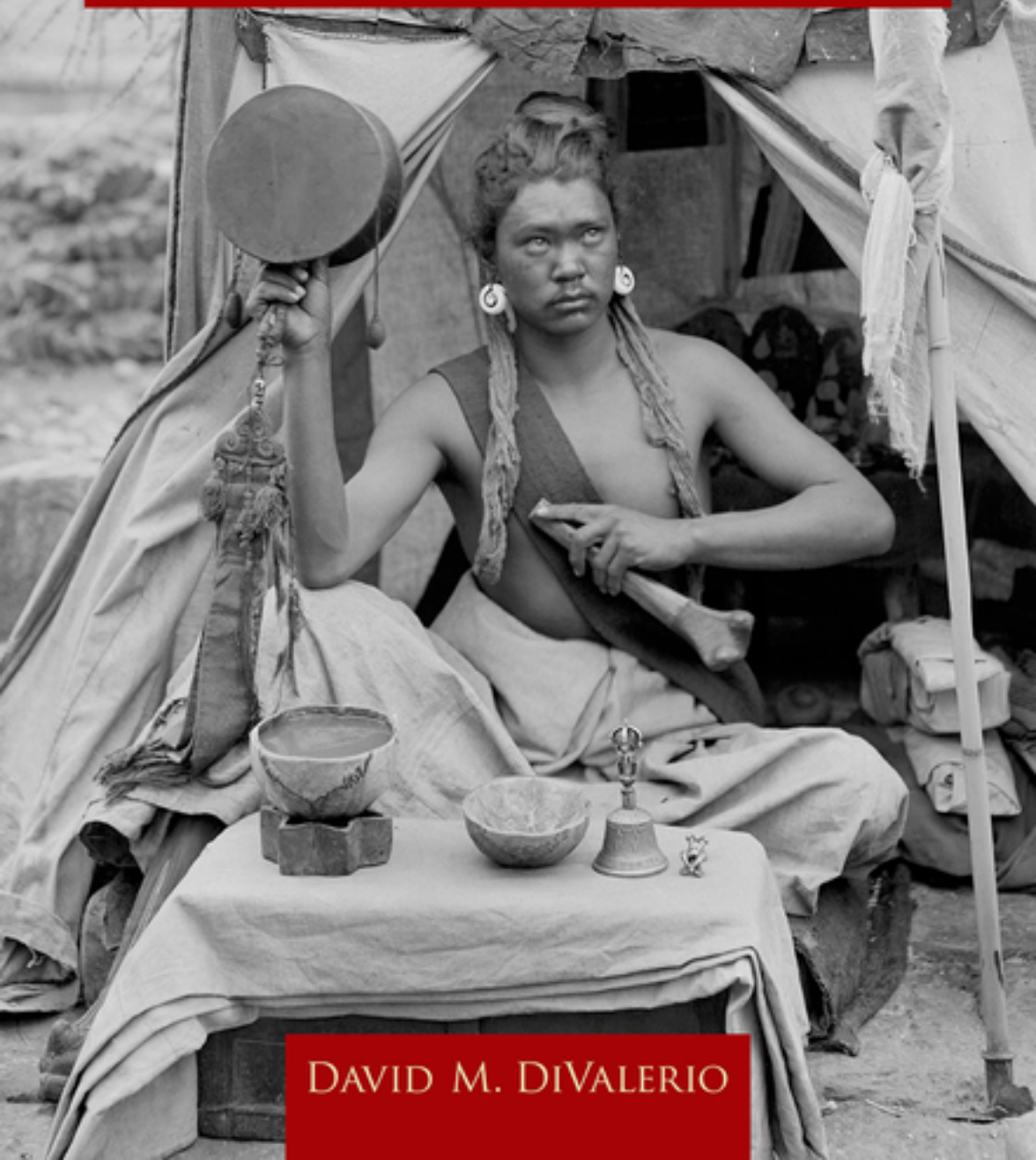


THE HOLY MADMEN OF TIBET



DAVID M. DIVALERIO

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Technical Note

TIBETAN TERMS AND proper nouns appearing in the body of the text are in most cases rendered according to the phonetic transcription scheme developed by the Tibetan and Himalayan Library. Spellings of Tibetan terms are given in parentheses using the orthographic transliteration system first developed by Turrell V. Wylie and revised somewhat in recent years. Transliterated spellings of proper nouns are given in a key at the end of the book. Wylie transliterations are used in the endnotes. Some of the Tibetan texts drawn from in this study use shorthand at times. For the sake of consistency, these abbreviations will be transliterated in their fully expanded forms, so that *rn+yor* is rendered as *rnal 'byor*, *srgyas* as *sangs rgyas*, *bzhud* as *bzhugs*, with numerals spelled out, and so on. Because of the frequency of misspellings encountered in the texts drawn from in this study, they will only occasionally be pointed out using [*sic*].

The Tibetan phoneme rendered in this book as *ü*, as in the Madman of *Ü*, should be pronounced like a German umlauted *u*, such as in the word *für*. Its pronunciation is similar to the vowel sound in the French *rue*. An umlauted *o*, as in Götsang, should be pronounced like a German umlauted *o*, as in the first vowel sound in the name of the poet Goethe, which is similar to the vowel sound in the French *peu*. *É* should be pronounced like the “ay” in the English “day,” so that Gyantsé is pronounced “Gyan-tsay.”

The Sanskrit letter rendered as *ś* should be pronounced “sh,” as in the god Śiva. *ṭ*, *ḍ*, and *ṇ* are pronounced as retroflexes, with the tip of the tongue folded back, touching the top of the mouth. *Ṣ* is a retroflex “sh.” In Sanskrit words, *th* should not be pronounced as it would in the English word “the,” but as a hard “ta.” Thus the name of the buddha of our world age, Siddhartha, is pronounced “Siddharta,” with the final *ta* heavily aspirated, rather than “Siddhar-tha.” *Ca* should be read as “cha,” with

Cakrasaṃvara pronounced “Chakrasamvara,” *caryā* pronounced “charya,” and so on. A line over a vowel indicates a slight lengthening of its sound.

The traditional Tibetan manner of counting a person’s age differs from that which predominates in the European world. Rather than recognizing individual birthdays, everyone would be counted as a year older at the beginning of each new year. What’s more, from the time a baby is born, she is considered “one” year old, because of the time spent in the womb. Thus a baby born late in the year could turn “two” after just a few months. For these reasons, Westerners would in most cases subtract one or two years from the age listed for a Tibetan person. As I draw from a wide range of sources, some using the Tibetan system of calculating ages, some using the European, discrepancies are bound to arise. All ages mentioned in this book are therefore approximate.

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. The European-language sources drawn from in this study use varying conventions in their transcription of Tibetan words and names, the use of diacritical marks, the capitalization of terms like *dharma* and *buddha*, and so on. Except where specified in the endnotes, quoted passages have been left unaltered.

The Holy Madmen of Tibet

Introduction

His naked body was rubbed with ashes from a human corpse, daubed with blood, and smeared with fat. He wore the intestines of someone who had died as a necklace and ornamenting his wrists and ankles. His hair was bound up with a garland he had made from the corpse's fingers and toes, which he had cut off and strung together. He wore an incomplete set of bone ornaments that someone had offered to him. Sometimes he laughed, sometimes he cried. He did all manner of nonsensical things in the marketplace. Although the people of Tsari were very coarse in their ways, he overwhelmed them with his abilities and tamed them with his compassion. And so they became faithful, and since they unanimously praised him as "the Madman of Tsang," in every direction that name became as renowned as the sun and the moon.

GÖTSANG REPA, *The Life of the Madman of Tsang*¹

SANGYÉ GYELTSÉN, COMMONLY known as Tsangnyön Heruka—"the Madman from Tsang, the Heruka"—first became famous for making grotesque displays among crowds of people while wearing an outfit fashioned from human remains. Künga Zangpo, "the Madman from Ü," miraculously survived the many savage beatings he received for making daring affronts to powerful lords. Drukpa Künlé, "the Madman of the Drukpa [Kagyü sect]," is credited with composing verses that overturn all sense of propriety, paying homage, not to the Buddha, but to an old man's impotent member.

The central questions this book seeks to answer are: Why did these men (and a few women) behave in unexpected ways that would get them labeled "mad," with that term carrying generally positive connotations? In what sense were they "mad"? The aim of this book is to convey a well-rounded understanding of the human beings behind these colorful personas, by looking at the details of their lives and literary works in their due historical contexts. Previous studies have addressed aspects of the lives and legacies of a few of these "madmen," in particular Drukpa Künlé and

the Madman of Tsang. This book seeks to offer a more comprehensive account of the “madman” phenomenon, offering new understandings of the more famous “madmen” and bringing many lesser-known ones into the conversation.

Traditional Tibetan worldviews hold that there are a number of factors that could cause mental derangement in an individual. In some cases, madness was thought to result from problems occurring inside an individual’s body, as understood by Tibetan medicine. Traditionally madness was most commonly ascribed to a disorder of the psychophysical winds (*rlung* in Tibetan, *prāṇa* in Sanskrit) that carry thoughts and animate the body. Also believed capable of causing insanity were external harms (*gdon*), such as the influence of witches, demons, celestial bodies, and contact with poisonous or polluted substances. If correctly propitiated, a deity might even drive an enemy mad at one’s behest.²

Distinct from all these possibilities, there have traditionally been individuals in Tibet called “mad,” whose apparent mental unwellness was not seen as resulting from any unfortunate circumstance, but, in the view of some, as symptomatic of high achievement in religious practice. Although they are called “mad,” through a series of inversions, the term comes to bear positive connotations. It is these individuals who are the subject of this book.

Tibetans most often simply call such a person a *nyönpa* (*smyon pa*), “madman,” it being clear from context that they do not mean “mad” in the ordinary, negative sense. In these cases, *nyönpa* can often be taken as abbreviating one of three related terms: *druptop nyönpa*, “mad *siddha*”; *neljor nyönpa*, “mad yogin”; or *lama nyönpa*, “mad lama.”³ *Siddha* and “yogin” are Sanskrit terms; “lama” is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit “guru.” A yogin is one deeply involved with the practice of meditation (*yoga* in Sanskrit). A *siddha* is an individual who has achieved *siddhis* (special qualities and supernatural powers) and perhaps enlightenment through advanced tantric practice. Yogin is a general term referring to a meditator, who may or may not have achieved some of the remarkable abilities of a *siddha*. As the Madman of Tsang himself wrote, “If one is a *siddha*, one is certainly a yogin. If one is a yogin, one is not necessarily a *siddha*.”⁴ In common usage, the term yogin carries some of the same positive connotations as *siddha*. “Lama” refers to a teacher who instructs one in meditation. Given the great respect that a student is expected to have for his guru, it is usually assumed or implied that one’s lama has

achieved an advanced spiritual state. Tibetans use the full terms that translate as “mad *siddha*,” “mad yogin” and “mad lama” infrequently, although some examples of their doing so will be shown in the chapters that follow. Tibetans usually assume the more famous and exalted figures referred to as *nyönpa*, like Drukpa Künlé and the Madman of Tsang, to be “mad *siddhas*.” Lesser-known figures referred to as *nyönpa* would likely be considered “mad yogins” or “mad lamas.” In the vast majority of instances, they are simply called “madmen,” leaving their perceived degree of spiritual attainment unstated.

Those writing in English about these figures have referred to them as crazy *siddhas*, divine madmen, saintly madmen, Mad Yogins, “Crazy Yogins,” and so on. Each of these renderings has advantages and disadvantages. In this book I mainly use the term “holy madman” (sometimes in quotation marks, sometimes not), since this seems the most neutral phrasing. Although the term “mad *siddha*” may be more accurate in some respects, it is overly delimiting, putting these characters into the predetermined category of *siddha*. The term “holy madman,” although less literal, will allow us to come to our own conclusions in our thinking about these figures. In referring to them as “holy madmen,” I do not mean to imply that from my perspective these are in fact holy beings, but rather that they tend to be regarded as such by other Tibetans—although they often had critics who were skeptical of their spiritual worth. This book is an exploration of the nature of their holiness.

This book does not discuss individuals perceived as “mad” in the unfortunate sense, and as such is not a Foucault-style study of the shifting conceptions of madness in Tibetan culture historically. The saintly figures that are the subjects of this book did not constitute significant points of interface between Buddhist and medicalized discourses about madness (perhaps because a highly structured medical discourse was a later development in Tibet). However, the argument developed in this book is influenced by Michel Foucault’s thought in other ways, as discussed below.

Nor does this book address the “mad saint” traditions of other religions and cultures. There are comparable traditions of “crazy” Buddhist saints in South Asia, China, and Japan. There are respected “mad” or “intoxicated” figures in branches of Hinduism and Islam as well. There is a long tradition of saintly “fools for Christ,” and the figure of the “holy fool,” or *yurodivy*, is a mainstay of Russian literature. Each of these traditions is deserving of its own close historical study. Once this has been

accomplished, I hope more meaningful comparisons—rather than flights of fancy inspired by the evocative notion of holy madness—can someday be made.

This book only touches upon the ways the idea of Buddhist “holy madness” has become manifest in the imaginations of Western observers. For example, in *The Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith, the voice of Jack Kerouac, narrates: “I wrote a pretty poem addressed to all the people coming to the party: ‘Are in your eyelids wars, and silk . . . but the saints are gone, all gone, safe to that other.’ I really thought myself a kind of crazy saint.”⁵ Smith often refers to his circle as the “Zen Lunatics,” expressing how they thought of themselves as emulating the ways of past Buddhist sages through their free-spiritedness. For Smith—and Kerouac—holy madness is a natural part of Buddhism. But the goal of the present book is to explore the idea and the workings of “holy madness” in Tibet. The way Buddhist holy madness has been imagined by modern-day Europeans and Americans will be addressed only briefly in chapter 7.⁶

From among the Nyingma, Sakya, Jonang, Geluk, and Kagyü sects of Tibetan Buddhism, it is with the last that most of the individuals discussed in this book are associated. The Kagyü presents itself as continuing a tradition initiated by famous practitioners of tantric yoga in India, with whom they remain connected through an unbroken lineage of guru–disciple relationships. The lineage begins with the Indian master Tilopa, who received instructions directly from the primordial buddha Vajradhara. Tilopa’s foremost disciple was Nāropa, at one time a famous scholar at Nālandā monastery, who abandoned his monkhood to pursue a more tantric lifestyle. The Tibetan Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (1012–1097) traveled to India to train under Nāropa, then brought the teachings back to his homeland, where he imparted them to Milarepa. The poet-saint Milarepa (1028/40/52–1111/23) is discussed throughout this study, as his history is interwoven with that of the “holy madmen” in myriad ways.⁷ Milarepa’s life is one of the best-known stories in the Tibetan world. After having his inheritance stolen by his aunt and uncle, Milarepa’s mother sent him off to learn black magic, in hope of someday exacting revenge. He performed dark rituals that caused the deaths of thirty-five people. After realizing the grave error of his deeds, Milarepa dedicated his life to the practice of Buddhism. He sought out Marpa, who submitted him to a series of grueling trials before accepting him as a disciple and initiating him into tantric practice. Then Milarepa meditated and endured an almost unimaginable

asceticism in caves along what is today the Tibet–Nepal border, subsisting for years on nothing more than nettles.

In time Milarepa achieved highest enlightenment. He would instruct Gampopa (1079–1153), Rechungpa (1083/84–1161), and his many other disciples through songs expressing his spiritual insights. The individual responsible for composing and mass-disseminating the version of Milarepa’s biography that would become most central to the mythology of the Kagyü sect was none other than the Madman of Tsang.

In the generations after Milarepa, a variety of subsects were established within the broader Kagyü. There were the Drukpa, Pakmodrupa, Drikung, Shangpa, Taklung, Karma, and other subsects, each with its own monastic institutions, favored texts, and eminent hierarchs—sometimes in the form of reincarnation lineages, as with the successive Karmapas of the Karma Kagyü, or the Drukchens (also known as the Gyelwang Drukpa) of the Drukpa Kagyü.

This book deals largely with the form of Buddhism referred to as Secret Mantra, Vajrayāna, tantra, or sometimes “esoteric” Buddhism.⁸ First arising as a new movement in the latter half of the first millennium CE, tantra has continued as a subcurrent within certain Buddhist traditions, where it remains contrasted with exoteric or sūtric Buddhism. Tantra has proven notoriously difficult to define. It presents itself as the most potentially powerful form of Buddhism, since it offers the possibility of achieving enlightenment in a single lifetime. (Those who misuse tantra, however, will find themselves in Vajra Hell.) Tantra involves a wide variety of means to the desired transformation. Many of these are ritual actions intended to tap into various sources of power that exist in the universe, most important among them being enlightened deities with whom the meditator enters into a relationship and strives to achieve full self-identification. A practitioner must undergo a formal initiation ritual before beginning these practices, and they must be taught to him by a guru who has already undergone the training himself. A good deal of advanced tantric practice concerns itself with the movements of the psychophysical winds and “drops” (*bindu* in Sanskrit, *thig le* in Tibetan) that circulate within the yogic, “subtle” body, a system of channels running throughout the physical frame. Sexual intercourse is one means by which some practitioners have invigorated the flow of these energies. Intercourse was also the means to produce the sexual fluids that, for some tantric communities, were of central importance in rituals of initiation. The various forms of mental and physical alchemy that constitute the techniques of tantra involve directed

visualization, the repetition of mantras, tactile rituals, the cultivation of specific experiences, and much more.

TIBETANS TODAY TEND to think of the “holy madmen” with great fondness. Many of the Tibetans I spoke with during my research for this book would immediately laugh when asked what they thought about the holy madmen (using the phrase *druptop nyönpa* or *neljor nyönpa*, “mad *siddha*” or “mad yogin”). This was because my question brought to mind tales of Drukpa Künlé or some other eccentric master of whom they had heard. Drukpa Künlé is by far the best known of all Tibetan “holy madmen.” The Madman of Tsang and the Madman of Ü are second and a distant third best known, respectively. A few of the Tibetan lamas, *khenpos*, and *rinpo-chés* I spoke with mentioned these three figures together under the grouping “the Three Madmen” (*smyon pa gsum*).⁹ Some mentioned the famous Tangtong Gyelpo, Milarepa, or an eccentric lama of more recent times.

Tibetans often point out that the term *druptop nyönpa*, “mad *siddha*,” is an oxymoron. *Siddha* means one who is “accomplished [in tantric meditation],” and has thereby achieved supernormal abilities and intelligence. An insane person cannot be a *siddha*, and a *siddha*, by definition, cannot be insane—at least, not in the medical understanding of madness. This mutual exclusivity is part of the conceptual framework for the most predominant way in which Tibetans interpret the odd behavior of holy madmen: the holy madmen are highly realized—enlightened—beings who see everything as it truly is, and act accordingly. Their way of seeing the world is radically different from our deluded, unenlightened one. This puts them at odds with conventional expectations. In this understanding, their being labeled and labeling themselves “mad” is ironic, pointing out the radical disparity between enlightenment and nonenlightenment. This “madness” is at once a marker of the saint’s state of awakening and a reminder of our own lack of it.

Based on this view, Tibetans often say that we ordinary beings cannot comprehend the actions, words, or thoughts of an enlightened “madman” like Drukpa Künlé, for they are “inconceivable” (*bsam gyis mi khyab pa*). Many of the lamas I interviewed would offer an interpretation of the “holy madmen” only after making clear their feeling that anything we might say on the topic is somewhat speculative, since we can never fully comprehend the minds of the enlightened.

Tibetan religious specialists employ a variety of related terms to describe the high level of spiritual realization that the eccentricity of the

“holy madman” is so often taken as indicating. This “madness” is often said to result from the fact that these individuals have abandoned all *namtok* (*rnam rtog*; in Sanskrit, *vikalpa*), meaning conceptual formations or false ideations. *Namtok* are preconceptions, which are, from the Buddhist perspective, *misconceptions*. These conceptual thoughts act like lenses, distorting our vision of the world around us. Only those who are free of such thoughts can experience reality directly. Thus, while unenlightened beings like us try to understand the world through such relative distinctions as big and small, hot and cold, dirty and clean, pleasant and unpleasant, comfort and pain, right and wrong, and so on, a highly realized Buddhist master lives without such discursive categories mediating and distorting his experience of reality. When viewed from this perspective, the Madman of Tsang’s adorning himself in human remains indicates that he has transcended the unenlightened distinction between repulsive and nonrepulsive. In light of the emptiness of all phenomena and worldly distinctions, in truth there is no such thing as virtue or sin, which is why Drukpa Künlé can sleep with other men’s wives with impunity. This state is sometimes explained as the yogin’s having transcended “worldly concerns” (*’jig rten gyi chos*). Sometimes it is said that because the holy madmen have abandoned all *namtok*, they have only “pure vision” (*dag snang*), or see everything as a buddha realm (*zhing khams*). This idea can be formulated in a more general way by stating that the holy madmen behave in their eccentric ways because they have an abundance of “realization” (*rtogs pa*).

Some learned Tibetans with whom I spoke mentioned Saraha, Virūpa, Nāropa, or other Indian *siddhas* in the process of explaining the nature of holy madness. Often these *siddhas* were cited as individuals who appeared strange to the world but secretly harbored great wisdom. On other occasions they were referred to because of their ability to perform miracles, which is taken as an indication of their having achieved *siddhis* or of their realization of the emptiness of all phenomena.

Those adhering to this most widely held understanding of holy madness—that it is a symptom of the individual’s being enlightened and having transcended ordinary worldly delusions—tend to see the irreverent behavior of the “holy madman” as occurring naturally (*rang bzhin gyis*), rather than having some sort of purpose or intention behind it. Alternatively, Tibetans sometimes see the eccentric behavior of these yogins as something engaged in with a specific purpose in mind: either to help unenlightened beings realize the emptiness of phenomena, or as part of the yogin’s own training toward that realization.

The idea that the behavior of the holy madman is by nature pedagogical tends to be articulated in a few different ways. The most common is to say that the madman does and says wild, unexpected things in order to dispel the conceptual thoughts or misconceptions (*rnam rtog*) of those who behold him. Drukpa Künlé is often cited as one who exemplified this. A person taking this view would interpret the Madman of Tsang's dressing in human remains as intended to be a lesson to us unenlightened beings about the falsity of worldly distinctions. The yogin's purposeful crossing of boundaries and calling into question the observer's preconceptions is sometimes said to constitute the "introduction [to the nature of reality]" (*ngo sprod*) that is essential for a trainee's progress toward realization. When viewing the phenomenon from this perspective, it is sometimes said that the "mad" yogin is "simulating the behavior of a madman" (*smyon pa'i spyod pa 'khrab*). Some may see this behavior as exemplifying the Buddhist concept of "skillful means" (*thabs* in Tibetan, *upāya* in Sanskrit).

A yogin can also teach others by performing a miracle. Many Tibetan yogins like our holy madmen are said to have had the ability to leave impressions on boulders with their hands and feet, to tie metal swords into knots with their bare hands, and so on. These supernatural feats are sometimes interpreted as a lesson to the unenlightened, teaching us that because everything is ultimately empty, nothing is impossible. Even that which seems most solid is in truth completely malleable.

The third way in which Tibetan religious specialists tend to explain the behavior of the "holy madman" also involves an element of intentionality, but the yogin's concern is directed inwardly rather than outwardly. This view maintains that the yogin's shocking behavior is meant to foster his own spiritual development, as part of a deliberate process through which he trains himself to overcome conceptual distinctions and realize emptiness. By embracing the impure and the disgusting, by doing the utterly unimaginable—like stripping naked in the middle of a bustling marketplace—one can have the invigorating experience of crossing the invisible boundaries we draw around ourselves and which define the way we live. By purposefully transgressing conventions, one can begin to do away with them, and progress into a more immediate way of experiencing the world—a way that is based on the truth of emptiness, rather than our imperfect habits of mind. When viewed in this way, the yogin's odd behavior can be said to be for the sake of changing his "experiential understanding" (*nyams myong*) or overcoming conceptual formations (*rnam rtog*). It can also be said to advance his training toward

“experiencing [all phenomena] to be of a single taste” (*ro snyoms*): in other words, to experience everything as empty.

All commentators recognize that the “holy madmen” appear to live free from the concerns that define life for ordinary individuals fully participating in society. The question is whether this deviance is a natural by-product of the yogin’s state of realization, or part of his mode of teaching, or something purposefully pursued for the sake of his own edificatory experience. The first possibility is cited most often, and is nearly ubiquitous; the third is least commonly appealed to. The idea that a “holy madman’s” eccentric behavior may be for the sake of his own training is almost never applied to famous saints like the Madman of Tsang or Drukpa Künlé, whom people assume were fully enlightened. The idea is occasionally used to explain the behavior of lesser-known “holy madmen,” who do not have such well-established reputations as highly realized beings.

Many of the lamas I interviewed expressed doubts about whether we can ever be sure which of these interpretations is most accurate in a given situation. As His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa explained, any of these three motivations might lie behind the eccentric behavior of a “mad” yogin at a particular moment, and it is difficult for us to be sure which applies. Is the yogin in question fully enlightened or still working toward that goal? Is his activity for his own training or for the purpose of instructing others? With figures like Drukpa Künlé and the Madman of Tsang, it is generally agreed that they have long since completed their spiritual training. But for yogins of lesser renown and stature, who can say for certain what they have achieved?

When asked pointedly whether or not there are any mad *siddhas* (*grub thob smyon pa*) living in the world today, Tibetan religious specialists offer a wide range of responses. One lama stated that “holy madmen” are difficult to find, but as long as there is good meditative practice in the world, they will exist somewhere. One lama said that they surely do exist, but that they are very rare; they were easier to find in old Tibet. Another lama said that these days holy madmen are more likely to exist in Tibet than in other places, because of the political situation there, but would not elaborate on why. Differences of opinion and interpretation abound.

There is also ambivalence with respect to the question of “real” and “fake” crazy yogins. Some lamas say it would be impossible to tell whether or not an eccentric individual was a holy madman, for there are no limitations on how a holy madman might act or disguise himself. The behavior of a real holy madman may appear the same as that of a pretender; the only

thing differentiating them would be their respective states of mind. Other Tibetan religious specialists see a more appreciable distinction, maintaining that if you were to put a “real” holy madman alongside a “fake” one, it would become obvious which was which. This can also be framed as a question of faith. As one lama told me, those who are open to being taught will learn a valuable lesson from the holy madman, while those who are not will walk away from the encounter unchanged. It is not the motivations of the yogin that matter so much as the attitude with which one beholds him. The most famous holy madmen, with the weight of tradition behind them, tend to be accepted as “real” holy madmen. There is less certainty regarding lesser-known and more recent figures sometimes said to be holy madmen, although an attitude of respect toward them generally prevails.

These few pages have summarized some of the main modes of thinking about “holy madmen” that tend to be expressed by Tibetan religious specialists and laymen today. Some of the other ways Tibetans have thought about the “holy madmen” will be examined in the course of this book. At any given moment, past or present, one can find evidence of a wide range of attitudes and opinions about Tibet’s “holy madmen,” moved at times by great faith or skepticism, and based upon differing understandings of individuals, of history, and of the nature of religion. There is no single traditional Tibetan view. What’s more, many of the lines of thinking I apply toward understanding “holy madmen” in the course of this book have long been exercised by Tibetans, in various times and places—including by some of the “holy madmen” themselves. Any perceived chasm between “my” and “their” ways of thinking about the “holy madmen” is an illusion.

THIS BOOK IS in large part a study of how certain people came to be perceived as holy. It takes it for granted that, for the sake of academic research, we should view all things and people as existing on the same ontological plane, which is material in nature. However, in the course of human history certain entities have been conceptually set aside, and have thereby become imbued with a sense of holiness—at least in the eyes of some observers.

I do not contend that ghosts, demons, and gods truly exist, or that the miracles described in these saints’ biographies—flying, disappearing, walking through solid walls—actually occurred. And although history has witnessed a broad spectrum of human capabilities and intelligence, I take there to be no specific moment in a person’s development when he or she gains supernatural abilities or omniscience. In the world described in the

pages that follow, there is no point at which an individual truly achieves a different ontological state as a *siddha* or a *buddha*. For the purposes of scholarly research, I assume that all of these designations are tropes and categories produced out of human discourse. It is not the case that holiness or enlightenment or gods or demons or miracles exist, independently and objectively, and that there is a Tibetan discourse describing them. Rather, beliefs in things such as these have been generated out human discourse.

Take, for example, the very notion of enlightenment. At any given moment in Buddhist history there have existed competing understandings of what constitutes liberating knowledge. This undermines the idea that enlightenment might exist as objectively real, independent of the discourses that describe it. Therefore, it must be said that those discourses do not *describe* enlightenment, but that they have in fact created the very idea of it.

Rather than accepting the view that through extraordinary religious achievement an individual can attain a different ontological state or the ability to perform miracles, we should examine the histories, needs, and intentions of the people who have made such claims, which brings us back into the domain of language and culture, of “truth” and power. The argument about Tibet’s “holy madmen” that unfolds in the course of this book is in large part about competing models of truth, and the relations of power with which they are associated, and is thus inspired by Foucault’s work in a general way.

Instead of trying to somehow plumb the inner, experiential dimension of being a “holy madman,” this book explores its external dimensions—the effects or side effects of taking on the persona of a “holy madman,” for historically and socially embedded individuals. Here sainthood is viewed as something that arises out of the dynamic between a saintly figure and his public, both during his lifetime and after. This allows us to explore the texture and workings of the social medium in which holiness exists. This book thus takes as a starting point arguments advanced by Aviad Kleinberg in *Prophets in Their Own Country* and by Robert Campany in *Making Transcendents*.¹⁰ In the chapters that follow, I draw from both of these works in ways too innumerable to point out. Like Kleinberg and Campany, my aim is to understand these “holy madmen” as real people, as ordinary humans. As commonsensical as this approach may seem to some readers, it has not always been employed by scholars of religion. Viewing the “holy madmen” as creative, self-aware, meaning-producing *people* enables us to better appreciate their unique and brilliant contributions to

the world. A view that sees the holy madmen as enlightened *siddhas*—and their odd behavior as a natural by-product of that state—actually divests them of genuine agency.

Readers should take my use of the term “saint” with a grain of salt, understanding this to mean “saintly figure,” rather than something more reified or traditionally defined. There are differences in the mythologies, ideologies, and relationships that surround saintly figures of the world’s various religions (and at different historical moments within any particular religion). Nevertheless, across cultures and time there are meaningful similarities to be identified in the processes through which individuals come to be perceived by others as having achieved an exalted religious state, and subsequently become the subject of devotion or worship. For this reason, a general phenomenon of “sainthood,” unmoored from the specificities of any particular religion, is a worthy term and object of study.

One observation that catalyzes the research presented in this book is that Tibetan “holy madmen,” like the vast majority of Buddhist renunciants, still live within the matrix of worldly activity. In the course of Buddhist history, there have undoubtedly been rare individuals who have pursued the hermetic ideal to its fullest, truly turning their backs on the world, undoing all social ties, and living entirely off the grid. But we know nothing of such figures, since they by definition would not have been involved with the production of literature or have associated with communities or institutions that would have transmitted their legacies to us. By contrast, we know of the holy madmen who are the subjects of this book only because they were social and cultural actors, with audiences who knew of them and saw preserving their stories as worthwhile.

There is also the inescapable fact of embodiment. The basic biological need to eat keeps the hermit in a relationship of exchange with the mundane world. Moreover, by separating himself from human society (spatially, symbolically, rhetorically) an ascetic can achieve a degree of sanctity. Paradoxically, this sanctity often serves to draw interested parties—faithful laypeople, potential patrons, disciples—to the ascetic, inasmuch as they hope to receive his blessings or his favor. Announcing one’s rejection of society is an act that can carry profound consequences in the social sphere.

As a traditional Tibetan adage observes, “When practitioners meditate in mountains, food will roll uphill.”¹¹ Those whose livelihoods come from religious practice—monks, ascetics, ritualists, and so on—are as aware as anyone of the ever-unresolved tension between renunciation and engagement with the world. As we shall see throughout this book, one of the most

common criticisms a religious individual or group might level against a competitor is to say that they are worldly-minded, only masquerading as being devoted to higher renunciatory ideals. This exposes a concern that lurks perennially beneath the surface of the discourse. Many of these “holy madmen” were particularly attuned to the dynamics of exchange that inevitably surrounded them. Taking on a new identity as a “holy madman” in many cases had clear social, institutional, political, and economic ramifications. As skilled cultural and social actors, these individuals were aware—consciously or unconsciously—of what kinds of ramifications their decisions were likely to have. This is not to say that such decisions are always fully calculated or strategic, but it is having this basic awareness of how others within their society are likely to respond to their words and actions that defines them as participants in their culture (as it does us in our own).

The ascetics discussed in this book (as with the vast majority of all Buddhist ascetics, despite what rhetoric they may espouse) had various social ties and were engaged in worldly activities throughout their lives. The Madman of Tsang, for example, performed his antinomian behavior for all to see and hear of. He also mass-produced Tibetan-language literature using the most advanced printing technology available during his time. And although he underwent periods of meditative retreat, during which he greatly reduced his engagement with the affairs of the outside world, those connections were never severed absolutely, and these periods of withdrawal were temporary, having the effect of profoundly altering his standing in society once he emerged from them. This was not a man striving for hermetic anonymity. This study focusing on individual yogins is necessarily a study of yogic communities, and the ways individuals relate to them.

Finally, this book is in large part about narratives, both oral and textual. It considers how narratives are formulated in discrete acts of meaning making, and the way ideals are commodified through those narratives. This study also considers how those narratives circulate, affect people, and change over time, which enables new perspectives on historical questions.

The first five chapters are dedicated to developing a comprehensive understanding of two figures: the Madman from Tsang (1452–1507) and the Madman from Ü (1458–1532). Chapter 1 offers a brief discussion of the nature of the religious biographies that are the main sources used in this study, followed by abridgments of the biographies of these two “holy madmen.” This serves to establish the basic trajectories of their lives and to introduce readers to the religious culture in which they operated.

Chapter 2 examines the shocking, antinomian lifestyles assumed by the Madmen of Ü and Tsang as being a form of religious practice. Despite the apparent strangeness of their behavior, it in fact resulted from their enacting a very literal reading of certain passages of tantric Buddhist texts that tended to be taken figuratively in Tibet.

Chapter 3 considers the Madmen of Ü and Tsang as public figures. The fact that they had both supporters and impassioned critics suggests that any degree of saintliness they achieved existed in the eyes of their beholders. The two acted in ways that led others to compare them to the enlightened *siddhas* of India, which was cause for controversy. By describing broader patterns in their interpersonal encounters, this chapter argues that the lifestyles assumed by the Madmen of Ü and Tsang were meant to position them as diametrically opposed to representatives of scholastic, monastic Buddhism, which is significant to the question of what may have motivated them to take on their distinctive personas.

A brief intermezzo explores the relationship that seems to have played out between the Madmen of Ü and Tsang, and how that relationship is portrayed in their respective biographies.

Chapter 4 considers how the “madness” of the Madmen of Ü and Tsang may have been related to the broader religious and sociopolitical events of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Tibet, which was a period of civil war and tense sectarian rivalry. This chapter suggests that the Madmen of Ü and Tsang’s decisions to enact such a literal reading of the tantras was part of an attempt to reimagine and redefine the Kagyü sect in response to its waning fortunes and influence. This decline was caused mainly by the dramatic rise of the Geluk sect and the reformed style of Buddhism it espoused. The specifics of the unique political and religious situation of the moment are what enabled the Madmen of Ü and Tsang to achieve such significance and influence during their lifetimes.

Chapter 5 describes the various cultural projects taken up by the Madmen of Ü and Tsang later in their lives, which were important means through which they worked to redefine and invigorate the Kagyü. These projects include the Madman of Ü’s monastery-founding activities, and the Madman of Tsang’s writing and printing the *Life* and *Songs* of Milarepa, his setting to paper the teachings of the Aural Transmission, and his renovating Nepal’s Swayambhūnāth stūpa in 1504. This chapter considers the ways these projects served to continue the agendas the madmen earlier pursued through personal identity formation.

The final two chapters consider the lives and legacies of other “holy madmen” in Tibet. Chapter 6 attempts to separate the historical Drukpa

Künlé, Madman of the Drukpa (born in 1455), from more recent and popular representations of him. A close reading of Drukpa Künlé's four-volume *Miscellaneous Writings* suggests an individual very different from the one that lives on in popular memory. Attendant to the transformation from the historical Drukpa Künlé to the one so well known today was a dramatic change in the nature of his "madness." This chapter also explores the relationships Drukpa Künlé had with the Madmen of Ü and Tsang, and his views on the politics of his day.

Chapter 7 offers a brief survey of the "holy madman" phenomenon throughout Tibetan history, as well as the broader rhetoric of religious madness to which it is related. We will see that individual holy madmen were influenced by what they knew of other holy madmen who preceded them, and also that representations of holy madmen were often recycled. This shows that the holy madmen existed within a literate and self-aware tradition. The final section considers how some of the ideas about holy madness that currently predominate among European and American commentators were produced, and how those ideas have shaped understandings of the history of the phenomenon.

Much of this book focuses on Tibet in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which was a society at once as admirable and as problematic as any that has ever existed. Religion dominated, as almost every aspect of Tibet's culture—conceptions of the self and the world expressed through literature and art, the basic categories through which people thought and communicated—was filtered through Buddhist discourse. Despite its pervasiveness, the influence of Buddhism was by no means totalizing, for people experienced other ways of viewing the world, held competing values, and at times behaved in ways that opposed Buddhist ideals. This Tibet was a place of faith and good works, but also of self-interest and treachery. Civil war carved a path of destruction across the regions of Ü and Tsang (figure 0.1, figure 0.2). Sectarian conflict was commonplace. Wrongdoing like murder was rarely punished, with clerics on occasion both the targets and perpetrators of this kind of violence. There was no separation of church and state, and the shifting relationships between religious hierarchs and members of the nobility drove the politics of the day. Meanwhile, the majority of the population worked in subsistence agriculture, subject to the nobles or monasteries whose land they farmed, in some cases as serfs. For those who had the freedom to do so, entering the monk- or nunhood was one of the few alternatives to this lot. Anyone invoking the traditional Buddhist historiographic trope of our living in a degenerate age (*snyigs dus*; similar to the Indian notion of a Kali Yuga),

when Buddhism and the human condition have devolved grossly, would have had much to point to in support of that view.

In the individuals described in this book we witness the full range of human emotions, motivations and foibles: faith and doubt, affection and disdain, selfishness and selflessness, pride, compassion, jealousy, allegiance, and opportunism—anything that one can imagine. We see examples of remarkable creativity coming up against deeply entrenched structures of thought, as well as personal striving that is at times in the service of, at times in tension with, the concerns of various collectives. These people are as complicated as we would ever imagine our own selves to be.

The years I have spent studying Tibet's "holy madmen" have been filled with many kinds of conversation. I have spoken with lamas and *khenpos* of the various sects, and given lectures on my findings to Tibetan scholars. I have had countless conversations with Tibetan laypeople, mostly in India, in which they asked me, "What is it that you're doing here?" Some thought holy madmen an odd subject to spend one's time studying, there being a strong sentiment among Tibetans that there is little sense to be made of the holy madmen: they are enlightened masters, so what hope do we have of understanding their behavior? Conversations about my research with other American and European scholars have often given way to debates about our most basic understandings of what religions are. It is my hope that the publication of this book will lead to further meaningful conversations—about these "holy madmen" and the history of Tibet, but also about the nature of religion and the methodologies and assumptions we employ when studying it.

In framing my arguments in ways that challenge some readers' preconceptions, I hope to do justice to the legacy of the holy madmen, for as a friendly Tibetan layman said to me one morning as we switch-backed down the steep hill to the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, the holy madmen have always been important, because "if there were no madmen, there would be no new [ways of thinking]" (*smyon pa med na gsar pa yod ma red*). I hope in the pages that follow to portray these "holy madmen" as forward-thinking individuals, who had a clear understanding of the workings of the world around them, and who, through their words and actions, challenged others' assumptions about how things ought to be.