsha, owned 90 times as much land and ten times as many yaks and cattle as the average household. Yet its largest nunnery, also in Karsha, owned less than half an acre.¹⁰ Karsha’s monastery receives more than one hundred times as much grain as its nunnery does annually from alms and sharecropper rents. Yet there are only four times as many monks as nuns in Karsha.¹¹ Roughly half of the 11,000 kilos of grain collected annually at Karsha goes directly to the monks. The other half is stored for ritual services, loans, or other institutional needs. While Karsha’s nuns receive a few kilograms annually from their institution, the monks each receive more than 50 kilograms of grain annually. When laypeople make a donation to a monastic assembly, each monk or nun receives a share (skal ba) of this offering.¹² Individual

¹⁰. Gutschow (1998) and Riaboff (1997) have discussed the statistics on land ownership in Zangskar.

¹¹. If the membership were proportional with its sharecropping income, the monastery should have 2,000 monks. Karsha nuns receive 2.5 kg of grain annually, while Karsha monks receive roughly 60 kg of grain per year. By comparison, a Sherpa nunnery in Nepal provided each of its 23 members with 84 kg of grain per year, as Führ-Haimendorf (1976) and Aziz (1976) noted. French (1995:4) reported that monks in one Tibetan monastery received 110 kg of grain annually before 1959.

¹². When grain or monetary gifts given to the entire assembly is distributed, each monk receives a single share, and additional shares are distributed according to office. The titular head of the monastery, Ngari Rinpoche, gets five shares; the Labrang treasury gets ten shares; the abbot gets three shares; the ex-abbots, Vajra master, chant master, assistant chant master, disciplinarian, Labrang managers, and Labrang assistant each get an additional share.
monks in Karsha may collect up to several thousand rupees in earnings, while nuns earn no more than a few hundred rupees.

The monastery is as much a place of economic and social mediation as of symbolic meditation. Although monks do find time to meditate later in life, their early years are spent managing the monastery’s assets, debts, and investments and ritual bureaucracy. From the moment they join the assembly, monks rotate through the monastic offices as cooks, tea bearers, trumpeters, ritual assistants, and stewards (gnyer pa). Those more textually inclined monks may take up more challenging roles as disciplinarian (dge skos), chantmaster (dbu mdzad), ritual master (rdo rje slob dpon), and abbot (mkhan po).13 By comparison the retinue of posts at the nunnery is rather circumspect and all nuns must rotate through every post, from sacristan all the way up to chantmaster, who doubles as head of the nunnery. Zangskari nunneries do not have female abbots. They are ruled by male abbots who usually rule in absentia. During disputes or in cases of misconduct, the male abbot has final authority to discipline or expel a nun from the assembly.

Karsha monastery draws its members from a dominion (mnga’og) that spans much of northern and central Zangskar. This domain includes those villages that rely on the monastery for ritual services. By contrast, Karsha and most other nunneries draw most of their members from one or two villages to which the nuns can walk for their daily work. This turns out to have profound consequences for the kinds of interaction monks and nuns have with their kin.

The monks who serve three-year terms as stewards, managing the monastic treasury and its permanent endowments, mobilize extensive kin networks for assistance. They may call on their kin to help arrange begging beers and fund-raising feasts that enable them to solicit donations and obligatory payments of grain, butter, and firewood for the largest and most spectacular festivals. In exchange, kin who travel from across the region to attend and donate gifts to these festivals expect to be hosted by their relatives at the monastery. On the flip side, kin will host monks during the collection of alms, sharecropper rents, interest payments, or loans that are past due, as well as aid monks in negotiating water rights or purchasing properties. These same kin benefit from their access to the monks in charge of the monastery’s most lucrative business and construction ventures. I have heard of several monks admonished but not disrobed for channeling thousands of rupees to their own families. The tacit social acceptance of this corruption underscores the necessary and symbiotic relationship between the monastery and its lay clients.

By contrast, the nuns’ more reduced ritual and economic role in village life limits the kinds of assistance they can offer or require from their kin. Lacking land and other endowments, the nunnery relies on its members to fund many rituals. The regular trimonthly rituals at the nunnery are stowed by nuns, on rotation, who collect the necessary barley, butter, and other ritual foodstuffs from their families or local villagers.14 The Great Prayer Festival and the annual fire sacrifice rely partly on a small endowment of goats that are divided among the member nuns. During these rites, each nun brings in an annual payment of butter and flour as a symbolic “interest” on the goat she has been loaned from the nunnery’s herd. Yet the paltry sums collected pales in comparison with the vast stockpiles the monastery gathers from its sharecroppers.

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13. The inner retinue (nang ’khor) includes the posts of: disciplinarian (dge skos), assistant disciplinarian (dge g.yog), sacristan (dkhon gnyer), butcher (bsa’pa), cook (byan ma), and hearth assistant (thab g.yog). The outer retinue (phyi ’khor) includes: two conch blowers (dung pa), two long horn blowers (dung chen pa), and two oboe players (rgya gling pa). The sacristan performs offerings to the Tantric deities and local protectors.

14. Each of these monthly rituals requires the following: 1.3 kg of butter for tea and butter lamps, 7 kg of roasted barley flour for the communal offering cakes (tshogs), 10 kg of wheat flour for the breads (except on the tenth of every month), 1 bottle of buttermilk as leavening agent, a handful of salt, 2 handfuls of loose green tea, and a plateful of sweets known as tshogs zas.
generosity of villagers often dictates the extent of the ritual
calendar at many nunneries. Many of Zangskar’s poorest
nunneries sharply curtail their rites for lack of endowments.15
While nuns in Karsha are responsible for collecting an annual
quota of dung and firewood for the nunnery hearth, the
monastery can rely on its clients and sharecroppers for such
services. I recall the scandal caused when one set of villagers
refused to deliver their firewood quota because of a grazing
dispute. When the monks threatened to stop performing
funerary rituals for the boycotters, the villagers hastily agreed
to deliver the firewood. The nunnery does not have this kind
of bargaining power because its members are not called to
perform the most critical life-cycle and village rites.

Unlike nuns who are rarely called to perform more
pragmatic Tantric rites, monks also earn considerable incomes
performing household and village rites.16 For much of their
tenure at the monastery, most monks are stationed for three
years on rotation in villages across the monastic domain. When
serving as ritual officiants (mchod gnas), monks are responsible
for performing the birth, death, and other purificatory or
expiatory rites that ward off sickness, misfortune, and other
impurities. It is monks, not nuns, who perform rites to expel
demons, ghosts, and other misfortune through the tossing,
burning, and burying of effigies, threadcrosses, and ransom
figures (be le ‘phang byes brgya bzhi, ‘chi gnon, rgyal mdos,
dgu mig bzlo). Monks are also more likely than nuns to be
called for the seasonal or ad hoc rites that ensure prosperity,
fertility, and purity, while warding off slander, envy, or other
negativity. Additionally, villagers tend to conscript monks
rather than nuns to ward off natural disasters, and bless human
ventures like journeys, constructions, and seasonal activities
that meddle with the earth (plowing, watering, threshing).

Because laypeople think that monks have more merit and
purity than nuns do, villagers prefer monks for most ritual
expiations, propitiations, and ablutions. In Zangskar, ritual
efficacy is rather like medical efficacy: the more expert the
practitioner, the more effective the rite is considered to be.
Because the demand for the most qualified Tantric experts
exceeds their supply, kin loyalty may be called upon to obtain
a desired monk’s services. Families frequently request their
own relatives at the monastery to arrange the performance of
these rites. Nuns can and do participate in rituals like weddings,
funerals, and certain village-wide rites such as honouring the
ancestors (dge tsha) or circumambulation of the fields (bum
skor). However, while both male and female assemblies are
called to generate merit, only monks perform the complex
Tantric mediations that transfer merit, capture wealth, defeat
enemies, or release the consciousness from the body during
these ritual occasions. Laypeople do ask nuns to perform basic
rites to generate merit for all sentient beings, including the
donor. However, if more pragmatic ritual effects are desired,
monks are often preferred.

Conclusion

Nuns and monks are bound to laypeople by a variety of
reciprocal obligations. Yet each order differs in the types of
services they provide. Nuns perform the most menial labour
while monks serve as ritual and scholastic experts for their
communities. While nuns may renounce marriage and procrea-
tion, they cannot avoid being called into the spheres of
production and consumption by village households. Monks
do work in fields on occasion; yet it is nuns who are expected
to perform daily household chores. As a result, nuns may earn

15. Tungri, Dorje Dzong, and Pishu nunnery host bimonthly prayer
sessions and the Great Prayer Festival, while the newest and least
endowed nunneries like Skyagam, Bya, Manda, and Sani may only
celebrate a brief Prayer Festival (smon lam).

16. Gutschow (2004); Crook and Osmaston (1994); and Riaboff
(1997) describe the kinds of Tantric rites that monks generally perform
from the monastic perspective, while Phylactou (1989) and Day (1989)
analyze the purpose of these rites from the lay or household perspective.
Although Tantra is dedicated to transcending duality in order to bring
the practitioner closer to enlightenment, it has many pragmatic ritual
applications in Tibetan Buddhist culture.
material resources but little other social capital. Monks, by contrast, earn and offer highly convertible forms of economic, social, and symbolic capital. Monks provide their kin with material resources and status through their access to the largest landholder in Zangskar. The social networks and fame they earn in the course of their ritual and financial duties on behalf of the monastery generates considerable social capital. Finally, monks earn considerable symbolic capital through their ritual performances.

To understand ritual practice, to give it back both its reason and its raison d’être without converting it into a logical construction or a spiritual exercise, means more than simply reconstituting its internal logic. It also means restoring its practical necessity by relating it to the real conditions of its genesis, that is, the conditions in which both the functions it fulfills and the means it uses to achieve them are defined. (Bourdieu 1990:97)

Bourdieu’s focus on the practical over the rhetorical logic of ritual activity led him to define symbolic capital as misrecognized capital because it appears to have been produced by disinterested means. The merit or purity produced in the course of Tantric rites offers a prime instance of symbolic capital because it appears to have been generated in a disinterested fashion. Doctrinally, monks generate merit disinterestedly for the benefit of all sentient beings. From an analytic perspective, however, monks enact an interested relationship when they perform ritual mediations whose effects are invisible if not unknowable in exchange for visible and calculable payments of cash and grain.

Monastic rituals reify existing social hierarchies as well as legitimate the accumulation of economic and social capital among monks. Buddhist doctrine claims that nobody can purify another. Yet Zangskari monks exercise and earn ritual and economic power as they purify bodies and spaces and generate merit for their patrons. The classic symbols of Tibetan Buddhism—purity/pollution, merit/demerit—may be arbitrary, yet their effect is not. Moreover, it is the ritual use of these symbols that generates power and hierarchy. Monastic rituals authorize and reinscribe an ideology that claims monks to be more pure and meritorious than nuns. The ideology of purity and pollution that ranks male over female and aristocrat over outcaste in Zangskar is reinscribed and validated by Buddhist rituals. Transient impurities—from accidental contact with outcasts or demonic sprites—can be remedied through monastic ritual. Yet lasting forms of impurity—the female body, being born into a lower caste—can only be undone in a future rebirth by making merit in this life. As a result, even the lowest positions in the social hierarchy are conscripted by the ideology of purity and pollution. In short, villagers and nuns are complicit in their own subordination when they call monks to generate merit or purity on their behalf.

Although nuns do not become submissive wives, they remain dutiful daughters and sisters. In Zangskar, married daughters are exchanged for milkprice (o ma’i rin)—which is given to the mother as payment for nursing the future bride, brideprice, and the promise of future reciprocities with the in-laws. By contrast, nuns are exchanged for merit and the promise of labour. Nuns may elude the patriarchal economy of marriage, but they cannot escape the exchange of women. The anthropologist Levi-Strauss argued that the universal exchange of women marked the boundary between nature and culture, separating humans from animals. His theory has been roundly criticized for positing women as objects but never subjects of this exchange, and for its assumption of universality. Yet, his point that society is founded upon the exchange of women is relevant.

We must view monasticism not so much as a rejection of kinship as an alternative social relationship. Gayle Rubin (1975: 177) defines “exchange of women” to mean that “men

17. Levi-Strauss (1969) believed that the universal prohibition of incest was less a rule preventing marriage within a group than one obligating groups to seek women from other unrelated groups or clans, thereby initiating the exchange of women. Books or essays dedicated to rebuking his theory on the exchange of women include Strathern (1988), MacCormack and Strathern (1980), and Rubin (1975) among others.
have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights in their male kin.” This, in fact, is what happens in the monastic realm. Monks, as abbots, have rights to discipline or expel nuns, which nuns never have at the monastery. These rights give monks a certain authority over the traffic in women into and out of the nunnery, just as fathers manage the traffic of brides between households (see Gutschow 2001).

Buddhist renunciation is often portrayed as more egalitarian than its Hindu counterparts. However, both Buddhist and Hindu renunciation remain bound by prevailing social hierarchies. While Buddhist doctrine offers the appealing argument that gender has no bearing on the potential for enlightenment, its monastic practices both legitimate and extend gender disparities. In closing, Buddhist monasticism has proved somewhat less enlightened than expected.

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Bibliography


Renouncing Expectations: Single Baul Women Renouncers and the Value of Being a Wife

LISA I. KNIGHT

Introduction

Baul renouncers of West Bengal and Bangladesh pose a number of challenges to South Asian paradigms of renunciation where one expects to see an individual severing ties for a life characterized by celibacy, itinerancy, and worldly detachments. Bauls follow none of these accepted notions of renunciation, yet they use terms like sannyasi, tyagi, and bairagi to describe themselves as renouncers.1 In stark contrast to more standard expectations of celibacy, the hallmark of

1. These terms are often used interchangeably and indicate a formal rite of renunciation, though in my experience tyagi and bairagi are also sometimes used to convey a sense of detachment without formal renunciation.