



Book review:

**Stephanie Guyer-Stevens and Françoise Pommaret,
*Divine Messengers:
the untold story of Bhutan's female shamans*
(Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2021)
175 pp. \$24.95 USD**

reviewed by ANGELA SUMEGI

Written by Kunzang Choden, a prominent Bhutanese author, the forward to this book sets the tone for what is to follow: a celebration of the Bhutanese women who serve their communities as diviners, healers, and spiritual guides. The book is written primarily by Stephanie Guyer-Stevens, an award-winning journalist, radio producer, and community activist in collaboration with Françoise Pommaret, an ethno-historian and Tibetologist with a longstanding interest in the religious phenomenon known in Bhutan as *delom* (Tibetan *delok*). Pommaret, who has lived and worked in Bhutan since 1981, translated and edited the testimony of the women they interviewed as well as serving as a guide for Guyer-Stevens in making sense of her journey into the Buddhist world of the *delom*.



The word *delom*, predominantly associated with women, means one who has 'returned from the dead.' This is both an historical tradition as well as one that continues into the present day. Guyer-Stevens explains that, traditionally, a *delom* is understood to have died for some length of time during which her consciousness travels to the various Buddhist worlds of rebirth, most often the hell realms but sometimes also the paradises of the Buddhas. On her travels, she meets with the Lord of Death or other tutelary deities who instruct her in the workings of karma and its relation to Buddhist cosmology, which is to say, a preponderance of good deeds leads upward to rebirth in heavenly worlds and a preponderance of bad deeds downward to the hell worlds. During this period, which can be for many days, her body lies inert as if dead. Usually, Tibetan Buddhists leave the body for some time before cremation, or instructions not to disturb the body have been left, but at least one interviewee expressed fear that her body would be cremated while her consciousness was travelling. The *delom* eventually returns to her body, charged with relaying what she has seen and heard regarding the afterlife results of virtue and non-virtue.

Historical *delom* biographies, such as the one featured in the book, give gruesome and graphic accounts of the tortures of the eighteen hell worlds waiting for those who do terrible deeds. In sharing her personal experience, the *delom* reinforces basic Buddhist doctrine, but beyond that, the *delom's* experience sets her apart as an intermediary between the ordinary life of the people in her community and the cosmological worlds of rebirth in which they believe. She is regarded as having directly encountered the deities that most only see depicted on the monastery walls. She becomes someone, therefore, with special divinatory powers based on her intimate knowledge of, and communication with, the deities worshipped by the community.

Guyer-Stevens' personal reflections on her travels combined with atmospheric descriptions of Bhutanese culture, landscape, and people make for an easy and engaging read. She is clear that the book is not to be regarded in any way as an academic endeavour, but as testimony to the role and value of the work being done by the women they interview. The first third of the book establishes the religious context of the interviews in terms of Buddhist concepts such as karma, the use of the word *shaman*, and the meaning of *delom*, as well as various other related titles for women who offer divination services – *khandrom*, *rizam*, *nyendrom*. This section is written in broad strokes that can only offer a superficial overview of the topics. Nevertheless, it provides an important context for the interviews to come, and the bibliography offers good sources for further exploration.

In 2011 the authors interviewed the first of five women of west Bhutan; seven years later, they interviewed the remaining four and revisited the original interviewee. The interviews, some more detailed than others, reveal how the women came to be known in the way they are, the occasional rivalry that ensues regarding who is or is not an authentic medium, as well as folk stories associated with the cultural heroes and local deities. The women recount familiar

shamanic tropes of sickness or madness culminating in the realization and, in most cases, their self-proclamation of special status. In some instances, this status is authenticated by Buddhist authorities, but more often, the medium is validated by the people of her community who accept her as having divinatory powers and consult her on their problems.

The book contains translated excerpts from the biography of Sangay Choezom, an early eighteenth-century *delom* from eastern Bhutan. As the interviews unfold, however, it becomes apparent that the textual historical understanding of *delom* has, in the modern world, given way to a much broader range of interpretations and practices. Increasingly, the more renowned also gain international clients brought by tourist guides. Having experienced, through the efforts of one such local guide, the possession trance of a Bhutanese *pawo* (male medium) brought on through hair-raising drumming and dancing, I was a bit disappointed not to find an eye-witness account of a female possession ritual.

The present-day spirit mediums mentioned in the book operate under various titles, but all function as channels for the powers of other worldly beings, either through divination, healing, mind-reading, or possession. In profiling the women who provide such services for their communities, the authors fulfill their intent to honour and to shed light on those who, for the most part, function on the fringes of Buddhist hierarchy, yet who fulfill an important need in ordinary Bhutanese life.

While the work may not satisfy those looking for more in-depth ethnography or analysis, it provides a solid starting point for the study of ongoing interactions between Buddhist and shamanistic beliefs and practices in Bhutan and other Himalayan cultures. For those with a general interest in the subject, it offers a tantalizing glimpse into the lives of women who preserve and maintain a vibrant part of Bhutanese spiritual life.

About the Author

Angela Sumegi is Adjunct Professor of Religion at Carleton University, the author of *Dreamworlds of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), and co-editor of *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025).