



Echoes of Enlightenment: The Life and Legacy of the Tibetan Saint Sonam Pelden

By Suzanne M. Bessenger

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Echoes of Enlightenment explores the issues of gender and sainthood raised by the recently discovered "liberation story" of the fourteenth-century Tibetan female Buddhist practitioner Sönam Pelden.

Born in 1328, Sönam Pelden spent most of her adult life as a nomad in eastern Tibet until her death in 1372. She is believed to have been illiterate, lacking religious education, and unconnected to established religious institutions. For that reason, and because as a woman her claims of religious authority would have been constantly questioned, Sönam Pelden's success in legitimizing her claims of divine identity appear all the more remarkable. Today the site of her death is recognized as sacred by local residents.

Suzanne Bessenger draws on the new-found biography of the saint to understand how the written record of the saint's life is shaped both by the hagiographical agendas of its multiple authors and by the dictates of the genres of Tibetan religious literature, including biography and poetry. She considers Sönam Pelden's enduring historical legacy as a fascinating piece of Tibetan history that reveals much about the social and textual machinations of saint production. Finally, she identifies Sönam Pelden as one of the earliest recorded instances of a historical Tibetan woman successfully using the uniquely Tibetan hermeneutic of deity emanation to achieve religious authority.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Echoes of Enlightenment traces the once lost life and works of a contemplative woman in pre-modern Tibet. Through Bessenger's fine writing we have the chance to hear an important Buddhist voice, one that was clearly prominent and influential in its day, yet rarely carries through history's censored record. Sönam Pelden will become a well-regarded member of what is still a small group: Tibetan women whose stories, whose songs, whose brilliance were preserved for future appreciation." -Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Professor and Department Chair, Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia

"Bessenger contributes to the field of gender and religion, not only in bringing to light another female Buddhist saint from the Tibetan literary record, but also by capably analyzing complex representational strategies, ever cautious about what can and cannot be surmised from hagiographic sources in the absence of other contextualizing information." --*Reading Religion*

About the Author

Suzanne M. Bessenger is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Randolph College. Her research explores Tibetan Buddhist biographies, cults of saints, and conceptions of gender. She lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her family.

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