

ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་བྲན་པ།
(Remembering My Mother's Handmade Tsampa)

སློན་སྒྲུང་མངའ་ས། Min-Nangzey

(Translated from Tibetan by Annabella Pitkin)

Abstract: Contemporary Tibetan poet and essayist Min-Nangzey shows how women's lineages of work and oral tradition are vital aspects of the transmission and flourishing of Tibetan culture. She highlights the value of women's caregiving work as mothers and preparers of the Tibetan staple food, through vignettes of her own mother preparing tsampa (roasted barley flour).

Keywords: tsampa, lineage, oral tradition, women's activity, cultural transmission

Translator's Introduction

Memories abide in the physical textures of our bodies and the bodies of those we love, in a smudge of barley flour or in the touch of many fingers on the sides of an old wooden storage box. Memories activate with particular force through the smells and tastes of the food of childhood. The contemporary Tibetan poet and essayist Min-Nangzey invites the reader into an embodied world of sensory memory in the spare, resonant piece translated here. Whether tracing

ancestral ties through the remembered aroma of her mother's cooking or mapping the ache of homesickness via the hunger felt in a dream, throughout this piece Min-Nangzey takes tsampa (roasted barley flour) as a touchstone for thinking about cultural continuity through the intimate lens of food and home. Tsampa, that most familiar, quotidian, staple food of the Tibetan world, here forms the vital substance of a generational and personal lineage of memory and transmission.⁶

Min-Nangzey is part of a generation of Tibetan writers and artists who center the lived realities of nomadic life as touchstones of cultural survival. Such familiar daily objects as the black yak hair tent, the grassland itself, or the staple food of tsampa take on a heightened significance under contemporary circumstances, freighted with the pain of imminent loss. Under increasingly intense political and economic pressures, ordinary Tibetan lifeways—the smell of cooking, a turn of phrase, the peg that holds a tent to the ground—resonate with poignant urgency.⁷

Through a series of vignettes of her own mother preparing tsampa during her childhood on the grasslands of Golok in eastern Tibet, Min-Nangzey conveys a sense of women's caregiving work as mothers and as preparers of the Tibetan staple food. These two roles of mothering and preparing food emerge here as inextricably linked with the transmission of culture. Min-Nangzey's mother nurtures her children's physical health with tsampa, while at the same time

⁶See Shakya 1993; also Lama Jabb 2015.

⁷Lama Jabb 2015; Robin 2014; Ju Kalsang 2006.

she nourishes their relationship to their Tibetan identity. Repeatedly throughout the piece, Min-Nangzey asserts tsampa's special role at the core of Tibetan cultural continuity, in particular when it is a mother's "handmade tsampa." In her words, "tsampa made by a mother's hands...is the special food of the Tibetan people, the best food. Its nourishment is indispensable, essential to Tibetan livelihood."

At a deeper level, as the guardian and provider of the family's tsampa, Min-Nangzey's mother connects her children with an inherited Tibetan past that stretches back to that "primordial ancestor" who has made tsampa-eating possible for Tibetan people in the present day. This link to the resources of the generative past is in fact part of what gives tsampa its special value: "Through toil and sweat, a kind primordial ancestor brought into being this custom of eating tsampa. That makes tsampa our inheritance—the foundation of our life force as one people, and the extraordinary foodway of our shared lineage."

Notably, the "shared lineage" of transmission that Min-Nangzey honors here is a specifically female one, a chain of mothers and daughters who are keepers of the family tsampa box, and with it the family's history, as well as its sustenance. The tsampa box emerges as both the literal repository of nourishment and maternal care, and as the container of irreplaceable oral tradition. By explicitly asserting the value of her mother's tsampa preparation and care work in the home, and more broadly, by asserting the value of women's practices of memory and storytelling, Min-Nangzey focuses on an aspect of women's activity that is often taken for granted or devalued, so familiar as to be invisible. Countering that invisibility, Min-Nangzey here frames women's tsampa-making as part of a lineage that is both

ancient and essential to Tibetan cultural flourishing, profoundly worthy of respect. Indeed, Min-Nangzey makes a powerful intervention simply in her use of the term “lineage” (འཁྱུར།) for women’s knowledge and stories, and for the literal, physical transmission of tsampa and the wooden box that holds it.

“Lineage” is a term usually reserved for religious contexts or for transmissions of scholarly, high-status learning and interpretation, such as literary theory or medicine. Lineage can also refer to the reincarnation sequences of important religious teachers, or the dynastic generations of aristocrats and kings. But here, Min-Nangzey uses the term to assert a lineage of women’s knowledge and action, manifest in ordinary household work and caregiving. In this sense, this women’s lineage is inseparable from the physical and biological web of family life, which so much of Tibetan Buddhist literature, by contrast, describes as at best an entanglement, and sometimes as a poisonous snare.

Through small details, Min-Nangzey roots this women’s tsampa-making lineage in the lived reality of women’s hands, bodies, implements, stories, and relationships. Her mother’s remembered words are telling: “This tsampa box, which has become grey with sticky dirt, is a precious treasure, a legacy from our kind ancestors.” Here, the sticky grey dirt itself hints at the physical traces of generations past, of the mothers, daughters and grandmothers who have all touched and used this wooden “treasure.” The sticky dirt on the box speaks of effort, of work, of the difficult struggles of daily life, and the ordinary impermanence of bodies and things. In a similar way, the constant refrain of “hands” and “my mother’s hands” running through

every section of this piece returns the reader over and over again to the physicality and intimacy of cooking and nurturing, and the tactility of kneading and eating tsampa in particular.

This bodily intimacy heightens the poignancy of Min-Nangzey's subsequent separation from her mother and from her mother's tsampa, in section 4. Although she notes that she loves her mother's tsampa best out of all her siblings, and boldly asserts that "tsampa is a supreme food, from which I will never be parted in my whole life," section 4 sees the narrator on a "lonely path," far from home. In the final dream sequence with which the piece concludes, Min-Nangzey poignantly reflects on her own sense of longing for her mother, and for her family on the grasslands. Expressed as a hunger for the food of her mother's hands, Min-Nangzey's dream evokes the pain of separation from home as an unsatisfied desire for tsampa. As a writer now living in diaspora, Min-Nangzey's grieving metonymy of separation from both her mother and her mother's handmade tsampa expresses her own longing for home, and by extension, the longing of so many others.

The final moments of the dream sequence also hint that the making and partaking of tsampa is linked with ways of being together with others in ongoing forms of relationship. Although never said directly, the closing lines open the possibility that the inheritance of tsampa Min-Nangzey's mother has given to her children is also an inheritance of mutual support and care. Consider the piece's final lines: "But all around me are my siblings. When they get a good look at me, they all hold out both hands. They come crowding around our mother's handmade tsampa." Part of the poignancy of these words lies in the

reader's confidence that, inspired by her own hunger, Min-Nangzey will surely share her tsampa with all those relatives who long for it.

ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་བྲན་པ།

༡ ལྷ་ཐང་ནས་གཉེས་ལག་རྩམ་གིང་སྤྱ་འདབས་ནས་ཆེ་སློག་འབྲས་པའི་བོད་མི་
ཞིག་ཡིན་ཕྱིན་པལ་ཆེར་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་གྱི་རོ་བཅུད་ལ་བརྟེན་ཏེ་འཆར་ལོངས་མ་བྱུང་བ་
གཅིག་ཀྱང་མེད། ཁོ་མོར་མཆོན་ན་ཡང་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་ལ་རོལ་ཏེ་ནར་སོན་པའི་འགྲོག་
ལྷག་མ་ཞིག་ཡིན། ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་ནི་བོད་མའི་ཐུན་མོང་མ་ཡིན་པའི་ཟས་ཏེ་བོད་མའི་འཆོ་
བའི་ཁྲོད་དུ་ཆེས་མེད་དུ་མི་རུང་བའི་བཅུད་ལྡན་གྱི་ཟས་མཆོག་ཅིག་ཡིན།

༢ གདོད་མའི་མེས་པོ་བཀའ་ངེན་ཅན་སུ་ཞིག་གིས་དཀའ་སྤྱུག་གི་རྩལ་ནག་ལས་
བརྗོད་པའི་རྩམ་པ་ཟ་བའི་སློལ་འདི་བྱུང་བ་ནས། རྩམ་པ་འདི་མི་རིགས་གིག་གི་ཆེ་སློག་གི་
རྟེན་གཞི་དང་རིགས་རྒྱུད་ཅིག་གི་ཐུན་མོང་མ་ཡིན་པའི་ཟས་སྐལ་དུ་བྱུག། མི་རིགས་འདི་ལ་
མགོ་ནག་རྩམ་ཟན་པ་ཞེས་པའི་མིང་འདི་ཡང་དུས་དེ་ནས་ཐོགས་པར་སྟུང་། དེའི་ཕྱིར། བོད་
པ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ཕྱིན་རྩམ་པ་ཟ་བར་མི་དགའ་མཁན་ཅུང་ཅུང་ཡིན། ཁོ་མོར་མཆོན་ན་ཡང་བོད་
པ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ཕྱིར་རྩམ་པ་ཟ་བར་དགའ་ལ། ལྷག་པར་དེད་ཆང་གི་ཤིང་སྐྱམ་དུ་སྒྲུགས་པའི་
ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་ཟ་བར་ཏུ་ཅང་དགའ། ངས་བྲན་པ་ནས་བཟུང་དེད་ཆང་གི་མར་སྦྱིད་འགྲམ་
གྱི་ཤིང་སྐྱམ་གྱུ་བཞི་དེའི་བདག་པོ་ཨ་མ་ཡིན་ལ། ཟས་ཐུན་སྤེལས་ཐངས་རེར་དེ་ཞེས་འབྲུལ་
ཞིང་རྫོད་ཁོལ་མ་ཡལ་བའི་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་ལ་རོལ་དུས་སེམས་སུ་སྤར་མེད་སློབ་ཆད་མེད་
རེ་སྦྱེས་ཁྲོད་ལ། ཐུར་དུ་རྩམ་ཟ་བྱས་ཏེ་སྤར་ཡང་ལག་པ་བཟེད་བར་དགའ།

༣ དེད་ཆང་གི་ཤིང་སྐྱམ་གྱུ་བཞི་དེའི་ནང་ན་ཉར་བའི་ཨ་མས་ལག་འཐག་གི་རྩམ་

བ་ནི། བ་མེས་ཡང་མེས་ནས་བརྒྱད་པའི་གཅེས་ནོར་དང་། ལོ་ངོ་སྟོང་ཟླ་གྱི་མའི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་
རུམ་ཞིང་མི་རབས་དུ་མའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་ཁུར་ཏེ་ཆེ་སློག་གངས་མེད་ཅིག་ལ་ཡང་ཆོའི་ཁོ་ལག་
རྒྱས་སུ་བརྟུག་སོང་། དེར་བརྟེན། དེད་སྤྱན་མཆེད་སུ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ཡང་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་གྱི་རོ་
བརྟུད་ལ་བརྟེན་ཏེ་ནར་མ་སོན་པ་གཅིག་ཀྱང་མེད། ལྷག་པར་དུ་ཁོ་མོ་ནི་སྤྱན་མཆེད་གཞན་
ལས་ཀྱང་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་ལ་རོལ་བར་དགའ་བའི་བུ་མོ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ཟློན། ནམ་རྒྱུན་ཨ་མ་
དང་འབྲལ་མ་སྟོང་ལ་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་དང་ཡང་འབྲལ་མ་སྟོང་བས། ཁོ་མོའི་ཆེ་སློག་གི་
རུས་རྒྱུ་རེ་རེ་ལ་ཡང་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་གྱིས་གསོན་ཤུགས་རྒྱས་སུ་བརྟུག་སོང་།

༤ ཨ་མས་གསུངས་པ་ལྟར་ན་ཆེ་དྲེག་ཆགས་ཤིང་སྐྱེ་བོར་གྱུར་བའི་རྩམ་སྐྱམ་
འདི་པ་མེས་བཀའ་དྲིན་ཅན་ཆོས་ཤུལ་བཞག་གི་གཅེས་ནོར་ཡིན་པས། ཨ་མས་ཀྱང་རྗེས་
མར་རྩམ་སྐྱམ་འདི་བུ་མོར་བརྒྱུད་སྟོན་བྱེད་དགོས་ཞེས་ཐེངས་མང་གསུངས་སྟོང་བ་མ་ཟད།
སྐབས་རེར་ཨ་མས་རྩམ་སྐྱམ་དང་འབྲལ་བའི་གཏམ་རྒྱུད་རིང་པོ་རེ་ཡང་བཤད་སྟོང་། གང་
ལྟར། ང་ནི་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་གྱི་གསོས་པའི་བུ་མོ་ཞིག་སྟེ། རྩམ་པ་ནི་ངའི་མི་ཆོའི་ནང་འབྲལ་
དུ་མེད་པའི་ཟས་མཆོག་ཅིག་ཡིན་ལ། ངའི་ཆེ་སློག་གི་བྱུང་ཆ་གཤམ་ཆེན་ཀྱང་ཡིན། ཡིན་ན་
ཡང་། ངའི་གོམ་སྐབས་ཁེར་རྒྱུད་དུ་སྟོགས་པ་ནས་ང་ཨ་མ་དང་བྲལ་ཟིན་ལ་ཨ་མའི་ལག་
རྩམ་དང་ཡང་བྲལ་ཟིན།

༥ དན་གདུང་གི་ན་ཟུག་ལྟེ་ལ། ཁེར་རྒྱུད་གི་སེམས་ངལ་མོད་པའི་དུས་འདིར། ང་
སྤར་བཞིན་ཁེར་རྒྱུད་དུ་ཁང་མིག་གྱུ་བཞི་འདི་ན་ཨ་མའི་འཇུག་ཞལ་ཡིད་ལ་སྒྲོམ་ཞིང་ཨ་
མའི་ལག་རྩམ་དན་བཞིན་མིག་རྒྱུ་ཐིགས་པ་རེ་རེ་མཁུར་ཆོས་བརྒྱུད་དེ་ས་རུ་ཟགས་བྱུང་
། སྐབས་འདིར་རང་དབང་མེད་པར་མདང་དགོང་གི་མི་ལམ་དེ་དན་བྱུང་། མི་ལམ་དུ་ཁོ་མོ་
དང་ཨ་མ་གཉིས་སྐྱེ་འདབས་ན་འཛོམས་ཤིང་ཨ་མས་སྤར་བཞིན་ཆ་བེར་བེར་གྱི་ལག་རྩམ་
བརྗེས་ཏེ་ཁོ་མོའི་ལག་དུ་བཞག་པར། ཁོ་མོས་ཨ་མས་ལག་རྩམ་དན་བྲགས་ནས་རྩམ་བྱ་བྱེད་

བཞིན་འདུག ཁོ་མོའི་མཐའ་འཁོར་ན་ཡོད་པའི་སྤྱན་མཆེད་ཆོས་ཀྱང་བདག་ལ་མིག་ཟུང་རིག་
རིག་གིས་བྱེད་ཞིང་ལག་ཟུང་བཟེད་བཞིན་ཨ་མའི་ལག་རྩམ་ལ་འཆང་ཁ་བྱེད་བཞིན་འདུག

Remembering My Mother's Handmade Tsampa

1. Among those Tibetans who start their lives among the black yak hair tents that flourish on the grasslands, not a single one grows up without being nurtured on their mother's handmade tsampa. I myself am an example. As a nomad girl, I too grew up savoring the tsampa my mother made.

Consider it: tsampa made by a mother's hands. It is the special food of the Tibetan people, the best food. Its nourishment is indispensable, essential to Tibetan livelihood.

2. Through toil and sweat, a kind primordial ancestor brought into being this custom of eating tsampa. That makes tsampa our inheritance—the foundation of our lifeforce as one people, and the extraordinary foodway of our shared lineage. It's no wonder that our people are often called “the black-haired tsampa eaters.” Few are the Tibetans who don't like tsampa, for that reason.

Take me for instance: I also like eating tsampa, because I'm a Tibetan. In particular, I love eating my mother's handmade tsampa, which fills my family's wooden storage box.

I've clung to the memory of that square wooden box, in front of my family's red hearth, with my mother in charge of it.... Every time she cooked, a delicious smell would spread, as mother's handmade tsampa heated up, bubbling and steaming. Every time I would savor that smell, I would be consumed with longing, as if for the first time. Immediately, it would make me ravenous to eat. I would eagerly hold out my hand time and time again.

3. My mother hand-mills the tsampa kept inside my family's square wooden box. This hand-milled tsampa is a cherished treasure passed on in a lineage from our ancestors. For thousands of years of history, generations of oral tradition have emphasized how it keeps one's whole body youthful and vibrant. That's why every single one of my siblings has been nurtured on our mother's handmade tsampa.

And yet, even compared to my other siblings, I was a daughter who specially loved to savor the tsampa made by our mother's hands. For as long as my mother and I were inseparable, I was never parted from the tsampa my mother made. In that sense, my mother's handmade tsampa is what has infused life into the very marrow of my bones.

4. My mother used to say, "This tsampa box, which has become grey with sticky dirt, is a precious treasure, a legacy from our kind ancestors." Mother would continue, "Moreover, later on, you will have to pass this tsampa box on to your own daughter." She told me this many times. Not only that: each and every time, my mother would also recount a long oral tradition linked to the tsampa box.

All of which is to say, I am a girl nurtured on her mother's handmade tsampa. That tsampa is a supreme food, from which I will never be parted in my whole life. It's a core element of my very lifeforce. And yet. Despite all of this, I have turned toward a lonely path, parting me from my mother. And so, in the same way, I have been parted from the tsampa made by my mother's hands.

5. In the here and now, loneliness burdens me, and the heavy ache of tormenting memory. In this four-cornered room, alone as usual, I bring my mother's smiling face to mind. Remembering Mother's handmade tsampa, tears leak across my cheeks. Then, unbidden, I remember last night's dream.

In the dream, the two of us, my mother and I, are together near the black yak-hair tent. My mother is kneading hot handmade tsampa just as usual. She places some into my hands. I miss my mother's tsampa so sharply that I long to eat it all. But all around me are my siblings. When they get a good look at me, they all hold out both hands. They come crowding around our mother's handmade tsampa.

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