

Celibacy, Culture, and Society

The Anthropology of Sexual Abstinence

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2 Kim Gutschow

The Women Who Refuse to Be Exchanged Nuns in Zangskar, Northwest India

Why exchange women? Because they are “scarce [commodities] . . . essential to the life of the group” the anthropologist tells us.

— Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, on Lévi-Strauss

While Buddhist doctrine proclaims phenomenal reality to be empty of absolute or independent existence, in practice both gender and sexuality appear to be inescapable and absolute conditions of the monastic existence. Buddhist nuns may renounce the act of sex and desire, but they cannot transcend the sex-gender system that constrains their monastic vocation.¹ Nuns can no more escape the eternal dialectic of desire between the sexes than they can flee the mundane gender roles that enmesh them. Even those intrepid nuns who successfully maintain the celibate life remain complicit with a central premise of the sex-gender system: the exchange of women.² While daughters are exchanged in marriage, nuns are traded for merit. Monks regulate this traffic in women, for they reserve the right to control the admission, confession, and absolution of nuns. These privileges date back to the founding of the nuns' order, when the Buddha apparently gave the monks considerable control over nuns.

For Buddhist nuns, domestication has been achieved at the expense of liberation. In the Tibetan Buddhist regions of the northwest Indian Himalaya, the narrow path to female celibacy is strewn with obstacles through which only the hardest souls may persevere. Along the way, nuns must engage in everyday forms of resistance in order to evade the demands and desires made by their families, acquaintances, and monastic brethren for assistance or succor. Even as their shorn heads and sexless maroon robes

signal a lofty intent to renounce the worldly life, nuns remain tied to sex and gender roles in ways that monks are not. Nuns are expected to toil selflessly in the gardens, fields, and kitchens of both village and monastery while forgoing their own meditations. Their status as dutiful daughters constrains their efforts at becoming sacrosanct celibates while ensuring the agrarian prosperity essential to both household and monastic economies. Classical Buddhist injunctions against renunciates working in the fields are ignored by both villagers and monks, who eagerly recruit nuns prized for their altruism. In theory, nuns' compassion is supposed to be applied universally; in practice, it may be exacted along lines dictated by custom and kinship.

The Law of the Buddha and the Domestication of Nuns

The Buddha's initial ambivalence about founding the nuns' order was based not on women's lack of spiritual qualification but on a perceived threat to the male monastic order.³ Legend has it that the Buddha established the nuns' order only after being accosted by his aunt, Mahāpajāpatī, and his closest disciple, Ānanda. After considerable hesitation, he relented but warned that the entry of women into the order was as dangerous as mildew on a rice crop or rust on a sugar cane field. Furthermore, the Buddha allowed women to ordain on one condition: that they henceforth adopt the so-called Eight Chief Rules (*Garudhammā*). These rules specify that nuns may never censure or admonish monks, that the most senior nun must respectfully prostrate before a freshly ordained monk who may be decades her junior, and that all nuns must take their ordinations, bimonthly confessions, rainy season retreats, and penances in the presence of monks. While these baneful rules may never have been spoken by the Buddha, as some scholars claim, they positioned the nuns' order as subordinate to the monks' order from the start.⁴

The cumulative effect of these rules was to give monks the right to discipline and punish the nuns while ensuring that the monasteries overshadowed the nunneries in terms of wealth and power. Centuries of regularized repetition of subservience led the nunneries to become economically and spiritually dependent on monasteries. Because nunneries never gained as much patronage and political power as monasteries did, the nuns' order eventually died out in many regions. By the eleventh century, women could no longer seek full ordination throughout South, Southeast, and Central Asia.⁵ Since only novice ordination was transmitted to Tibet and the Indo-Tibetan realm, nunneries never held the same status, wealth, and power that monasteries did. While monks still receive rich dividends from their monastery's vast endowments in land and livestock,

nuns in the Buddhist Himalaya still work on their relatives' farms in exchange for their daily bread.⁶ Additionally, nuns have been disqualified from teaching or transmitting esoteric practices and knowledge. Thus, female students have been forced to supplicate themselves in front of male teachers, a posture that has grave potential for abuse.

Nuns are domesticated by monks, for whom they perform menial tasks, just as a wife might for her husband. Although such tasks are strictly forbidden by the monastic discipline, or Vinaya, I have seen and helped nuns wash and sew clothes, collect dung and firewood, weed and water fields, roast barley, bake bread, and perform countless other chores for monks in the Tibetan Buddhist region of Zangskar.

Officially, only monks can manage a woman's passage into celibacy and the monastic order. In Zangskar, only fully ordained monks can officiate the first tonsure ceremony, which signals the initial commitment to celibacy, and the ordination ceremony, when a nun formally joins the monastic order.⁷ The officiating monk must be sufficiently pure and ritually advanced in order to transform the latent and manifest symbolic content of these rituals. Hair is a potent symbol of sexuality; its removal signifies a rejection of femininity and fertility.⁸ Because long and glossy braids are markers of a woman's fertility, their absence may be mourned inwardly. The ritual offering of hair and jewels during the tonsure rite during ordination expresses a symbolic exchange in which forgone sexuality is traded for future merit. Yet monks reserve the right to regulate this traffic in merit making.

This chapter focuses on the nun's life in Zangskar, a region which lies tucked among the folds of the Greater Himalaya, in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Three staple crops—barley, peas, and wheat—along with large herds of yaks, cows, goats, and sheep guarantee most houses self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs. This livelihood is essential in a region cut off from vehicular traffic for at least seven months because of heavy snows.⁹ Marriage and inheritance patterns are changing rapidly, although vestiges of polyandry and polygyny remain. Until recently, marriage and residence patterns were flexibly oriented toward a single goal: keeping household landholdings intact. A melange of patrilocal and matrilineal monogamy and polygamy contributed to an economy where household fortunes might rise and fall, yet landholdings remained fairly stable over generations.¹⁰

Primogeniture is still customary. While the oldest son inherits the house and fields, younger sons may either join their brother's marriage or become monks, homesteaders, or outmarrying husbands. Daughters either marry out or inherit their father's estate in the absence of sons. Zangskari households are still linked by the exchange of women. Bridewealth pay-

ments consist of silver coins left over from the Raj, as well as cash, grain, and livestock, although brides also receive substantial dowries to take to their husband's home. Conspicuous wedding feasts culminate the lengthy marital negotiations, which may be drawn out over the better part of a decade. Overall, marriage maintains the symbolic capital of Zangskari culture: generosity, reciprocity, and hospitality.

Zangskar, where 95 percent of the population practice a local variant of Tibetan Buddhism, has an extraordinarily high number of nunneries.¹¹ Although the absolute number of monasteries and nunneries is roughly equal, the ratio of nuns to monks (two to five) is far higher than in neighboring areas of Tibet and Ladakh.¹² It may constitute the highest such ratio in the Indo-Tibetan realm. While most nuns and monks in Zangskar are monastic celibates in the Gelugpa and Drugpa Kagyud orders, some of the members of the latter order are married meditators (*sgrub pa*) practicing Tantra. This chapter examines one of Zangskar's largest nunneries, which supports 20 novice nuns (*dge tshul ma*), who come mostly from the village of Shun (population 440) and other nearby villages in the region's mandala-shaped central valley.

The Narrow Path to Nunhood

The path to religious renunciation is long and tortuous in both life and literature. These two realms may even merge when a narrative staged as a drama becomes ground for embodied experience. When the famous Tibetan folktale of Nangsa Obum was performed during the course of the annual Gustor (*dgu gtor*) Festival in Shun one year, the play became a participatory performance and identifying narrative for local actresses.¹³ Several weeks before the performance, members of the all-female cast appeared to take up the play as an allegory for the difficult choice between the religious and the married life. At rehearsal parties, which lasted far into the night, the young actresses confided their own deepest fears of marriage and dashed dreams for the celibate life. Palkyid admitted that, as an oldest daughter, she was destined to marry, thereby destined for joy in this life but suffering in the next. Kesang said she had wanted to join the nunnery rather than be sent off as a slave to an unknown husband but had cared for her sick and aging parents instead of studying religion (*chos*). Lobsang recounted that when she divorced her husband after just a week of marriage, she had tried to become a nun but had been unable to master the archaic scriptures. Although other actresses had not sought out the celibate life, most identified with the play, a Tibetan *Bildungsroman* of a woman who seeks to renounce worldly life in spite of nearly insurmountable obstacles.¹⁴

Nangsa Obum: The Girl Who Would Renounce

Once upon a time in a Tibetan village, there lived an elderly couple who were devoted Buddhists.¹⁵ Though they were very aged, one night the wife had a vision of the Tibetan goddess Tārā in her sleep. Indeed, nine months later she gave birth to a daughter, whom they named Nangsa Obum. When Nangsa grew into a beautiful maiden, suitors came from many lands, but her parents refused them all, saying she wanted to become a nun. One year when she went to religious festival, the lord of Rinag saw her and decided she must marry his son. When he called her over to propose, she protested that she was not fit to be a nobleman's wife. The arrogant lord persisted, placed a turquoise on her head, and declared that he would kill any other man who dared marry her. The next day the lord appeared at her parents' doorstep, announcing that he had come to make the bridewealth payments. When he left, Nangsa wailed that she would rather meditate until she died than marry. Her parents replied that the lord might kill them all. In the end, Nangsa was married and bore a son after a year.

Nangsa was terribly unhappy at her husband's palace, where her sister-in-law, an unmarried and perhaps sexually frustrated spinster, never gave Nangsa keys to the storeroom and generally made life difficult. One day, two religious mendicants came to visit the palace while Nangsa was in the fields harvesting barley. Because she had no access to the storeroom, Nangsa could offer them only grain straight from the fields. The jealous sister-in-law struck Nangsa for her insolent and impromptu generosity and complained to her brother. Nangsa's husband then beat his wife, breaking three of her ribs. Nangsa bore her pain in silent resignation. Shortly thereafter, another religious mendicant (her future teacher, in disguise) came to the palace. When he sang a parable about the suffering that beautiful women experience, Nangsa was deeply moved and, for lack of anything else to offer, gave him the jewels from her breast.¹⁶ The lord, who had been listening at the door, entered the room in a fury. The beggar leaped out the window, but the lord beat Nangsa senseless, inadvertently killing her. When the lord called in an astrologer, he warned them not to burn Nangsa's body, because she would come back from the dead in seven days' time. As foretold, she came back to life a week later, declaring her intention to take up the celibate life.

When Nangsa's in-laws pleaded and her son begged her not to abandon him, she relented. Still miserable, she went to visit her parents and told them of her wish to become a nun. Her mother told Nangsa how ridiculous she was to ignore her husband and his fine palace and yearn for celibacy. After feuding with her mother, Nangsa ran off to the mountains to

search for her teacher. Wandering for days, she found his hermitage, where she requested religious instruction. The teacher flatly refused and said she was not ready. In response, she pulled a knife from under her skirt, threatening to plunge it into her breast. He relented and initiated her into Tantric practices. Eventually, Nangsa's husband came to recapture her with an army. Killing many meditators, the soldiers captured her teacher and insulted him:

You are an old dog that has seduced our snow lion! . . .
 Why did you try to rape this white grouse? . . .
 Why did you pull out her feathers and wings?
 You are an old donkey living in a dirty stable.
 Why did you rape our beautiful wild horse?
 Why did you cut off her mane?
 You nasty old bull, why did you have sex
 with our beautiful white female yak?

(from Allione 1984: 122)

The Tantric master reached out, moved the mountains, and brought his dead disciples back to life. In response to the soldiers' taunts, Nangsa levitated, mocking their attempts to tame her or own her. When the soldiers saw her flying above them, they dropped their arms, and all were converted to the religious life, including her husband and the vicious sister-in-law.

Even as a miraculous practitioner, Nangsa is traded like a commodity between men. After her parents give her away to a pestering suitor, she is pursued to the hermitage by the Rinag clan like an animal who has gone astray. She represents an object of exchange that has been seduced and defiled by the Tantric teacher. Because Nangsa's true nature is wild, she protests their attempts to domesticate her. Nangsa can pierce through the delusions of the Rinag clan, yet such a success is far less likely for nuns in Zangskar. The contradictions between intense spiritual ambition and social constraints overwhelm many women who set out to be nuns. The themes of Nangsa's story—domestic abuse, harsh in-laws, jealous spinsters, and the urge to flee the worldly life—both draw and derail the Zangskari woman's quest for celibacy.

The Struggle for Celibacy in Zangskar

Attaining and maintaining celibacy is a long and difficult battle with one's own family as much as one's conscience. While some girls are chosen by their parents to serve as future nuns, others must fight to leave home and clandestinely join a nunnery. The words of a charismatic teacher, a propensity for religious study or devotion, and childhood hardship or abuse,

all may influence the choice to take up celibacy. The only women who almost never become nuns are oldest daughters destined for marriage. While there is no single factor that determines monastic celibacy in Zangskar, a few patterns emerge. Some nuns are illegitimate children or partial orphans, and many have lived away from home during their childhood. They may have learned the self-abnegation, stoicism, and self-restraint that are essential to the celibate life. Yet for every orphaned or illegitimate girl who arrives at the nunnery, there are many other such girls who do not choose the nun's life.

Palmo is a nun who has told me of her unlucky childhood as an illegitimate daughter. Her mother's informal liaisons with two married men caused Palmo much suffering. Since her mother was only a mistress but never a wife, Palmo was sent to live with her father shortly after her mother had weaned her.¹⁷ Palmo's father took her to his new home in Shun, where he had been forced to marry his older brother's widow after the brother's death. Palmo was an outsider twice over in her stepmother's house. Her father was a second husband who could never fill his older brother's shoes, and Palmo was a constant reminder of his past indiscretions with his mistress. Since her father now lived matrilocally in his wife's house, he had no permanent inheritance rights. As the unwanted child of another woman, Palmo was treated worse than a servant girl. She ate last from the leftover scraps which others had neglected.

Palmo lost count of how many times she ran away to her mother's village, only to be discovered by her enraged father, who beat her soundly and took her back to Shun. Her father's abuse may have stemmed from the rage he felt as a powerless and henpecked husband in a house he would never call his own. With no prospects for a properly arranged marriage, Palmo vowed to become a nun and never wind up a spurned mistress like her mother. After having her head shaved and memorizing the required texts, Palmo begged her father to allow her to join the nunnery.¹⁸ Her father and stepmother stalled until Palmo threatened to kill herself if they did not allow her to join the assembly of nuns. Although her father and stepmother relented, they soon forgot their promise. When Palmo remained adamant, her father took her to the nunnery and petitioned the male abbot that she be admitted to the nuns' assembly. Palmo's father and stepmother never built her a cell and still scold her when she is absent from household duties while attending ritual services.

An elderly nun, Deskyid, told me how she grew up, the second of six children in a poor household. Because her parents could not afford to feed all their children, they sent her away to live with two of her father's sisters, who were both married to the same man and childless to boot. Deskyid's aunts treated her terribly, perhaps because they too were vic-

tims of abuse at the hands of a husband who mocked them for their sterility. She recalls "not being allowed to finish a single cup of tea without getting up for nine different chores." She had no shoes, hardly any clothes, never enough to eat, and often slept without a blanket. Her sadistic aunt once cracked her ankle with the fire prongs, cutting her to the bone, and her uncle once beat her unconscious. She still bears the traces of a childhood marred by misery and abuse.

The first time Deskyid tried to run away, she was thrashed until she fainted. Her aunt told Deskyid she would drown her slowly in the river by dipping her in and out. Deskyid was so frightened that she didn't run away again until she was 19 years old. During her second attempt, she was caught by two men on the open desert plain just outside her aunt's village. On her third attempt a year later, she forded the river on horseback with a young man who saved her life, she still says. When she reached her parents' house, she vowed never to return to her aunts' house again. She began to memorize religious texts with her brother, a monk, and begged to have her head shaven. Her family replied that she was too old to learn all the required texts. Yet her diligence impressed an elder nun who took her on as a student, and some years later Deskyid took a seat at the nunnery.

Drolma was sent to take care of her sister's children in a distant village. Until she returned home at age 16, when her wedding negotiations went into full swing, Drolma studied religious texts with her friend Chosnyid at the home of a neighboring doctor (*am chi*). When a learned monk (*dge bshes*) from Ladakh came to give the precious Kālacakra teachings in Zangskar one year, Drolma and Chosnyid went to be initiated. Dressed in their finest silk brocade vests, tie-dyed shawls, and jewelry, the two maidens were oblivious to the stares of young men and older folks who whispered about Drolma's imminent wedding. When the monk finished his sermon, they were so overwhelmed that they decided to take up the religious life as soon as possible. Explaining her motivations for renunciation on the next day, Drolma told the monk, "To be enmeshed in delusion is nothing but endless suffering. When the lama shaves my head, he cut the ties of worldly sorrow." After Drolma returned home with a shorn head, her parents began to cry because she was their youngest daughter. Yet Drolma saw how unhappy two of her sisters were in their marriages with abusive husbands. She told me she prefers the nunnery, where she enjoys quiet evenings reading scripture rather than cooking for ungrateful men.

Chosnyid had far greater difficulties, for she was an oldest daughter who flagrantly disobeyed both her parents and society. When she did not return home after the teachings, her father came looking for her. When he saw her shorn head and her neck bereft of jewelry, he was livid with rage. In a sober voice that would admit no counterarguments, he told her that

he had drunk the asking beer of her engagement over the last five years. Quite simply, it was too late to turn back the wedding. He then tied her onto the horse in front of him like a child and took her home. Although he hastened to conclude the marriage negotiations, his daughter outwitted him and fled back to the nunnery. Again, her father came to fetch and berate her. For a year, Chosnyid and her father were engaged in this tedious game of hide and seek until she could bear it no longer. When the snow melted, she fled over the passes to Ladakh and went to Dharamsala, where she settled in a hermitage near the Dalai Lama's exile residence. She has never returned to Zangskar, although 25 years have passed.

Celibacy and Its Discontents

Celibacy is an essential aspect of monasticism in the Gelugpa order, and it is literally defined as "purity" or "perfection" (*gtsang ma, tshangs ma*) in Tibetan idiom. When I asked nuns how difficult it is to maintain celibacy, they equivocated or laughed. By the time most nuns join the nunnery, they have been celibate for years. While most nuns confessed to having no carnal knowledge from their youth, some lay people differed on this point. Zangskari lay people generally treat nuns with great respect and rarely recite the Tibetan folktales about Aku Tonpa and Drukpa Kunley, filled with bawdy references to sexually frustrated nuns.¹⁹ However, in Tibetan, there are more words for abandoning celibacy (*mi tshang par spyod pa, log g.yem, 'khrig pa, grong pa'i chos*) than for maintaining it.

Many have asked me if there are lesbian relations at the nunnery, but I never saw or even heard evidence of this. Locals may joke about the homosexual activity in monasteries, but they demur when asked about nunneries. How do nuns sublimate their sexuality? Perhaps a degree of physical proximity and the lifelong companionship of nuns substitute for sexual intimacy. Since most nuns are engaged in higher Tantric meditations intended to subdue the passions of the body, they follow well-established methods of sublimation. Even so, a younger nun once quipped, "If you bring us a few husbands the next time you come from America, will they follow obediently or will you put rings through their noses like we do with our calves?" Many of the nuns I interviewed were pleased to be single because they had a chance to pursue their religious studies. Some recited a common proverb:

Rang dbang thams cad dge ba yin
Gzhan dbang thams cad sdug bsngal yin.

(Everything by your own will is blessed happiness,
Everything by another's will is suffering.)

In my observations, lapses from celibacy usually occurred while outside Zangskar on pilgrimage and resulted in immediate disrobing for nuns, although not always for monks. Monks seem to get away with an occasional village tryst, since no witness may be found for the monk to be formally charged with sexual misconduct. I have heard of monks protesting their innocence years after most of the village is sure of their guilt. In contrast, women often bear an undeniable marker of their indiscretions: pregnancy.

Nuns and monks who lose their celibacy are rarely ostracized by villagers, although they are punished by their respective orders.²⁰ Rather than shame, families express a deep sadness over the lost karmic potential, for a defrocked monk or nun can never join a Tibetan order again in this lifetime.²¹ I have seen mothers weep decades after their child's disrobing.

Although there are probably as many defrocked monks as nuns, nuns usually are blamed for the lapse of celibacy. With folktales extolling women's dangerous and insatiable desire, many villagers are not surprised when a young woman takes a "wrong turn" before reaching the nunnery. To be and to become a nun involve subtle but continuous resistance to the domestic demands and physical desires of those who claim a share of a nun's time or her body.²² Nuns may renounce sex but remain vulnerable to unwanted advances. Long after they take vows of celibacy and homelessness, they may be called back into productive and procreative roles.

Like several other nuns whose stories I heard, Yangdrol was seduced back into the mundane realm of village life. After she joined the nunnery, her father became completely bedridden, and so she began to live with her parents in the village. Although Yangdrol had become a nun in hopes of getting on in life and escaping domestic servitude, it seemed her destiny was to grow old and single in her parents' house. Her neighbor, who had been observing her from afar when she went to fetch water each day, eventually propositioned her. When he asked if she wanted to join him on a pilgrimage to attend the Dalai Lama's teachings in Sarnath, she jumped at the chance. Although her mother and her friends warned her about the neighbor's lecherous ways, she had higher dreams. After the pilgrimage, she returned pregnant and has since had two more children by the same man, who bears no responsibility for their children.

Why Are There Relatively Few Nuns?

The decision to give up a child to the nunnery is rarely an issue of having one fewer mouth to feed, although this may be a contributing factor. If motivation for celibacy were purely economic, one would expect to find a

far greater percentage of nuns and monks in Zangskari society. The paucity of nuns suggests that daughters may be too valuable to be "given away" to the nunnery, despite a promise of increased merit. To treat the monastic vocation as an economic solution to the problem of feeding one's children is to reduce social actors to a Parsonian rationality which neglects affective and irrational aspects of human nature and fortune.²³ Many Zangskari parents cry when a daughter leaves home for the nunnery because they are losing a child even while gaining merit. Mothers may bemoan the loss of companionship with daughters who forgo the roles of mother and wife, and siblings may envy the sisters who spend increasing amounts of time studying and practicing the monastic life. Over time, family members must accept that monasticism is premised upon the erasure of social and affective bonds between an individual and the family.

There are not only psychological costs but also material costs in sending a daughter to the nunnery. Even a family that cannot afford to feed its children may find it cheaper to send a daughter to a relative or to keep her home as a spinster than to send her to a nunnery. After joining the nunnery, a nun may ask her family to provide the labor and materials to build her cell. She will also call upon her parents and relatives to sponsor numerous rituals for which she is nominated steward. However, although her parents lose some of her labor when she begins to live at the nunnery, parents do not lose a daughter to the nunnery in the same way that they lose a son to the monastery. The relatively high ratio of nuns noted earlier may be related to the unique source of adult labor power that female monasticism provides in Zangskar. Because they seek their daily bread from home rather than from their monastic institution, nuns remain at the mercy of their relatives who call them to work. Yet renunciation superimposes a web of chores owed to the monastic collective. Many nuns find themselves in a double bind, with duties to their fictive kin at the nunnery as well as to their real kin in the village.

Only rare and intrepid souls dare undertake a journey to lifelong celibacy, which demands considerable perseverance. A nun does not land in her position by accident because her parents cannot afford a wedding. Nuns are not the ugly ducklings who failed to find husbands by middle age; such women remain spinsters and rarely master the classical Tibetan required for the monastic profession. Many Zangskari women agree that the nun's life is the most difficult to attain but the most rewarding in the end. Yet these Zangskari women speak less of making their own life choices and more of responding to a destiny they call karma. Older women see their situation as largely determined by birth order, household wealth, and status. A handful of younger Zangskari women have become

nurses, teachers, and medical orderlies, but such roles were unthinkable a generation ago. Traditionally, the nunnery was the only haven for exceptional women with intellectual or spiritual aspirations.

Many nuns have told me that celibacy is a karmic boon earned in a previous lifetime. Such nuns believe they accumulated enough merit in prior lifetimes to have achieved a rebirth in which they were able to become nuns. Karma provides a theodicy but allows room for agency as well, because every action is also a choice for which the individual must bear ultimate responsibility. Adversity thus forges rather than erodes individual determination. While nuns may recognize the hardships or, as Durkheim (1965: 351) would have us believe, the painful wounding of their maternal instincts, they find compensation in the karmic philosophy which underlies their action. One nun, Lhaskyid, when asked if she missed not having her own children, replied, "We nuns are lucky; we are every child's mother. We do not rejoice or grieve over only our own."

The Impossible Refusal of Exchange

For nuns, celibacy and renunciation are more about resistance than release, more about struggle than liberation. In Zangskar as elsewhere in the Tibetan realm, nuns are domesticated by the social and cultural construction of sexuality that places them in subservience to both families and monks.²⁴ I propose that the subordinate position of nuns rests upon a deeper impossibility of allowing them to be equal to monks. A radical egalitarianism between male and female celibates would threaten the traditional and inviolable hierarchy of male over female. In practice then, Buddhist monasticism maintains sexual difference even at the expense of doctrine. If nuns were free to transcend their sexuality, they would stand radically outside their society's sex-gender system. Because monasticism is bound to the very roots of the society upon which it depends, sexual hierarchy appears inevitable.²⁵

Questioning the assumption of obligatory heterosexuality in Lévi-Strauss's 1969 theory of kinship, Irigaray writes: "Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another; if it were otherwise, we are told, the social order would fall back upon incestuous and exclusively endogamous ties that would paralyze all commerce. . . . *But what if these 'commodities' refused to go to the 'market'?*" (1985: 192, 196; emphasis in original).²⁶

Female celibacy may threaten the principles of kinship and exchange, yet its negation of both sex and gender runs more directly counter to these principles. A nun's refusal of marriage and motherhood opposes the prin-

ciples of alliance and reciprocity. While nuns are permitted to relinquish responsibilities to forgone husbands, in-laws, and children, they cannot deny their roles as daughters and sisters. In the end, nuns cannot avoid the symbolic exchange for merit and the promise of filial service. They may elude the patriarchal economy of desire, but their refusal to be exchanged cannot be fulfilled. Nuns can attempt, but cannot maintain, the refusal to be exchanged. Monks are not casual bystanders but operate the exchange of women between the secular and the sacred realms. As noted, monks retain the sole authority to admit, admonish, advance, or expel nuns within their own order. The monk's order upholds the principle of exchange when they receive one more dutiful servant whose spirituality does not challenge but sustains their fundamental ritual and economic superiority. Although Buddhist doctrine preaches an ultimate escape from the dualism of sex and gender, this message is quite gender specific. Nevertheless, when nuns cease to be simply at the mercy of others' desires, the utopian ideals of Buddhist celibacy may be fulfilled.

Notes

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1. Rubin uses "sex/gender system" to denote "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (1975: 159). Caplan's (1987) introduction to a book on the cultural construction of sexuality addresses the relations among the terms *sex*, *gender*, and *sexuality*.

2. Rubin notes, "Exchange of women" is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin" (1975: 177).

3. See Sponberg's (1992) and Falk's (1980) insightful analyses of the social context and subtle shifts in the attitudes toward women during the early Buddhist era.

4. Falk (1980), Gross (1993), Horner (1930, [1952] 1992), Paul (1985), and Willis (1985) describe the impact and nature of the Eight Chief Rules (in Pali, *Garudhammā*; in Sanskrit, *Gurudharma*).

5. Falk (1980) describes the decline of the nuns' order in Asia, whereas S. Levine (forthcoming) and Tsomo (1988, 1996) discuss campaigns to reinstate full ordination for nuns in South Asia.

6. Aziz (1976), Fürer-Haimendorf (1976), Grimshaw (1983a, b, 1992), and I

(Gutschow 1997, 1998), Havnevik (1990), and Willis (1989) describe the economic situation of Buddhist nuns in the Nepalese and Indian Himalaya.

7. In Tibet before 1959, charismatic nuns may have officiated at tonsure ceremonies, as Havnevik (n.d.) notes.

8. The connections between hair and sexuality are analyzed in Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger 1995; Hershman 1974; Leach 1958; and Obeyesekere 1981. Cixous (1981) explores the connection between decapitation and castration.

9. In the winter, the frozen Zangskari River is the main route in and out of Zangskar, for it is sunk deep within a gorge and protected from the fiercest storms. The 1980 completion of a 250-kilometer dirt road from the neighboring district capital of Kargil has altered local economies of supply and demand in terms of rations, foodstuffs, construction materials, and consumer items.

10. In 1992, I conducted a rough kinship survey which included some 398 marriages, of which 26 (7 percent) were polyandrous and 30 (8 percent) were polygynous. The marital and residence patterns found in Zangskar, Ladakh, and the Tibetan Himalaya are summarized in Crook and Osmaston 1994; Gutschow 1995; N. Levine 1988; and Phylactou 1989. Klein 1985 describes the exchange of women in Tibet.

11. Buddhism was introduced to Zangskar from Kashmir in the early part of the first millennium and from Tibet after the tenth-century Buddhist renaissance in western Tibet.

12. In Tibet before 1959, the ratio of nuns to monks was one to nine, according to Shakabpa (1967). In a 1994 census, Zangskar's nine nunneries housed a total of 116 female celibates (2.3 percent of the female population), and its seven monasteries housed 297 monks (5.6 percent of the male population). The number of monastics appears to be declining: Cunningham (1854) and Ramsay (1890) reported that roughly 15 percent of the Ladakhi population were monastics.

13. Rosaldo (1986) and Steedly (1993) describe how narratives shape lived experiences.

14. Nangsa Obum's tale belongs to a didactic genre known as *'das log* (literally, "returned from beyond"). Such stories tell of individuals who have died and returned to life to teach a religious message. See Epstein 1982; Havnevik, n.d.; and Pommaret 1989.

15. In the Zangskari version of the folktale, Nangsa becomes a nun rather than a Tantric yogini, as in the Tibetan tradition. The Tibetan folktale is translated in Allione 1984 and Waddell 1895.

16. Faure (1998: 20) notes that while beauty may be a blessing for monks, it is a curse for women who seek to become nuns. Consider the Zangskari variant of the famous story of Gelongma Palmo, in which the tenth-century Indian nun prays for leprosy so that she might be disfigured enough to become a nun and avoid the marriage her parents had negotiated. Her story and the popular fasting ritual she has inspired are described in Gutschow 1999; Ortner 1978, 1989; and Shaw 1994.

17. Customarily, an illegitimate child (*nal bu*) is raised by the mother for the first few years and then sent to the father's house. Illegitimate daughters usually become spinsters in their father's home.

18. Joining the nunnery (*ri la 'jug byes*; literally, "to dwell on the cliff") requires the permission of one's parents in theory, although this may be overlooked in practice.

19. Dorje (1975) and Dowman (1998) have translated the tales of these legendary rascals.

20. In the past, defrocked monks were covered with ashes and exiled from the village while seated backward on a donkey. Nowadays, defrocked nuns must pay fines up to 10,000 Rs (\$250), and defrocked monks pay between 5,000 and 10,000 Rs, each to their respective monastic assembly.

21. Tsomo's translation of the nun's disciplinary code (*Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa*) from the Dharmagupta canon states: "Just as a person whose leg is injured is unable to walk; Similarly those who have broken the precepts cannot be reborn as a god or a human" (1996: 25).

22. Ortner (1995) reviews the mushrooming literature on resistance following the 1985 publication of Scott's book on peasant resistance, and Abu-Lughod (1990) warns of the dangers of romanticizing the resistance, which is so eagerly sought after by ethnographers. While Ortner castigates the subaltern school for having dissolved the subject as the nuns attempt to recuperate agency, I try to foreground how nuns have had a central role in founding and shaping their own monastery's social and ritual activities (Gutschow 1997, 1998).

23. Yalman (1962) posits that in Sri Lanka, young boys are sent to the monastery so that poor families may have fewer mouths to feed and may earn merit as well. I have described how nuns are embedded in Zangskar's economy of merit (Gutschow 1997, 1998).

24. For a comparison of how female renouncers are constrained by Hindu cultural and social norms, see Khandelwal 1996, 1997, and this volume; and Phillimore, this volume.

25. Lévi-Strauss (1962) theorized that every society must have at least three types of communication: women, goods and services, and messages. In other words, kinship, economics, and language were simply variations on a universal theme: exchange.

26. Irigaray's (1985) brilliant deconstruction of the exchange of women finds a utopian escape in the lesbian women who refuse to "go to the market." Lévi-Strauss's position is further challenged in Butler 1990; Irigaray 1994, 1987; and Rubin 1975.

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