The Tibetan Nun Mingyur Peldrön

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Chapter Two

Authorizing the Saint

The desired boy was not brought to the Terton’s Dargyé Chöding lineage. This unwanted girl was brought instead. Now she will sustain it. The treasury will not be forgotten.

—Lochen Dharmaśrī

I respectfully bow at the feet of the infallible supreme bliss queen of the ḍākinīs, the essence of refuge for all.

—Gyurmé Ösel

Gyurmé Ösel worked within the confines of the namtar genre to establish his argument for Mingyur Peldrön’s greatness, engaging the intersectional nature of authority and gender to further his argument. In composing Dispeller, he drew on the methods found in most men’s namtar, but at turns he also included and elided feminine language and references to Mingyur Peldrön’s status as a woman, engaging or erasing her gender in different moments to skillfully present her as authoritative. Her gender status is a continuing site of complexity throughout her hagiography. There are ways in which it seems to have affected her religious positionality and moments in which the importance of gender is superseded by other factors. The treatment of her status as a woman also connects with and diverges from how gender is treated in other Tibetan women’s Lives.

A frequent theme in Tibetan women’s life writing is that being born a woman is less desirable than being born a man. Gendered hardship and its karmic implications have been frequent narrative foci for women practitioners, and this theme revolves around the concept of the “lesser female birth.” Generally presented as the karmic result of previous negative actions and a (sometimes contested) hindrance to enlightenment, the topic has also been used more specifically in auto/biographical life writing as an outlet for engaging “self-humbling strategies” that position the author as speaking from
a position of humility. In both hagiographic and auto/biographical subsets of Life writing, women are depicted as facing additional trials and tribulations in their lived experience. This is coupled with the implication that life as a woman is an undesirable samsaric state that is a direct result of one’s karmic conditioning, which has been generally treated as a foregone conclusion in Buddhist traditions for centuries and across diverse geographic regions. Some women worked to actively reframe their status as embodied women from a negative to a positive, which is reflected in Gyurmé Ösel’s approach to Mingyur Peldrön’s status as a woman.

In Dispeller the idea of gender becomes more complex as themes of womanhood and femaleness are sometimes elevated and presented as beneficial for religious practitioners and then disparaged in other moments. A multivalent approach to understanding the role of gender in this text is helpful, as considering gender alongside a host of other factors reflects the literary representations of gender as well as the social context in which Mingyur Peldrön lived. These factors were employed in the process of asserting her position as authoritative and relaying that in Dispeller. As rhetorical moves, they were directed by the social dynamics at play in any given moment, and the ways that these dynamics influence perceptions of her privilege and authority are highly context dependent. In different moments her access to authority might be impacted by her gender identity, perceived connections with deities (most importantly, Yeshé Tsogyel), religious institutional affiliation and educational training, wealth, personal relationships with political leaders, and relationships within her family, all of which were used at different points as means for asserting individual authority.

Rather than adhering strictly to the trope of the lesser female birth, Mingyur Peldrön’s status as a woman is treated with complexity throughout Dispeller, as elevating and positive gendered language is juxtaposed with Mingyur Peldrön’s own apparent self-humbling references and expressions of desire to be born a man in the future as well as occasional negative statements uttered by those around her. If we take a multivalent approach to Mingyur Peldrön’s Life and depictions of her gender, these rhetorical moves make more sense. Studying the variable dynamics between gender and authority and the ways these dynamics affect social positioning can help us understand her hagiographic presentation (and potentially her lived experience) more clearly. She was able to leverage various aspects of her privilege to support the women who studied and became nuns under her guidance and to act as a leader at a time when institutional leadership from women
was unusual. Meanwhile, on at least a few occasions she referred to herself as being of lesser female birth, pointing to the normative gendered representations that would be expected in a namtar and likely reflected broader assumptions about her approach to gender and religious status. For the women of Mindröling, the challenges of being born a woman were often mitigated by other forms of privilege. For example, her sisters were harassed and nearly assaulted by Dzungar army men as the result of being women affiliated with a Nyingma institution. However, Mingyur Peldrön and her sisters and mother were able to draw upon their personal and institutional connections in order to escape that same army. In their moment of escape, their association with a Nyingma monastery meant both their being targeted for attack and also the potential for making connections with the people who would help them escape that violence. Likewise, while one daughter became a religious teacher in exile, the other became the wife of a king, and it is possible there was a discrepancy between the autonomy present in each daughter’s path. Therefore, while gender is an active construct in Dispeller, it cannot be read in isolation from other aspects of Mingyur Peldrön’s identity and must be understood in relation to privilege.

“Authorizing referents”—or the terminology used to elevate historical figures—are evident in depictions of Mingyur Peldrön’s position and in Tibetan hagiography more broadly. In hagiography, authorizing referents serve to remind the reader about what legitimizes the main subject. They work by helping the audience recall or recognize personal connections between the subject and other people, moments, or institutions that support their authority in one way or another. For example, by likening a woman to a well-known buddha, the woman is able to take on a bit of that buddha’s personality. When a reader is reminded of the main character’s brilliant education, they hold in their mind that character’s intellectual legitimacy and perhaps their institutional connections. Likewise, other modes of authorization can imbue literary and historical figures with cultural cachet as they evoke shared personality traits. These referents take many forms in Dispeller, from the discussions of Mingyur Peldrön’s connection with important deities to the very organization of the text itself.

The format of Dispeller—its very structure and layout—is informative for understanding the ways that Gyurmé Ösel argued for the significance of his master. The text follows an organizational pattern that will be familiar to scholars of the more hagiographic forms of namtar. It begins with an invocation to primordial deities and buddhas who were most closely associated
with the Nyingma tradition, before turning to a description of Mingyur Peldrön’s previous emanations. Only then does the narrative begin to discuss her life as Mingyur Peldrön. Each section details what Gyurmé Ösel considered to be significant aspects of or moments in her life, from birth to death, with an emphasis on the factors that would authorize her as a Mindroling teacher, including her education and family connections. The narrative of her youth is presented in the format of lists of teachings (senyik) and the names of those who bestowed them, while her adulthood is depicted in anecdotal prose narrative. It includes supporting citations sprinkled throughout that come from tantras and other religious texts. Gyurmé Ösel uses them to support his argument by emphasizing the prophetic nature of her existence. Finally, the narrative ends with a lengthy discussion of Mingyur Peldrön’s death, funerary rites, and a colophon discussing his creation of the namtar. Most of the text is in prose, with Mingyur Peldrön’s own verse and occasional quoted verses from sacred texts emerging at particularly important moments. Another notable component of the hagiography is the literary device of quoting Mingyur Peldrön, her father, uncle, and others from her life. While we cannot be certain about their veracity, Gyurmé Ösel attributes these quotations to historical figures as a means of reiterating his points or to fill in details of the events he is discussing.

Part of what makes namtar texts so dynamic is that they can convey important information about a wide range of literary and social meanings. The religious and cultural references they employ and the events that are featured can give the modern reader hints about what the author found to be important as well as the author’s assumptions about the general knowledge of his or her readership. We know almost nothing about Gyurmé Ösel beyond what is found in Dispeller, in which he presents himself in a self-deprecating light as a struggling student of the Great Perfection who benefited from Mingyur Peldrön’s profound compassion, in spite of his shortcomings. His reasons for writing Dispeller, and the subjects that are his focus in the text, echo the usual reasons for writing a namtar. Generally speaking, the literary purposes of namtar were threefold: to authorize the saint as a saint, to serve as an exemplary narrative that could guide practitioners, and to offer biographical descriptions of important figures. Gyurmé Ösel adheres to this formula closely, including narratives of the hardships his subject overcame, inspirational quotations he attributes to her, and signs of her important social status and enlightened nature. Dispeller served as a place for him to memorialize his beloved teacher, a feat he
accomplished by first elevating her in accordance with the strictures of the namtar genre and then recounting her activities in service of the tradition. According to him, Mingyur Peldrön was a highly respected and authoritative figure at Mindröling, but this does not necessarily mean that her lived experience reflects the elevated existence that he claims for her. This is a hagiography, after all, and modern readers might take his exhortation with a grain of salt.

**Modes of Authority**

Understanding how Gyurmé Ösel constructed a public identity for Mingyur Peldrön is made easier by analyzing the several systems of authority that are also relevant for other namtar, as they mirror common themes found across the genre. They are defined here as emanation authority, institutional authority, and educational authority. This tripartite delineation of authoritative types draws on Max Weber's division of a somewhat similar set of “pure types” of authority, which are organized and differentiated in order to more easily indicate the specific societal structures and concerns that are engaged when each one comes into play in a social system. The division into different authoritative types will be useful here, but it is important to understand that more than one type will almost always be simultaneously active in any given situation. While authority is presented in three discreet ways in *Dispeller*, these types often work simultaneously to lend authority to Mingyur Peldrön. Each one authorizes her in ways that would have been legible in the eighteenth-century context in which Gyurmé Ösel was writing. Briefly, emanation authority is derived from someone's identification as the emanation or incarnation of a deity, buddha, or bodhisattva. Likewise, institutional authority affirms an individual's connection with reputable religious institutions. Finally, educational authority is that which is gleaned from training as a religious practitioner and teacher.

These forms of legitimation are common throughout Tibetan hagiographies, and many Lives draw on the same socially reinforced modes of authentication. The fact that Mingyur Peldrön's hagiographer engages in this form of argumentation is not unique. Rather, her *Life* serves as an example of some frequent rhetorical moves that hagiographers employed in the process of legitimation. More specifically, Gyurmé Ösel's use of these modes of authentication exemplify one way these methods could be implemented for the sake of women's legitimacy. Notably, he emphasizes her position as a
woman throughout. This suggests that her privilege in other arenas was significant enough that her status as a woman could be represented as negative, positive, or neutral, without fully undermining her authority. Ultimately, this gave her hagiographer the flexibility to present gender at turns as both negative and positive and to speak directly to its impact on her positionality generally as well as in specific moments. Her status is often related by repeatedly finding ways to connect her to her home institution and reminding the reader of her position as a highly educated woman. Gyurmé Ösel frequently applies gendered language at key moments in the narrative and gives us a sense of how Mingyur Peldrön was situated in her community. In using these prompts, he reinforces the types of religious authority that were present in his lifetime. It is illuminating to examine these types of authority in the sequence in which they appear in Dispeller, so as to convey the relative literary emphasis placed upon each form (although after their introduction, they appear throughout Dispeller both in concert and individually). Each pertains to Mingyur Peldrön’s specific context and also is used by Gyurmé Ösel to express her identity and her social and religious positioning.

Emanation Authority

The first type of authority attributed to Mingyur Peldrön in Dispeller is that which comes from being recognized as the emanation of enlightened beings. According to Buddhist tradition, a buddha or bodhisattva—no longer fettered by the bonds of karmic accumulation—can direct one’s own rebirth in order to help mundane beings escape suffering and attain enlightenment. Thus, a person might be identified as the incarnation of an enlightened being on Earth and therefore be considered to be imbued with the wisdom, compassion, and potential for engagement with others that befit an awakened one. It is common for Tibetan namtar to begin with a discussion of the subject’s previous lives, evoking both their enlightened status and their subsequent ability to emanate wherever they are most needed. This also positions them within a tradition of mythically and historically important personages as a means to contemporary legitimation.

Gyurmé Ösel follows this traditional narrative arc by beginning Mingyur Peldrön’s Life with descriptions of her previous incarnations. This section starts directly after the opening invocation and occupies approximately 10 percent of the total namtar. As in all namtars, this connection
with important Buddhist figures of the past always acts as a mode of legitimation. But for the few women for whom we have namtars, it serves the dual purpose of giving them female-sourced authentication in a male-dominant environment. That is, by engaging the common namtar trope of previous lives but focusing solely on previous female lives, Gyurmé Ösel presents the reader with an all-woman version of a Life that offers a woman-centered focus on the literary conventions that are most often used in recounting the lives of men. Gendered identity is centered in this section of Dispeller in a way that is wholly positive. By connecting the historical woman Mingyur Peldrön with eminent female figures of the past (ranging from buddhas to semihistorical Tibetan figures), emanation authority also reinforces the idea of positive models for women’s religious development. Gyurmé Ösel was not the first (or the last) author to do this with a focus on a woman as his literary subject. The importance of past lives in establishing a woman’s authority is well documented in English-language Tibetan scholarship. For example, in the Life of Sönam Peldren, previous female lives acted as authorizing referents to offer legitimated feminine imagery to support a woman’s religious identity. Likewise, in the few cases of highly privileged women who also have namtars, such as that of Tāre Lhamo, a woman’s connection with past female figures is first asserted and reiterated by the men who dominate the world in which she was born. Echoing Tāre Lhamo’s case, Gyurmé Ösel acted as a male voice asserting Mingyur Peldrön’s legitimacy by connecting her to a long string of previous female incarnations.

Frequently in Tibetan Buddhist communities, important people are associated with the illustrious figures of the community’s past through the institution of rebirth, that is, the tulku lineage system. Or they might be identified as the emanation of an enlightened deity (a buddha or bodhisattva) or a semihistorical figure. Tibetan studies scholar Hildegard Diemberger points to the important difference between incarnation as a buddha/bodhisattva and rebirth as a mundane human, fettered by the chains of samsara: “The former refers to the manifestation of a spiritual entity in a human being, whereas the latter implies the transmission of a principle of consciousness from one human being to another. The two are normally interlinked in the Tibetan context, as the reincarnating beings carry with them their divine attributes as emanations of the deity.” Mingyur Peldrön’s previous lives include a mix of references to buddhas and bodhisattvas, well-known historical figures, and legendary heroines. All in all, she is identified as ten different female figures.
Emanation authority bears a strong resemblance to Weber’s routinized “charismatic authority,” especially in the sense that prophecy and revelation are used to establish the divinity of the individual, after which the subject may come to be recognized as being imbued with the idealized personality of the deity. The significance of this type of authority is borne out in its presence in most extant namtars, with the main subject always identified as the emanation or incarnation of at least one (if not more) figures. This is the case for women’s Lives as well as those of men, and the pattern recurs even in namtar that are more or less hagiographic in nature. For example, like in Mingyur Peldrön’s Life, Sera Khandro’s auto/biography engages the frame narrative of her status as a reincarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel. In Sera Khandro’s case this worked to authorize her presence in a community in which she lacked roots. It supported her claim to authority in a community in which she might not have what Sarah Jacoby describes as the “biological pedigree from her present lifetime to reinforce her identity as a Treasure revealer” but one in which she could claim that “she was none other than Yeshé Tsogyel incarnate.” For Mingyur Peldrön her associations with ten different female figures (foremost among them Yeshé Tsogyel) would connect her with a longer institutional history that included widely known popular deities who were more universally recognized and who were respected beyond Mindröl Ling. Reflecting the privilege she enjoyed by being born into a religious family, several of these lineages were ascribed shortly after her birth. Others were applied later, by herself and others. Her association with all of these lineages would ultimately support her social prestige in
a way that meant she could be connected with her immediate familial and institutional history as well as with more broadly recognizable religious individuals and their respective soteriological systems.

What is most notable about the section of *Dispeller* dedicated to past lives is the large number of incarnations with which Gyurmé Ösel identifies Mingyur Peldrön. In listing ten important female deities and people, he draws on nearly every female deity or folk heroine available in the Tibetan Buddhist literature of the time. They range from the primordial buddha Samantabhadri to the somewhat lesser-known Machiks (Jomo and Zurmo) and include figures both native to Tibet and also those who arrived with Buddhism. Some of those mentioned are historical figures, while some are heroines of the mythic Buddhist past. Regardless, all of them would have been familiar to a mid- to late-eighteenth-century readership (that is, Gyurmé Ösel's audience). In considering the past life narrative as a frequently employed method for transmitting important cultural information, it draws social and religious connections that were considered important in different contexts. For example, Sōnam Paldren was identified as the “Great Mother,” Vajrayogini, and Dorje Pakmo. Chökyi Drönma was likewise identified as Dorje Pakmo, Sera Khandro as Yeshe Tsogyel. In fact, Orgyan Chökyi’s *Life* is unusual in that she does not “evoke lineage as a source of authority,” even though “she does employ the past to give meaning to her present tale” by relating her narrative to those of Machik Labdrön, Gelongma Palmo, Nangsa Öbum, and Lingza Chokyi. Each of the past figures would have conveyed a certain collection of information based upon their particular personalities, trials and successes, and so forth.

These women’s *Lives* engage well-known female figures as incarnates or at the very least as inspirational stories to relate to their own narrative arcs. That said, Tāre Lhamo’s namtar—*Spiraling Vine of Faith*—is the most similar to Mingyur Peldrön’s for its emphasis on previous lives. Tāre Lhamo is identified as the reincarnation of six female figures, and the story of her previous lives takes up fully half of her namtar. In comparison with the other women mentioned here, her *Life* compares most closely with Mingyur Peldrön’s. While *Dispeller* lists more incarnations for Mingyur Peldrön (ten) than Tāre Lhamo’s (six), these sections both take up substantial quantities of the text (in the case of Tāre Lhamo’s, a full 50 percent, while Mingyur Peldrön’s occupies much less but is still notable at 10 percent) and are used to convey the significance of these women through their connection to incarnate authority. There is even overlap between the two women’s incarnations. They are
both identified as Samantabhadrī, Tārā, and Yeshé Tsogyel. Interestingly, these are also both women for whom we have evidence of birth into religiously privileged families that actively supported their goals. Both were the daughters of famous treasure revealers, and it is possible that their family privilege can be linked with the extensive use of incarnate authority. There was more opportunity for early connections to be drawn with the mytho-historical narratives held in these communities and more opportunity to create community-wide buy-in to recognize their status as incarnations.

Throughout the narrative of Mingyur Peldrön’s Life, Gyurmé Ösel frequently mentions these past incarnations. His references to them in pivotal moments remind the reader of Mingyur Peldrön’s significance, acting as the foundation for her legitimacy. Just as the lengthy section on previous lives imbued Tāre Lhamo with certain attributes through suggestion and connection in Spiraling Vine of Faith, Gyurmé Ösel employs the emanation model at first in Dispeller’s section outlining previous lives and then refers back to particular incarnations throughout Dispeller to associate Mingyur Peldrön’s actions with the attributes that he claimed she shared with these deities and heroines of the past. By drawing on the specific attributes of each emanation, he uses the personalities of each one to support Mingyur Peldrön’s authority in dynamic ways.

The list of Mingyur Peldrön’s previous lives and emanations begins with the bodhisattva Samantabhadrī, a female deity who was often paired with her male counterpart Samantabhadra to form the primordial consort couple considered to be the co-progenitors of the Great Perfection teachings and the Nyingma school. At the beginning of Dispeller, Gyurmé Ösel writes:

> From the natural state of ultimate pure bliss, the natural state of all phenomena in saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, profound and peaceful and free from all construction, which is suchness itself, arose the glorious Lord Samantabhadra in the form of the spontaneous wisdom body; she [that is, Mingyur Peldron] appeared as his self-manifested consort, Space Mistress Samantabhadrī, and she requested [him] to create the various greater and lesser vehicles of the dharma, and in particular the essence of the marvelous teaching of the secret instructions of The Great Perfection.

As one and the same with Samantabhadrī, Mingyur Peldrön becomes identified with the co-progenitor of the Great Perfection and in this way is
made integral to the creation and dissemination of all instructions associated with it. Starting this section with the focal point of the Great Perfection is unsurprising, given Mingyur Peldrön’s relationship to these teachings at Mindröling. As mentioned previously, the Great Perfection was central to the establishment of Mindröling, and Mingyur Peldrön was one of two recipients of the entire corpus who survived the civil war to pass them on. Here her authenticity as a Great Perfection teacher does not come from her own religious education or her affiliation with the monastery but, rather, from her identification with Samantabhadri, who, according to this telling, actually initiated the study and practice of the Great Perfection by requesting that Samantabhadra bestow the teachings. With this opening Gyurmé Ösel establishes Mingyur Peldrön with primordial female authority before moving on to discuss other pre-lives. The rarified form of female divinity found in Samantabhadri is most starkly contrasted with her identification as a reincarnation of Nangsa Öbum.

In our second example of emanation authority, Mingyur Peldrön is depicted as the fifteenth-century folk heroine and delok Nangsa Öbum. Deloks are people who are believed to have died, traveled to hells, and then come back to life. After reviving, deloks generally have ethical lessons to share with their communities, which are supported by accounts of their experiences in the hells. The socioreligious influences of people who become identified as deloks is related to their social positionality within their communities. In particular, the hardship and subsequent recognition of otherworldly power that attends the shift to identification as a delok supports a parallel shift in social agency. The ability to gain social authority and to wield it based on one’s delok identity has additional potential for the social mobility of women.

Living as a delok has been a notably accessible way for women who have little authority to gain power and recognition within their immediate community. While both men and women have become deloks, the potential for it to shift one’s agency is arguably most pronounced for women. Convincing revenants are able to become identified as authoritative religious voices through their discussions of what they learned on their journey into and back from the realms of the dead. This of course depends entirely upon the community’s response to the narrative of what the delok saw while he or she was dead. Nangsa Öbum is an example of a woman of little privilege who became known as a religious specialist solely based on her transition from a
mortal woman to a convincing delok. Other women in Tibetan history (such as Orgyan Chökyi) have also been likened to Nangsa Öbum. In most ways Nangsa Öbum has little in common with Mingyur Peldrön’s privileged narrative. Instead, she was a woman who suffered abuse at the hands of her in-laws, epitomizing the narrative of the oppressed woman who manages to escape the householder’s life only in death. Her return from death imbued her with power in her community, making it possible for her to pursue religious practice and avoid further torment from her family.

While the stories of the two women’s lives are quite different, there is one moment in Dispeller in which Gyurmé Ösel has occasion to argue for Mingyur Peldrön’s previous existence as Nangsa Öbum, drawing on the delok’s struggles in order to position Mingyur Peldrön’s triumphs over suffering and hardship. He likens his teacher’s return from exile in Sikkim and her efforts at post–civil war reconstruction to Nangsa Öbum’s death and subsequent rejuvenation. Mingyur Peldrön had waited out the war in Sikkim accompanied by her mother, sisters, and a small entourage, until they were able to safely return home around 1721. Gyurmé Ösel describes the moment when they are joyfully traipsing over the last mountain pass and stop for their first view of home:

> What had formerly been a place equal to the delightful pleasure groves of the gods had (with the exception of the Sangnak Podrang) been ruined. The residences, the stūpas, the walls, everything [had been destroyed]. The empty buildings sat like corpses. Remembering the former wealth and prosperity of her father and uncle, she was tormented by woeful suffering. She said that because of that, a flash of memory arose of her suffering in her previous life as Nangsa Öbum.

This initial view of the destroyed monastery—the embodiment of her family legacy and her natal home—fills her with extreme sorrow. In this moment of mourning she suddenly remembers her previous life as Nangsa Öbum. Her suffering of lost home and extended exile is likened to the treacherous odyssey that constitute the delok’s narrative of death and return. Here Gyurmé Ösel is able to name Mingyur Peldrön’s trauma in such a way that it is contextualized within female divinity and authority. Her experience of exile and loss link her to a well-known Tibetan woman whose experience of suffering acted like a fire in which her authority was forged. According to Dispeller, her memory of this past life is what gives her the strength to go on.
After her realization and subsequent visions, she is newly resolved to get to work rebuilding Mindröling.

The connection with Nangsa Öbum makes Mingyur Peldrön accessible and human. It reminds readers of a famous figure’s trauma and, in linking the two women, gives readers a familiar literary context upon which to hang their understanding. Her sorrow at seeing her home destroyed changes the otherwise privileged young woman into one who experiences the suffering of mundane loss just like all other people. There are several moments like this throughout *Dispeller* in which Mingyur Peldrön’s suffering is made legible to the reader. But in this moment she is relieved of that suffering by her supernatural ability to remember past lives. Here the reader is presented with her suffering as contextualized within her divinity without detracting from her sainthood. By connecting her with the female delok, Mingyur Peldrön’s fallible humanity is also articulated, and her struggles become a source of legitimation. Although her *Life* is for the most part completely different from Nangsa Öbum’s, the two figures become unified in this scene in which the author points to a woman whose narrative of hellish experience authenticates her role as a newly emerging religious leader. Reminding the reader of the familiar tale of Nangsa Öbum, the story of exile in Sikkim becomes more potent.

Equating Mingyur Peldrön’s traumatic exile with Nangsa Öbum’s journey to hell suggests that Mingyur Peldrön’s time in Sikkim imbued her with a similar authority. In emphasizing her experience of pain and suffering, Mingyur Peldrön’s own privileged status is elided. Here she becomes authenticated through an emphasis on hard-won experience forged through hardship and the realization of suffering. Gyurmé Ösel draws on Nangsa Öbum’s charisma-driven legitimacy to argue for Mingyur Peldrön’s ability to recover from the trauma of escape and exile in order to revive Mindröling. In this moment in the text there is no mention of the support that Mingyur Peldrön would receive from well-wishers during the monastery’s reconstruction. Nor are her years of training in the Mindröling teachings or her support from the Sikkimese royal family and the religious community discussed at this point. Of course, in reality, training and external support would both help her preserve and then revive the Mindröling name. But here the focus is on the dangers she and her community faced during the civil war and the experience she gleaned from it. Also, it is important to note that even at this low point in her lived experience, the author does not lament her female birth nor cite it as the reason for her suffering. The authoritative
woman here gained power through her deathlike experience and in doing so strengthened her role as an asset to the community. Beyond the case of Nangsa Öbum, the hardships Mingyur Peldrön faces throughout the Life are not otherwise connected with her past emanations. Rather, her connection to female emanations is generally presented as a source of positive authentication, while moments of suffering are connected with the mundane world in which she lived.

Mingyur Peldrön’s past lives associate her experiences with those of strong female figures, impressing upon the reader that her status as a woman is synonymous with supramundane power. The case of Yeshé Tsogyel is the most abiding example. Throughout Dispeller the semihistorical, semimythical apotheosized figure is mentioned more than any of Mingyur Peldrön’s other incarnations. As in the auto/biography of Sera Khandro, the story of Yeshé Tsogyel creates the frame narrative for the rest of Mingyur Peldrön’s Life by being presented at the beginning and end of the text and at key moments throughout. Yeshé Tsogyel is arguably the best-known female religious practitioner in Tibetan literary and oral tradition. She is most easily recognized as the consort of Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) and is mentioned in the tales of him concealing Buddhist treasure texts, to be revealed in a future time when the world is ready to receive and study them. Additionally, she was a teacher in her own right and had her own solitary practice for at least part of her career. She has come to be recognized as a Buddhist heroine associated with the treasure revelation tradition that cropped up during the Renaissance period (in Tibet the eleventh through fourteenth centuries CE), as a protector of the teachings, and as a manifestation of divine femininity who helped practitioners along the dharma path. Meditation caves throughout the Buddhist Himalaya bear her name; these pilgrimage sites are often marked with imprints of her hands and feet, ostensibly left in rock as a sign of her spiritual accomplishment and power. Her role as Padmasambhava’s consort is generally accepted as a core component of her personality, connecting her as it does to non-celibate practice and her association with the predominantly Nyingma tradition of treasure revelation. Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel are foundational for Nyingma historical identity, and this is reflected in Yeshé Tsogyel’s depiction in Dispeller. It is noteworthy that she is presented differently in Dispeller than in most other women’s Lives, and these differences are informative in what they tell us about the significance of previous life depictions.
and how these narratives support the personalities of the women whose namtars are being told.

Yeshé Tsogyel is referenced frequently in women's Lives, sometimes as a previous incarnation, as a model of inspiration for the main subject, or some combination thereof. As with other deities or heroines, her presence establishes the main figure as an authoritative and iconic teacher of the tradition, worthy of the same reverence as Yeshé Tsogyel herself. Given her connection to the Nyingma school and the treasure tradition in particular, her presence is especially authorizing for women who were connected to these communities. As with Mingyur Peldrön, Yeshé Tsogyel features in the frame narrative of Sera Khandro’s auto/biography; Sera Khandro self-identified as Yeshé Tsogyel and was later recognized as an incarnation of her.

Yeshé Tsogyel is also listed as one of Tāre Lhamo’s six previous incarnations and plays a key role in authorizing her and Namtrul Rinpoche as treasure co-revealers and practitioners. For both of these women, identification as this famous figure had grounding and authorizing effects for their Lives and their public identities. Interestingly, Yeshé Tsogyel’s depiction in these other namtars has very different content from her representation in Dispeller.

In other women’s life stories, the narratives of Yeshé Tsogyel describe her as a female consort of Padmasambhava and as a woman who later took a man as her own consort. Her specific identification as a woman who engaged in consort relationships is central to both Sera Khandro and Tāre Lhamo’s narratives, as both women were Nyingma practitioners who engaged in consort relationships as part of their role as treasure revealers. While not strictly necessary, the consort relationship was considered to be beneficial in helping treasure revealers recover hidden treasure texts. The hermeneutical goals of treasure revelation were helped along by a consort who could help a treasure revealer in the process of locating and discovering a text. Sera Khandro became renowned in her lifetime as a legitimate treasure revealer, and a consort was considered a necessity for her successful treasure revelation. She also saw other benefits to taking a consort; in her auto/biography she mentioned that such relationships had soteriological and pragmatic benefits for speeding the path to enlightenment and supporting health and longevity. Sera Khandro also reinforced her public identity as a treasure revealer, calling upon one of the commonly held expectations of how a treasure revealer behaves and practices, by taking on a consort. There are also unspoken benefits for a woman—especially one with few other authorizing
referents—to identify herself as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel. She can then reinforce this connection by creating relationship connections (such as taking a consort) that mimic the activities of Yeshé Tsogyel narratives. Performing similar acts would aid in establishing such a woman’s public role as a community-recognized treasure revealer.

Tāre Lhamo was likewise recognized as an incarnation of both Yeshé Tsogyel, and also as Sera Khandro. Like Mingyur Peldrön, Tāre Lhamo was born into a treasure-revealing family and the tertöns in her community immediately identified her as Yeshé Tsogyel, thus passing on the religious authority of the well-known female figure in their process of formal recognition. This identification would have acted as an authorizing referent for the baby, regardless of what her future plans held. However, when she took the path of a treasure revealer, her role as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel was especially beneficial, as it connected her directly to the origin tale of treasure revelation. Later, when she and her partner, Namtrul Rinpoche, practiced and revealed treasures together, their identification as Yeshé Tsogyel and Padmasambhava reinforced their identities as legitimate tertöns through their connections to the progenitors of the tradition itself. For them the erotic innuendo of some of their epistolary exchanges authorized their agency as a treasure-revealing couple. For both Sera Khandro and Tāre Lhamo, their identities as religious practitioners and treasure revealers were reinforced by their association with Yeshé Tsogyel as a practitioner of sexual rites. Neither woman was celibate, and both eked out successful religious careers in their roles as treasure revealers who engaged in heterosexual sex in order to edify their own practice. Their identification with Yeshé Tsogyel was wrapped up with this practice and supported their careers and spiritual paths as tertöns. While Mingyur Peldrön is also identified as Yeshé Tsogyel, the nature of her identification is very different. In that difference we can see both the ways that the specifics of religious identity are reinforced by connection to well-known figures through echoes of past stories as well as the unique nature of Mingyur Peldrön’s role as a celibate female religious teacher and the ways that the figure of Yeshé Tsogyel was likewise altered in Dispeller.

Compared with these other Lives, Dispeller gives a very different backstory for Yeshé Tsogyel. Rather than being described as a consort to Padmasambhava, here she is depicted simply as his student and then later on as a solitary and celibate practitioner. To support this claim, Gyurmé Ösel includes a quotation that he attributes to the Pema Katang:
Moreover, in the *Pema Katang*, the woman Yeshé Tsogyel said:

“Ema Ho! Adorned with many good qualities, the Ornamented Lotus [Padmasambhava] arose.”

Also, she said:

“Thirteen years later, born in Tibet—
a father called Drakpa Namka Yeshé,
a mother called Nubmo Gewa Bum—
in the female wood bird year I, Tsogyel, was born.
In the female fire bird year I met with the Lord.
One who has attained unfailing memory
must be a student of the dharma.
Serving until the age of eighty-five,
remaining pure,
no male or female children whatsoever,
I am a nun, unblemished by the faults of samsara.”

Gyurmé Ösel repeatedly references Yeshé Tsogyel throughout *Dispeller*, pointing to well-known and important religious texts, Mingyur Peldrön’s visions, and his own dreams as evidence of the legitimate connection between the two women. *Dispeller*’s alternative reading of Yeshé Tsogyel reflects how Mingyur Peldrön’s unique privilege put her in a position to remain celibate. While invoking the famous figure as an important authorizing presence from Nyingma myth and history, he does so in a way that allows for and even highlights his subject’s celibacy, which later becomes a prominent theme in her life story. When Gyurmé Ösel talks specifically about Yeshé Tsogyel, it is as a student of Padmasambhava and a protector of his teachings but also as a celibate woman. Much of the Yeshé Tsogyel story remains familiar. As in other tellings, she escapes an unwanted marriage, studies with Padmasambhava, and engages in twelve years of solitary meditation, during which time she fights off an attack by brigands, meditates in cemeteries, and becomes known as a “wrathful subduer of evil.” As in other versions, this telling of her story emphasizes the teacher-disciple relationship with Padmasambhava but takes the additional step of mentioning that he passed all Dzogchen teachings on to her. Considering Mingyur Peldrön’s role as a lineage holder at Mindröling, it makes sense that the author would identify her with Yeshé Tsogyel. This connection would have been particularly powerful, since her father, Terdak Lingpa, was
considered an emanation of Padmasambhava who had already been credited as a successful tertön by the time she was born. It makes sense that his daughter and disciple would be identified as a close disciple of Padmasambhava in a way that reinforces these aspects of Yeshé Tsogyel's narrative. The depiction of Yeshé Tsogyel as celibate is highly unusual, but it would reinforce her position within both family and institution while adhering to her particular attributes.

By the time Gyurmé Ösel was working on Dispeller, Mingyur Peldrön had already embarked on a celibate path. He positioned his narrative of her as an emanation of Yeshé Tsogyel in such a way that it corroborated Mingyur Peldrön's narrative of monasticism. By emphasizing Yeshé Tsogyel's dedication to practice, going so far as to equate her life with that of a nun, he more effectively connects the historical woman with the mytho-historical heroine. However, it also seems he is reaching a bit or perhaps creating his own reading of Yeshé Tsogyel altogether. As far as I am aware, in all of her depictions she appears rarely (if ever) as a completely celibate woman. Compared with Sera Khandro and Tāre Lhamo's associations with Yeshé Tsogyel, which reinforce her association with consorts, we see how in Dispeller the same heroine can be invoked but with different emphases that effectively reflect the person whose life story is being told. Gyurmé Ösel's choice of presentation speaks to his particular focus on Mingyur Peldrön's monastic path while reinforcing it with emanation authority. As a well-situated member of Mindröling who was identified with one of the most important heroines in the Nyingma tradition, it seems that Mingyur Peldrön's privileged status is here reinforced in her presentation as a monastic version of Yeshé Tsogyel.

The use of this famous figure throughout Dispeller's frame narrative reinforces Mingyur Peldrön's importance. She was recognized as Yeshé Tsogyel by a large collection of people, not just Gyurmé Ösel. For example, she is described as “an emanation of Yeshe Tshogyel” by Dudjom Rinpoche and Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. As an emanation, she could embody Yeshé Tsogyel's authority, and through connection with such a heroine her status as a woman became partial evidence of her religious significance, rather than a hindrance to religious authority. By asserting the attributes of Yeshé Tsogyel that resonated most with Mingyur Peldrön, the section also serves to establish the historical woman's attributes with support from a semihistorical and well-known figure. By creating a connection between the two women in the context of rebirth, Gyurmé Ösel references a popular
narrative that affiliates Mingyur Peldrön with ideas of enlightened, powerful female buddhahood and a form of authority that is especially potent within the Nyingma imaginary. It is important to note that she was recognized as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel by her larger community, beyond Mindröling.

To return to her many past lives, emanation authority creates a literary space in the text in which gender can be centered in a positive way. By referencing ten well-known Buddhist figures, Gyurmé Ösel reminds the reader that she is not the first important woman in the tradition and that there were in fact many others who came before her. By connecting her to this lineage, he places her in good company with a host of other women and feminine deities. Drawing on the similarities between her and others, he employs these women to begin framing Mingyur Peldrön’s own concerns and personality. As Samantabhadrī, Nangsa Öbum, Yeshé Tsogyel, and seven others, she takes on the religious authority of each figure as well as their characteristics. Recognition as an emanation of powerful females could reinforce one’s practical religious authority in eighteenth-century Ü through engagement with gendered divinities. For the narrative’s audience, it could also serve to position a woman in a broader, well-known literary and historical context.

It is also worth noting that all of Mingyur Peldrön’s past lives are presented as female. In part Gyurmé Ösel is arguing that authoritative women need not embody culturally masculine traits to be powerful. But he is also participating in and reinforcing the normative gender binary. For him his teacher’s authority could—and should—be legitimated solely along female lines. This is a common occurrence, with men’s stories often only recounting previous male lives. Incarnation lineages frequently follow a pattern of reincarnation along one or another of the two normative gender lines. That is, women are rarely recognized as incarnations of men. However, there are some cases in which men have been recognized as incarnations of female figures. The modern-day case of the Kagyu lineage’s Garchen Rinpoche is a great twentieth-century example. He is widely considered to be an emanation of the bodhisattva Tārā. With that said, there are few (if any) examples of women being identified as reincarnations of male deities. In Mingyur Peldrön’s case the legitimating power of female figures is used to authorize the saint, without male representation in the story of her past lives.

Meanwhile, the sheer number of female figures listed in her previous lives suggests that Gyurmé Ösel was worried that one or two incarnations
would not be enough. The list of ten female identities gives an overabundance of evidence for her significance, to the point where the author seems to be overstating his case. As a comparison, while her brother Rinchen Namgyel was described in his own namtar as “clearly an incarnation of the teachers of old,” the details of his previous lives are only mentioned briefly. They appear at a similar point early on in his namtar, amid a description of his early years and unusual propensities for learning, and directly prior to a discussion of his early education. But the brevity in this section of Mingyur Peldrön’s brother’s Life makes it seem as though this is merely a nod to the expectation that he would be recognized as reincarnate in some fashion or another and that, according to convention, it should be mentioned at this point in the namtar’s proceedings. It is of course possible that this was the result of stylistic differences between the two hagiographers. Rinchen Namgyel's hagiographer might have been less interested in past lives than Mingyur Peldrön’s. However, given the weight that an incarnation lineage can lend to the life of the saint and what that weight can signify for the reader, the fact that incarnations is less prominent in Rinchen Namgyel's story than in his sister's likely has a gendered component.

When we consider the comparative rarity of the composition of a woman's Life, it is likely that the large number of past-life narratives acted as a grounding force for Gyurmé Ösel's argument, reminding the reader of the many other women in the Tibetan past who also held similar roles. By drawing on Tibetan literature's most important religious women almost to excess, Gyurmé Ösel sought to represent Mingyur Peldrön as the ur-woman, an ideal in her authoritative and conservative leadership and teaching style. Samantabhadrī, Yeshé Tsogyel, and Nangsa Öbum exemplify three very different female emanations who convey a range of legitimacy that Gyurmé Ösel calls upon to reinforce her authority in diverse ways while maintaining her previous existence as having occurred in female form. These lives also reinforce his presentation of Mingyur Peldrön's character and activities. While she became an emanation grounded in an excess of authoritative femininity, in each example her authentication reflected her different personality traits. In this exposition he points to the legitimating potential of female incarnation couched in the socially accepted terms of namtar. He asserts a specifically feminine narrative to the figures involved and, in so doing, reinforces her authority with female identities. There is a contrast with Rinchen Namgyel's narrative, which did not require as much reinforcement to establish his position as legitimate through the literary reminder of
great people of his gender who had come before. He was in a privileged position of being one man among many for whom hagiographies had been written in this style. Here Dispeller is working in parallel with a model that had most frequently been used for men, but Gyurmé Ösel supports it with solely female evidence and in excess when compared with that of Rinchen Namgyel's namtar. What Rinchen Namgyel's hagiographer could take for granted, Gyurmé Ösel had to work to prove. In doing so, Gyurmé Ösel puts forth an idealized vision of female authority built from a literary tradition dominated by men in a bid to establish his beloved teacher's authority in a mytho-historical context.

Institutional Authority

Mingyur Peldrön's institutional connections are where privilege most obviously impacts her position as an authoritative religious figure and where gender is least prominent. As someone born into and educated by a powerful religious family, she had a level of privilege only accessible by birth. The term institutional authority here refers to the authority derived from this proximity to the leadership at Mindröling and all the benefits that flowed from this proximity. Institutional authority loosely resembles Max Weber's “traditional authority,” in that both are transmitted according to a communally held belief in an institution's enduring legitimacy, rather than an individual's charisma. Weber's description of traditional authority can be helpful insofar as it is based “on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them.” Mingyur Peldrön inherited multigenerational financial and religious privilege, and as a result she had a closer proximity to institutional traditions that instilled in her an inherent authority beyond that of the average person with similar educational training. This institutional access would influence the relationships that she forged with powerful figures throughout her adulthood, opening doors for her that would have otherwise been closed. On the relationship between institutional power and intersectional identity, Brittney Cooper explains that “institutional power arrangements, rooted as they are in relations of domination and subordination, confound and constrict the life possibilities of those who already live at the intersection of certain identity categories, even as they elevate the possibilities of those living at more legible (and privileged) points of intersection.” While Mingyur Peldrön's institutional privilege did not
necessarily completely override her gender status, it was also not negated by her role as a woman.

By the time Mingyur Peldrön was born, Mindröling Monastery had been functioning for nearly three decades and was well situated as a center of learning for the affluent families in the central Tibetan religious and political world as well as those from farther afield. When Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasri founded the monastery, they enhanced its prestige with support from the Fifth Dalai Lama’s Ganden Podrang government. Terdak Lingpa and the Fifth Dalai Lama had a long-standing relationship of religious exchange and mutual influence and also used similar methods to develop their institutions. Their inclusivist approaches to ritual and praxis were quite similar.\(^48\) Mingyur Peldrön’s familial connections with a historically prominent Nyingma family and that family’s connection to the Ganden Podrang government made her childhood education possible in the first place and certainly influenced her relationships with political and religious leaders in her adulthood. During the civil war, institutional relationships influenced her welcome from the Sikkimese royal family when she sought refuge there during the destruction of Mindröling. These connections also meant financial support from other institutions to reconstruct the monastery after her return. Beginning in her early twenties and continuing throughout her adult life, her connections to leaders such as Polhané and the Seventh Dalai Lama almost certainly began as the result of her institutional affiliation.

Institutional authority is similar to social privilege, but the two are not identical. While Mingyur Peldrön’s social privilege informed her institutional authority, it did not guarantee her access to the privilege that she could draw on through family connections. For institutional authority to work, her social standing had to be recognized by the group in which she was exerting her authority. A counterexample is Sera Khandro, a highborn central Tibetan woman who sought inclusion in a non-monastic religious community in Kham. When she arrived at her chosen community of practice, her natal origins did nothing to reinforce her social standing in the new context. On the contrary, she faced ridicule about her high status.\(^49\) There was potential for women to struggle for recognition at the margins of the communities they sought to join, regardless of whether or not they were born into aristocratic families. A highborn woman who was recognized as such in her community of origin would not benefit from this status in another community if it did not recognize that status as worthy of consideration. If a woman’s social
privilege was not consistent with the expectations of her religious community, it would not generate greater ease of institutional access. In other words, it would not be a source for institutional authority.

Institutional privilege here goes beyond that of simple wealth, familial status, social standing, or religious affiliation. But it can include any of these advantages, and in Mingyur Peldrön’s case it included all of them. Her story is different from that of women like Sera Khandro in that, beyond membership in the social elite, she also benefited by being born into a family that sought institutional expansion and valued her influence in that project. That is to say, she did not need to leave home and defy her aristocratic parents in order to pursue a religious vocation. Instead, she was designated as a recipient of the empowerments of the family lineage shortly after her birth and remained within her natal institution throughout her life. She was expected (or at least invited) to participate in the goals of her family’s religious projects and was educated accordingly. To be raised in a context in which her religious pursuits (including an interest in celibacy) were considered beneficial for the family seems to have been relatively unusual among the women for whom we have Lives. With that said, she does share this unusual combination of institutional support and privilege with Tāre Lhamo and Chökyi Drönma. Like these two women, Mingyur Peldrön’s privilege was beyond that of a wealthy girl with a supportive family because she was also born into a religious dynasty, and her religious interests were cultivated to support the family itself. The institutional authority that resulted from this affiliation remained accessible to Mingyur Peldrön throughout her life and was especially beneficial after elder generations had died. At its most basic, this meant that she had external support in key moments of hardship that would have been less accessible for those without family ties to Mindröling. But it also meant that she could draw on institutional authority to expand her teaching base. As a member of the central family at Mindröling, she had unprecedented access to the religious institutional complex and therefore a position of privilege that resulted in a much smoother experience in acquiring authority than that described in the Lives of other religious women. Her institutional authority also impacted how her gender was treated in her namtar.

In highlighting Mingyur Peldrön’s direct access to institutional authority, Gyurmé Ösel’s telling of her Life shows how different forms of privilege can shift the ways that life stories are told. As he explains, his teacher’s institutional affiliation meant that she did not face several of the traditional
obstacles so readily present in other women's Lives. In moments in which the challenges of being a woman might otherwise become the focal point, Dispeller instead forwards the benefits of her institutional relationships. She and her female family members are taken in by the Sikkimese aristocracy when they flee civil war. She is relieved from languishing in obscurity in Kongpo when Polhané calls her to Lhasa as a Mindröling representative. She and her brother are called upon to assist in settling disputes among political figures in Lhasa, due to their connections with Mindröling. These moments do not make gender any less important in the overall narrative, but they do point to the ways that the relationship between gender and authority was complex in her case. The multifaceted nature of Mingyur Peldrön’s identity meant that in different contexts, different aspects of who she was would be emphasized and recognized by those around her. Insofar as intersectionality denotes the complex connections that make power accessible, her privilege frequently overrode her non-privilege in helping her to exercise power in her community. The combined attributes of her identity could become more impactful in combination; the result would be more than the sum of its parts, so to speak. Protected by her institutional authority, Mingyur Peldrön’s gender could be less of a burden in certain moments, leaving room for positive renderings of feminine identity to prevail throughout most of Dispeller. While there is a narrative of hardship in her Life, it is not tied to overcoming institutional exclusion, and only rarely is it connected with her gender identity.

Rather than struggling for recognition within the institution, Mingyur Peldrön was acknowledged as an important potential transmitter of empowerments and therefore a significant conduit for the tradition from the time of her birth. The literary effects of this were such that in Dispeller she is not daunted by either her gender or through institutional exclusion but is instead elevated through family connections. However, institutional authority could only propel one so far. For Mingyur Peldrön to establish herself as an authentic teacher and practitioner, she needed more than high birth and family acceptance; she needed an education. Luckily, her institutional privilege gave her an entry point to unprecedented access to the knowledge that would help her establish her role as a religious teacher.

Educational Authority

Mingyur Peldrön’s religious education meant that she was also imbued with an authority specific to the details of that education. Here educational
authority concerns the authorization of an individual to transmit teachings based upon their religious training. While the term education might elicit specific notions of formal scholastic training, here it refers to a wide-ranging idea of Buddhist education that includes religious transmissions as well as empowerments and other forms of instruction beyond book learning, such as contemplative and ritual practices, in addition to scholastic guidance. Regardless of the style, education is meant to evoke the processes of passing down normative modes of produced knowledge and methods of intellectual and spiritual practice. Education here also implies the systematization of knowledge production and its dissemination. By receiving training in these areas, Mingyur Peldrön would have been recognized as authoritative within and even beyond Mindröling.

Like other modes of authority, this type was hardly unique to Mingyur Peldrön, although its expression in her hagiography is unusual for a woman in that she was educated by her own family at the institution where she was born and raised. It is also tied closely to her status as a nun, insofar as she was able to identify as a religious specialist from a very young age in a way that her sisters were not. In her case her educational authority meant that she was authorized through official channels to pass on teachings held to be important at Mindröling and other Nyingma communities during her lifetime. Lineage systems are important in this process, as teachings are passed down from authorized teachers to their students and the students are then empowered to perform the practices and pass on the teachings themselves. In the Tibetan context this process is often sealed with an empowerment, a ritual formally acknowledging the student’s ability to perform the practice. For Mingyur Peldrön this meant that her empowerment was coming directly from people like Terdak Lingpa and other leading figures at Mindröling.

A brief comparison between educational authority and Max Weber’s “legal authority” will indicate some of the differentiating components of educational authority in the context of the authoritative types that were functioning in Dispeller. According to Weber, legal authority is based upon “a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.” In the same way, educational authority adheres to norms that are passed down institutionally. These are rule bound and authorized by institutions. However, this does not indicate a one-to-one correlation with Weber's pure type of legal authority, in which, as he explains, “obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. It extends to the persons exercising the authority of office under
it by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and only within the scope of authority of the office.”

Educational authority, on the other hand, draws on the individual’s aptitude for learning and personal charisma in order to transmit teachings as well as their direct relationships to similarly authorized teachers. If one cannot develop a following based upon recognition and trust from the larger community, the individual will not be sought out to pass on the teachings they hold. Like charismatic authority, educational authority requires the confidence of the recipients in order to function. Mingyur Peldrön’s educational authority was expressed from her young adulthood and reiterated throughout her life, but it is most firmly established in the education of her youth.

In *Dispeller* Mingyur Peldrön’s educational authority is first mentioned with senyik, the aforementioned lists of teachings and empowerments she received in her youth. It is then reinforced with brief vignettes recounting her learning experiences as a child and young adult. According to *Dispeller*, Terdak Lingpa directed his daughter’s studies from her early childhood until his death in 1714, at which point Lochen Dharmaśrī became Mingyur Peldrön’s primary teacher. By this time she had already become a nun, the only girl in her family’s generation to do so. In place of a detailed narrative of her childhood activities, Gyurmé Ösel chose to include the senyiks of teachings she had received from these two men. Rather than a narrative of youthful clashes with family expectations or hardships and suffering overcome or even idyllic depictions of bygone days, the reader is met with an eight-folio list of the teachings received by the young woman that establishes her educational authorization. This follows a similar pattern to the hagiography of Rinchen Namgyel, which also includes a senyik of the teachings he received in his youth. In Mingyur Peldrön’s case the most attention is given to the Mindröling-specific teachings, especially the treasure texts of Terdak Lingpa. Just as with her previous female incarnations, by including these lists in the hagiography, the sheer volume of teachings impresses upon the reader the extent of her high level of training.

For a young woman like Mingyur Peldrön to be educated and imbued with empowerments meant that both she and the institution were safeguarded. This would benefit both nun and institution when chaos threatened to overwhelm the community and its knowledge bearers were being dispersed and killed off. With the onset of the civil war in 1717, men from the older generations were murdered, and only one other person with the same level of education escaped. Mingyur Peldrön and Rinchen Namgyel were the
only people who lived through the destruction with such an extensive education and therefore the ability to pass on these trainings to others. During their exile her religious training meant that she could launch her teaching career in Sikkim. While it is likely that she and her female family members would have been well cared for by the Sikkimese royal family because of their connections with Mindrölön, she was allowed to teach because she held a set of important empowerments. This led to her being granted the permission to establish a mountaintop retreat center and trying her hand at disseminating a Mindrölön education to the Sikkimese community. Thus, she was able to forge institutional connections for the monastery while also bestowing an education that would have otherwise been inaccessible for this community so far from Mindrölön. Ultimately, her educational authority was employed to be of religious benefit for herself and her community. After the destruction of the earlier generation, her role as one of the few surviving lineage holders meant that she could rise to become an important figure for the community. In exile her education meant that she began to transmit Mindrölön teachings—and therefore its legacy—even as the edifice itself burned to the ground.

As with the forms of authority discussed here, Mingyur Peldrön’s educational authority intersected with issues of gender and privilege as she navigated the religious environment of her time. It is important to keep in mind that different people—even within the Mindrölön family—had access to different types of privilege and therefore different types of authority. While she and her brother were highly educated, there is little evidence that their sisters received similarly robust training. For example, Lady Peldzin is mentioned rarely in the hagiographic and historical records and seems to have had little influence beyond her ability to marry the king of Sikkim at her sister’s behest. Likewise, while brief biographies of Mingyur Peldrön, her grandmother, and Rinchen Namgyel all appear in the modern-day record of Mindrölön, there are no accounts of her sisters. In Dispeller the sisters’ roles were relegated to keeping Mingyur Peldrön company (along with their mother) during pilgrimages and other events and playing the important role of making religiopolitically important marriages. In comparison, Rinchen Namgyel is portrayed as an active religious teacher and community figure, leveraging his authority and working alongside his sister and also on his own. The sisters are once described as attending teachings alongside Mingyur Peldrön, although their education is not described beyond that (whereas Rinchen Namgyel’s is described in detail in his namtar). Initial
research has uncovered little discussion of these sisters outside of *Dispeller*. Whereas Mingyur Peldrön is mentioned frequently in Rinchen Namgyel’s *namtar*, his other sisters are not. They are mentioned as adults going to receive blessings from and make offerings to their brother, but they are not recorded as having taken part in the same level of early education as Rinchen Namgyel and Mingyur Peldrön. When compared with the lengthy discussions of their more educated siblings, this absence suggests that educational authority was not equally bestowed in their generation or among all girls in the family.

Another differentiating factor between Mingyur Peldrön and her sisters was that she alone was a nun. While it would have theoretically been possible for her to pursue religious education without becoming a nun, the distinction bears attention here. Without making assumptions based on my own twenty-first-century Euro-Western context, it is clear that in her case status as a celibate religious woman correlates with her relative freedom to follow religious pursuits and her position as a prominent figure in the ordering of Mindröling at that time. This also led to a higher level of bodily autonomy than that of her sisters. With that said, we also know that in spite of her education, Mingyur Peldrön still did not receive the same extensive training as her brother. Thus, access to educational authority was uneven among this generation at Mindröling. This has significant repercussions for how we think about privilege in their context. While economic privilege may have been balanced between them, the privilege associated with education was doled out unevenly by the community that raised them.

It appears that Mingyur Peldrön was the only woman at Mindröling to adopt a position of religious leadership during her lifetime, and her education would cement this role. Her ability to lead the community was also predicated on the absence of other (male) leaders in her young adulthood. Upon return from Sikkim, Rinchen Namgyel was still in exile, which meant that Mingyur Peldrön was the most qualified to guide Mindröling’s reconstruction.55 The absence of male leadership combined with her education meant that she could step into a leadership role. Her adoption of a more prominent role in leadership after the Dzungar destruction seems to have been unique to her situation. After her brother’s return home, she continued in her role as a teacher and maintained the relationships she had begun developing in her time as director of the monastery’s reconstruction. She would continue to be a sought-out teacher long after others had taken up official positions as the heads of Mindröling.
In *Dispeller* Mingyur Peldrön’s institutional and educational sources of authority are contiguous and mutually reinforcing. The lists of teachings she received and accounts of her education, as well as accounts of meetings with male religious leaders, show that she was entrusted with and expected to disseminate her family’s teachings. Gyurmé Ösel’s approach suggests that for a woman to become a religious leader in the eighteenth century, she would have to be educated and empowered in religious teachings, and the more the better. Educational authority did for Mingyur Peldrön what the other two types of authority could not. It instilled legitimacy in her own personal religious accomplishments beyond the purview of the familial relationship or past-life connection. Rather than her previous lives or her family’s clout, her religious training and her ability to engage with and pass teachings on to large groups of people was what ultimately solidified her authority. It also meant that anyone who received teachings from her (including Gyurmé Ösel) would be directly linked with the likes of Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī.

**Gendered Referents and the Complexities of Privilege**

The three authoritative types active throughout *Dispeller* converge at some points and stand alone at others. The referential terms used to refer to Mingyur Peldrön reinforce these three types of authority and highlight the complex ways that different aspects of her identity interact. The use of gendered referents speaks to the complexity of how Gyurmé Ösel portrays both her identity and her positionality. In reading *Dispeller* as a site in which the socially embedded notion of gender is negotiated, we can see the potential benefits and downfalls of living as a woman in an eighteenth-century Nyingma community. In the narrative contrary statements about gender, about best methods for religious practice and so forth, exist alongside one another. These create a sense of multiple extant perspectives on gender and whether it was beneficial to emphasize Mingyur Peldrön’s position as a woman in any given moment.

A brief consideration of the semiology of the pronouns and appellations used to refer to Mingyur Peldrön shows how in very important moments Gyurmé Ösel elevated her using gendered terminology, leaving androgynous language to less important but more frequent scenes. His use of overt feminine language suggests a positive perception of her birth in female form, while the routinization of masculine references seems to establish her
authoritative role. For example, quotations attributed to different male family members employ different “voices” to reveal Mingyur Peldrön’s familial positioning in gendered ways. These include some of the few notable negative appellations, such as calling her an “unwanted girl” and so belittling her female identity. These moments provide a sort of argument for the author to work against, addressing the potential concerns about the fact she was a woman with assertions that her actions helped ensure the survival of Mindröling. In other words, Gyurmé Ösel emphasized or minimized her gender according to specific contexts. By referring to her at turns using feminine or androgynous language in the honorific register or in quotations attributed to family members that simultaneously gender her and assign her roles within the family, he exhibits the complexity with which her status was treated. These gendered and agendered references are used in Dispeller to construct a sort of dialogue about her identity that is elevated through feminine language and that reverts to androgynous-masculine language that positions her as an authority within a normative male-dominant framework. In some places he engages femininity as a positive attribute to be forwarded at important junctures in the story. Elsewhere, he uses androgynous language to position Mingyur Peldrön as an insider in a male-dominated context.

Androgynous and masculine language puts Mingyur Peldrön on a par with the men who dominated the religious world into which she and Gyurmé Ösel were born. There were no living examples of institutionally influential women in their community. Gyurmé Ösel’s androgynous and masculine references to Mingyur Peldrön act as subtle reminders urging the reader to think of her as one of these leaders—all of whom were men. The most frequent phrase that he uses to refer to Mingyur Peldrön is jé lama. Lama is a notably challenging term to translate, conveying as it does a complex collection of ideas that include the notion of a highly revered religious teacher. It is sometimes cross-translated into the more familiar guru, but this has the potential to also carry the problematic ballast of exoticization that the term guru has taken on in English. I tentatively translate lama as “master teacher,” when I translate it at all, as it conveys the supreme authority held by the teacher as well as the reverence accorded to the religious master. Lama could likewise simply be translated as “teacher,” although in modern English that might not hold the same powerful connotation that “master” does. Throughout Dispeller Gyurmé Ösel also sometimes returns to phrases closely related to jé lama, such as “the master themself,” “my lama,” and “venerable supreme
While these terms are not inherently masculine, historically they were almost exclusively used to reference male religious figures. More specifically, to my knowledge, Mingyur Peldrön’s context is the only one in which the phrase jé lama is used to reference a woman. And yet jé lama—and derivations of the term—are used in reference to her more than fifty times throughout Dispeller. In using this terminology, Gyurmé Ösel centers on Mingyur Peldrön’s position as his beloved teacher and as a respected and important teacher more generally while simultaneously presenting her as a figure naturalized and embedded in an otherwise male world. He removes all feminine identity markers in his most frequent references to her, normalizing her role as an androgynized teacher and member of a male-dominated religious educational complex, including Mindröling but also extending beyond its walls.

While the default references to Mingyur Peldrön are androgynous, Gyurmé Ösel uses feminine language to elevate her in key moments in the narrative. This has the dual effect of showing her importance through ornate and feminized language and also reinforcing that her status as a woman is a potential source of positivity. The departure from masculine or androgynous referents at these junctures adds to the complexity of how gendered language reinforces authority in the hagiography. For example, at the most pivotal moments he employs some variant of the lengthened and feminized phrase Venerable Master, Excellent Queen of the ḍākinīs, to refer to her. Throughout the text this long title is also split into several abbreviated forms, and Gyurmé Ösel uses them thematically according to the significance of that particular anecdote. ḍākinīs can be fierce or friendly, pleasant or terrifying. They are a designation of female dharma protectors and translators of revealed treasure texts, who keep religious texts and practitioners safe from menacing forces. Notably, they act as guides for treasure revealers and other practitioners in need, visiting dreams and visions to help those who are stuck or confused. ḍākinīs are generally referred to as enlightened and are by far the most consistently positive expression of female power in Tibetan Buddhism. Due to their role as guides for serious practitioners, the abstract concept of the ḍākinī holds high status in Buddhist literature and iconography. ḍākinī is also a term that is often used to refer to religious women in a polite or elevating way.

In Dispeller several lengthy references to ḍākinīs are used when Mingyur Peldrön is engaged in a life-changing event, especially one in which her status shifts dramatically. Moments important enough to warrant long appellations of her as “ḍākinī queen” occur throughout: at the very beginning of
Dispeller, when Gyurmé Ösel first describes Mingyur Peldrön as a protector of Atiyoga teachings; at her birth; when she receives complete Atiyoga instructions and initiations from her father; when, having just arrived in Sikkim, she first bestows Atiyoga instructions on the Dzogchenpa and the Sikkimese king; when a messenger arrives in Sikkim with the good news that she, her mother, sisters, and attendants can safely return home and that the threat to Mindröling had passed; when she rebuffs the advances of the Fifth Lelung, Jedrung Rinpoche; and finally, after her death, at the end of a description of her tomb. There are two unifying themes across these instances. First, they indicate transformative moments in Mingyur Peldrön’s existence. From birth to death these episodes pinpoint profound junctures of change in her lived experience and public position. They are also formative moments that establish her public identity in one way or another. She becomes a publicly recognized exiled teacher. She returns home to take the lead in reviving Mindröling. She asserts her celibacy and so forth. Second, at many of these junctures, the Atiyoga teachings of the Dzogchen tradition are the focus of the context. This furthers the prominent role that Atiyoga—and therefore Dzogchen—takes in all of these moments and highlights the importance of these teachings for Mingyur Peldrön’s identity. In using this elevated feminine language, Gyurmé Ösel is also reinforcing her relationship to these advanced teachings. He is centering Dzogchen and Atiyoga, and her connection to them, with the use of feminine imagery. Rather than refer to her as androgynous “master teacher,” in these moments she becomes a highly powerful and authorized woman, depicted as the Queen of the Ḍākinīs. The importance of these moments called for a departure from the usual androgynous language to the more florid, feminine, and still powerful language.

Whether feminine or androgynous in tone, these honorific references have the cumulative effect of elevating Mingyur Peldrön in a way that correlates to two of the modes of authority that are used to authorize her in Dispeller. As the Ḍākinī queen, powerful feminine imagery echoes the narratives of her emanation authority, reinforcing her position in an overarching theme of authorized Buddhist femininity. As the jé lama, she is depicted as an androgynous-masculine teacher, recalling her educational authority and empowerment to teach and pass on the teachings that are the heart of the institution where she was educated. But what of her institutional authority, that gleaned from simply being born into the right family?
When Gyurmé Ösel quotes Mingyur Peldrön’s family members, they refer to her using feminine language that does not obviously elevate her. For example, in interactions with her father, Terdak Lingpa, she is the “girl” or “daughter.” Gyurmé Ösel engages these terms frequently in moments when it is important to affirm Mingyur Peldrön’s position in a parent-child relationship. In doing so, they established her institutional authority by placing her within her familial context and also in a gendered and generational hierarchy below the first generation of male Mindröling leadership. These terms are used most often to show the relationship between Mingyur Peldrön and Terdak Lingpa but are also applied to her relationship with her mother, Phuntsok Peldzöm, and her uncle Lochen Dharmasri. They are effective as “authorizing referents” because they directly connect her to her father, uncle, and other family members. In scenes in which these terms are used, Mingyur Peldrön’s position as an accepted and valued member of the family takes primacy over any other aspect of the conversation.

There are a few types of child-parent denotation that are used in the text, and one of these holds specifically religious connotations for the namtar readership. What I have translated here as “daughter” is the term srémo, which also identifies Mingyur Peldrön as a spiritual heir to Terdak Lingpa, rather than merely his biological child. In this case srémo might be rendered more effectively as “spiritual daughter” or “(female) spiritual heir.” Her position as a child within the Mindröling family is reinforced with this type of language, which is utilized at least thirty-two times in Dispeller. In every case the term is quoted and attributed to some member of the previous generation of the Mindröling family (usually Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasri but also occasionally Phuntsok Peldzöm). While not obviously elevating in tone, these references support Mingyur Peldrön’s institutional authority by reminding the reader of her natal origins. It is worth noting that these are feminized.

While abundantly establishing Mingyur Peldrön’s legitimate authority, Dispeller also adds complexity to the issue of her gender by including references to her role as an “unwanted daughter.” When she was fourteen, there was apparently some discussion about her position in the family. She was struggling with some of her studies and sought help from Lochen Dharmasri. Responding to her frustration and doubt, her uncle reminded her that although she might be an “unwanted girl,” she was destined to carry on the family’s religious tradition. He is quoted in Dispeller as having
declared: “The desired boy was not brought to the Terton’s Dargyé Chö ding lineage. This unwanted girl was brought instead. Now she will sustain it. The treasury will not be forgotten.” Mingyur Peldrön seems to have been buoyed by this reassurance, happily going about her practice. It is an interesting moment, heavy as it is with misogynistic language. In spite of her gender, the gifted girl was considered to be capable of upholding and propitiating family traditions of Terdak Lingpa’s lineage and protecting the future of Mindröling. However, these successes are still qualified as having been achieved in spite of her status as a girl. Here even her teacher (who we should remember was also her uncle) felt the need to point to her gender as potentially problematic, harking back to the impediments of the lesser female birth. Succeeding in spite of her gender introduces a different narrative to the text—one that is more familiar in the Lives of other Tibetan women. This juxtaposition of her femininity as at turns elevated and detracting shows how gender remains a complex aspect to her identity, even within the context of hagiographic narrative. In spite of all the positive references to her in gendered terms, there are brief hints that her position as a girl, and later a woman, would be detrimental to her status at Mindröling.

In a sense Gyurmé Ösel’s linguistic choices gendering Mingyur Peldrön in Dispeller exemplify how femaleness can be at turns elided or elevated when the figure has enough privilege cachet. The three most prominent referents used for her are interesting because they position her differently within her family structure, community structure, and Buddhist cosmology and reinforce the three authoritative types that were described earlier. The cumulative effect of frequent honorific references to her is that the overall portrait of Mingyur Peldrön is exemplary and glorified. In the most important places these are lengthy gendered epithets, generally likening her to a dākinī. Elevated feminine language deifies her while emphasizing her gender. Elsewhere, the frequent references to jé lama establish her as an actor embedded in a normative androgynous-masculine context. The androgynous terminology forwards her status as a prominent Mindröling teacher over and above her gender. Meanwhile, references to her as a female child at Mindröling reinforce her familial position alongside her gender. Diminutive references to her as a “girl” or “child” position her in close proximity to Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī. Each of these phrases sends a message that positions Mingyur Peldrön differently as an authority in her socioreligious context.
In *Dispeller* social religious authority is at times built upon notions of a specifically feminine identity and relayed in references to Mingyur Peldrön's past-life narratives. In drawing on these, her personal authority is reinforced through positive representations of idealized and enlightened female figures. Meanwhile, in other moments attributes such as education, social status, and family connections are asserted over and above her gender. Throughout, different appellations (whether they be gendered, elevated, both, or neither) also reinforce her positionality in the given moment. All of these factors come together in complex ways to establish her authority by drawing on different aspects of her privilege. The authoritative types used by Gyurmé Ösel are present in other namtars as well, where they reveal similar concerns for other auto/biographers, hagiographers, and their subjects and reiterate different namtar tropes. Mingyur Peldrön's gender is presented in complex ways. It is not always a detractor to be overcome and not always a support that elevates her. Rather, gendered identities authorize her in some moments and in others remind the reader of the “inferior female body” so often found in Tibetan Buddhist *Life* writing, including in *Dispeller*. The complexity of gendered language in the hagiography points to the continued role of gender as part of Mingyur Peldrön's identity. Gender is not completely obscured by her privilege or vice versa; rather, the two social constructs inform one another.

Gyurmé Ösel substantiates Mingyur Peldrön's authority by drawing on literary and cultural references that would have been recognizable to his eighteenth-century readership. By engaging familiar authoritative types, his choices point to the intersectional nature of authority, especially as it relates to gender and privilege. For example, his use of emanation authority signals that the *Life* will adhere to the normative traits of namtar but in a feminine register, presenting her identity as a nearly overwhelming number of female buddhas and heroines. In doing this, he validates her female birth while reminding the reader of the preponderance of female practitioners in the Buddhist canon. Through diverse narrative and literary reference, he connects her personal attributes within a larger program of divine femininity. By refusing to cross the binary gender divide in her pre-lives, he asserts that the forms of emanation authority so prevalent in men's *Lives* can be easily translated to the context of a female teacher. He presents a feminized version of the more frequently male literary *Lives*, replacing what might in other narratives be presented as the downfall of being born a woman with an emphasis on positive female representations. In these
and other moments, he uses ornate feminine apppellations likening Mingyur Peldrön to a ḍākinī queen.

But how do we make sense of the impact of gender on a person’s Life story where content is openly gendered in some places and elided or downplayed in others, the manifestations of gender are complex and often nuanced, and they regularly depart from the dominant narratives about being born a woman in a Buddhist world? While frequently present, Mingyur Peldrön’s position as a woman was not always the defining aspect of her personality or her authority. But that does not negate its importance in her lived experience and in her literary representations. Her role as an educated and highly trained individual and her position as a privileged daughter of Mindrölön are also both signals to the reader about her authority. In Gyurmé Ösel’s discussions of her institutional and educational authority, he highlighted privilege and access, particularly that of being born into the inner circle of a prominent religious institution. In describing her as a daughter of the tradition, he emphasized her institutional authority by forwarding her privilege and her gender. It is notable that this was presented within the boundaries of a positive female context that draws on feminine identities to reinforce Mingyur Peldrön’s own status as a legitimate lineage holder.

Mingyur Peldrön’s Life articulates her access to religious education and her role among the highest echelons of the privileged religious elite. For her, to be an authoritative woman meant being a teacher respected by the aristocracy and available to the masses. But it also meant having the ear of governing leaders, receiving the education of an elite religious institution, and becoming an indispensable protector and holder of institutional lineages. Her educational authority is at times gendered female (as when she is labeled a ḍākinī while giving Atiyoga teachings), and elsewhere she is gendered androgynous-masculine (as in most frequent references to her and while giving teachings to Gyurmé Ösel or groups of nuns). During moments in which educational authority is most important, the references to gender switch frequently.

In eighteenth-century Tibet, as in other times and places, women’s accessibility to roles in leadership and to education in general were as varied as their markers of social privilege, even as they were bound to societal structures and organization. Mingyur Peldrön had the unique privilege of being born into a position in which she could easily access religious prestige and training. As a result of this privilege, her gender had a less restrictive effect on her experience and could be celebrated and elevated. Gyurmé Ösel could
engage her gender in more flexible ways than if she had had less privilege to access. In her case family connections, wealth, and other markers of privilege also helped determine whether or not she would have access to religious education and what kind of education that would be. An intersectional approach to her life narrative reveals that gender was merely one of the factors influencing the scope of her lived experience. As a woman, her proximity to and relationship with a doctrinally and geographically central religious institution was highly unusual, and privilege informed her viability as a leader.

As we continue to investigate gender dynamics at different moments of Tibetan Buddhist history, Gyurmé Ösel’s gendered treatment of Mingyur Peldrön reveals how important it is to look at the variety of types of authority available to an individual including—and also always beyond—gender, especially in specific historical and religious contexts. Dividing her authority into the three types and examining each separately reveals how accessibility to authority is largely grounded in the privilege of her family background. This in turn made it easier for her to receive a high-profile training and build her persona as a Buddhist teacher. The elevation of her feminine identity often contradicts much of the narrative of the disadvantages of being reborn in a female body that are regularly found in Buddhist literature, without jettisoning her gender. In Buddhist contexts—as elsewhere—authority is wrapped up with specific cultural signifiers. For Mingyur Peldrön these included positive gendered references, education level, and markers of privilege such as wealth, institutional affiliation, proximity to centers of authority, position within her family, and political connections. Each of these were shot through with context-dependent privilege, in this case a privilege that contained an amalgamation of class-based and educational markers and was not evenly available to all the children of her generation. With all of its complexity, privilege laid the foundation for Mingyur Peldrön’s Buddhist education, her rise to prominence, and ultimately her authority.