

Review in *Nova Religio*

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Sex and Violence in Tibetan Buddhism: The Rise and Fall of Sogyal Rinpoche.

By Mary Finnigan and Rob Hogendoorn.

Jorvik Press, 2019. 204 pages. \$19.95 paper.

Sogyal Rinpoche, the author of the bestseller *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (2012), has been much in the news over the last year, first as the villain in a cascading torrent of abuse charges and then for dying. The present book, published just before his death, puts the final nails in his coffin.

The lurid title of this book is misleading, for the primary focus of the text is on sex and violence in the unsavory career of the late Sogyal Lakar (1947–2019) not Tibetan Buddhism as a whole. While a few pages are devoted to generalized allegations about the sex lives of Tibetan Buddhist lamas (gurus) and their institutional conspiracy of silence, most of the sex and violence alluded to in the title is attributable to Sogyal alone.

The two authors bring different perspectives, each taking primary responsibility for designated sections of the text. Mary Finnigan is a journalistic crusader at heart, having spent decades writing and speaking out about the spiritual incompetence and morally reprehensible exploitation Sogyal inflicted on his naïve students. She is a practicing Tibetan Buddhist who shows due respect for lamas she considers legitimate, but views Sogyal as an imposter and “a nasty piece of work” (4). Rob Hogendoorn is a legal scholar and researcher who appears to have done most of the investigation into Sogyal’s murky background.

Sogyal Rinpoche—Rinpoche is an honorific that means “precious jewel”—came to London in the late 1960s, a fortuitous time for a charming young man in maroon robes to set up shop. Finnigan had her doubts early on when she discovered that Sogyal appeared to be making it up as he went along, revealing only a beginner’s understanding of the Buddhist path. Western scholars who studied literary Tibetan Buddhist texts reported that Sogyal’s “translations” were highly inaccurate, at best.

Hogendoorn’s inquiry into Sogyal’s past found glaring discrepancies in his numerous autobiographical claims. A timeline reconstructing Sogyal’s childhood in Tibet and India reveals that he had at most a two-year window during which he might have received a rudimentary monastic education. Unlike Chogyam Trungpa and other recognized reincarnations (tulkus), Sogyal was not sent to the Young Lama’s School in India, but instead received primary education at an English language school noted for training future businessmen. It appears that Sogyal was not treated as a tulku as a child, making his later titles and teaching credentials suspect.

Readers learn that Sogyal was distinguished, even at the beginning of his teaching career, by his voracious sexual appetite and taste for luxuries. By recruiting a devoted inner circle of protective, loyal, and often abused subordinates, he hid his increasingly outrageous behavior for decades, while building an expansive and highly lucrative empire. He could be charming when it suited him (see his terrific performance in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*), skillfully exploiting westerners' orientalist fantasies of magical, omniscient Tibetan masters; but in private he appears to have been a terrible human being. The authors go far beyond the necessary to illustrate the awful, narcissistic, manipulative, and increasingly sadistic behaviors Sogyal displayed. As the accounts pile up ad nauseam, readers may feel that the authors are beating a dead lama.

Unfortunately, in their indignation, Finnigan and Hogendoorn lose their journalistic composure. The book often reads more like an internet rant than a reasoned exposition. More is not better; interlarding devastating first-hand reports of physical and sexual abuse with unconfirmed rumors is not an effective strategy. For example, the authors suggest that Andrew Harvey, a noted literary guru-hopper, was the actual author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. This may well be true, but the topic is dropped as soon as it is raised. Given the serious nature of Sogyal's criminal behaviors, this charge seems almost frivolous. Calling Sogyal's Rigpa organization a "cult," as if that explains something, is not helpful either.

The most serious issue raised by the authors is that the Tibetan Buddhist establishment in the West, the "maroon mafia" as the authors call it, not only fails to rein in renegade teachers, but enforces a code of silence upon fellow monks and their lowly acolytes. In this, of course, the Tibetan ecclesiastical establishment shows itself to be no better, nor worse, than most western religious bureaucracies. As the authors observe, the samaya vows taken by serious students of Tibetan Buddhism require unswerving loyalty to their lamas for this and all future lifetimes, with horrific punishments awaiting those who dare to question or speak out. The functional similarity between samaya vows and the billion-year contracts of Scientology is striking—both make dissent perilous, but once the dam breaks all sorts of horror stories flood forth.

Scholars of new religious movements and Buddhism in the West will find few surprising insights in this cautionary tale. Its main audiences are presumably western Buddhists—who often need to exercise more discernment when picking teachers—and journalists, who need to look beneath the exotic surface when reporting on religious groups they barely understand.