# House of birds: A historical ethnography of a Tibetan buddhist nunnery in Nepal

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*A Historical Ethnography*

# *House of Birds*

*of a Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery*

*in Nepal*

*Yolanda van Ede*

House of Birds

# House of Birds

*A Historical Ethnography of a Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in Nepal*

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*And your friends are together*
*all along the road you travel*
*all your days ...*
(Don MacLean)

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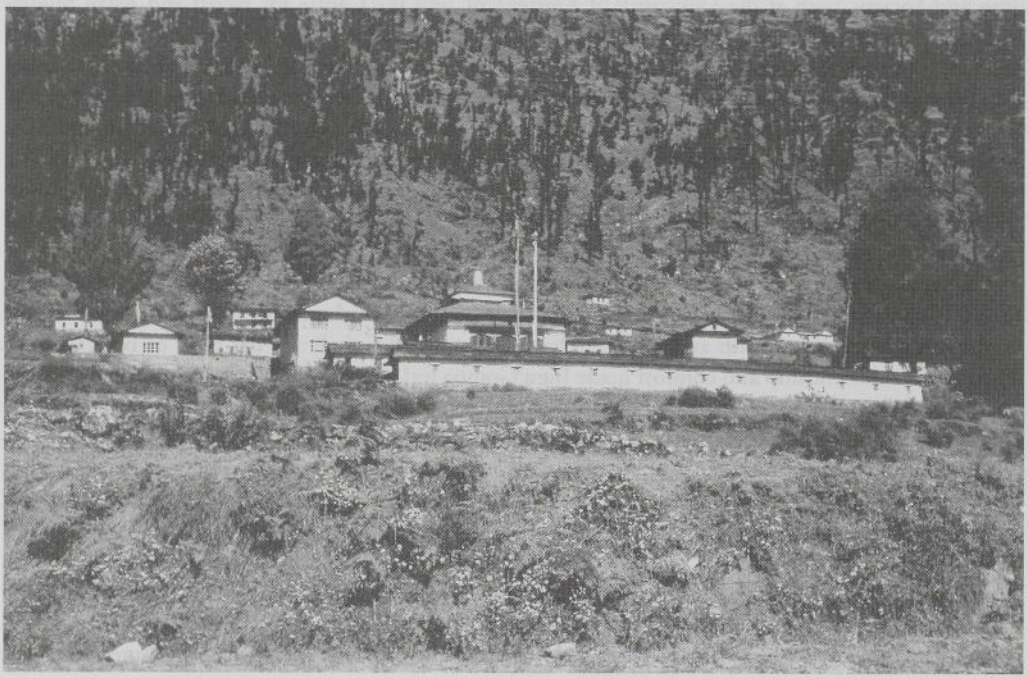

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# Dramatis Personæ

| | |
|---|---|
| Drugpa Rimpoche | founder of a Drugpa Kargyud lineage in Nepal; founder of a gomba at Kyirong, Tashi Gomba, Bakang Gomba, and Tsum Gomba. († 1941) |
| Nim Pasang | lay founder of Tashi Gomba; Sherpa headman of Bigu. († ca.1975) |
| Kusho Tendzen | eldest nephew of the Drugpa Rimpoche; appointed abbot of Tsum Gomba. |
| Kusho Pema | middle nephew of the Drugpa Rimpoche; appointed abbot of Tashi Gomba. († ca.1962) |
| Nim Dolma | former ani of Tashi Gomba; widow of Kusho Pema. (* ca.1932) |
| Kusho Tsetsu | youngest nephew of the Drugpa Rimpoche; appointed abbot of Bakang Gomba; head of the Drugpa Rimpoche's gomba until 1993. (* 1917) |
| Tulku | the reincarnation of the Drugpa Rimpoche; successor of Kusho Tsetsu as head of the Drugpa Rimpoche's gomba. (* 1946) |
| Meme Lama | one of the first monks of Tashi Gomba; Bigu's village lama. (* ca.1918) |
| Meme Khepa | the fresco painter from Bhutan who settled in Bigu. (* ca.1912) |
| Tashi Ongdi | former ani of Tashi Gomba; wife of the Meme Khepa. (* ca.1918) |
| Guru Lama | abbot of Tashi Gomba (1959-1986); abbot of Sailung Gomba (1970-1986). († 1986) |
| Lama Kelsang | abbot of Bakang Gomba since 1980; abbot of Tashi Gomba and Sailung Gomba since 1986. (* 1944) |
| Ani Ngawang Chutin | the first Tamang nun of Tashi Gomba. (* 1913 † 1991) |
| Ani Sherap Omu | Kusho Tendzen's daughter. (* 1943) |
| Ani Karma Sangmo | The Meme Lama's granddaughter. (* 1962 † 1996) |
| Ani Sange Dolma | Nim Pasang's greatgranddaughter. (* 1976) |

I

# Paths to Dharma, Paths of Dharma

## *Introduction*

*The spiritual path can be likened to building a house.*
*Even though we might like to begin by erecting the walls or roof,*
*in fact we must first put in the foundation.*
(the Dalai Lama)[1]

In August 1994, during my Ph.D. fieldwork in and on a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in the Nepal Himalayas, I received a letter from two runaway nuns I had met in spring 1992 when conducting my M.A. research at this same nunnery. In this letter they explained to me why they had left their monastic home and the valley where they had been born and raised.

> [W]e two decided to come down to South India because we (...) felt so unhappy that we did not have to study, [and] we heard that there, in South-Indian monasteries especially of the Nyingma sect, we would get nice education. So, we thought that **man without education is like a bird without wings**. So, we decided to leave Bigu and come here. (my emphasis)

This letter proved to be decisive for the direction my research was going to take. The motive these two young nuns expressed so poetically for their "voting with their feet" highlighted a theme which had appeared, and continued to appear, in the statements of lay people and monastics alike during my fieldwork: a desire for knowledge, education. In this ethnography, my aim is to offer a historical account of this one nunnery, by focusing on the relations between gender, knowledge and social change.

*My path to Tashi Gomba*

When, as an undergraduate student in anthropology in 1990, I had to make up my mind about the fieldwork I was to conduct for my M.A., I had no clear-cut idea where to go to and what to do. Somehow Nepal sounded alluring, but Thailand became the destination of an exploratory trip, and as a first encounter with Asia. It was there, in the busy streets of Bangkok, that I first learned of the actual existence of something like Buddhist "nuns". Back home in Amsterdam, however, anthropological literature on these religious women turned out to be disappointingly sparse. Then, only a few months later, a study on "Tibetan Buddhist Nuns" by Hanna Havnevik (1990) appeared. As her work was being called pioneering, I recognised a wide, unexplored anthropological field on Buddhist nuns. Thus was the choice of a subject for my M.A. thesis made, a choice which eventually led to the Ph.D. research and dissertation that lies before you.

Havnevik had conducted her research among Tibetan nuns in exile, in nunneries around Dharamsala, India, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile headed by the Dalai Lama. Here, she found that Buddhist nuns were caught in a vicious circle: suffering from too little economic support by the laity, the nuns were left with no means to enhance their religious knowledge by inviting lamas for teaching, which confined them to their lower status as religious practitioners when compared to the monks; because of

[1] In Mullin (1991:9).

which the laity favoured monks above nuns for sponsored rituals, which left nuns with insufficient economic means. I began to wonder whether the situation would be different in a nunnery inhabited by nuns with its own socio-cultural environment, where religious daughters and sisters might rely much more on the support of their family ties. How naive this economic perspective may sound now, it nevertheless set my path towards Nepal and Tashi Gomba.

In Havnevik's bibliography, an essay was mentioned with the title "A Nunnery in Nepal" by Fürer-Haimendorf (1976; 1984). From this article I learned that this specific nunnery had been founded in 1934 at the initiative of a Sherpa village headman; that the Sherpas were the largest ethnic group inhabiting the valley in which the nunnery was situated; and that, accordingly, most of the nuns of Tashi Gomba, as the convent was called, were Sherpa. As such, it met the demands I had placed on my research setting.

After four months of fieldwork in spring 1992, which turned out to be a preliminary to my doctoral project, I had to conclude that the nuns of Tashi Gomba felt as much restrained in their mobility, from educational opportunities and by financial means as their sisters in the Dharma in Dharamsala. The sociocultural environment did not seem to make much difference in the little appreciation nuns received from the laity, whether family or not. It only stressed once more their marginal position as religious practitioners in Buddhism in general and in Tibetan Buddhism in particular (cf.Horner 1930; D.Paul 1979). However, the question why nuns were lacking respect and support remained intriguing, especially in the case of Tashi Gomba.

In his essay, Fürer-Haimendorf stated that the Sherpa village headman had visited numerous monasteries and convents in Tibet. "Greatly impressed by their role as centres of religious artistic activities, [the headman] conceived the idea of promoting in his own village the foundation of a *gompa* similar to those of Tibet" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:123). By the end of the same paragraph, however, Fürer-Haimendorf also renders the headman's intention

> to establish a *gompa* for nuns, where women anxious to lead a religious life, and widows and deserted wives in need of a place of refuge, could find shelter and inspiration (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:123).

Given the low status of nuns in the Buddhist clerical hierarchy, the desire for a religious centre of learning and the actual founding of a nunnery seemed incompatible. A monastery (for monks) would have brought him so much closer to his ideal. If we were to take Fürer-Haimendorf's account for granted, something seemed to have made the headman adjust his original intention to the practicalities of everyday life. The explicit mentioning of single women, widowed or deserted and "in need of refuge", seemed to provide a clue. It suggested a social and cultural context, concerning women and the feminine, in which the establishment of a nunnery became compelling.

Yet another observation on Tashi Gomba puzzled me. During my initial fieldwork in 1992, I detected a doubling of the community's number of nuns during the early 1980s, taking Fürer-Haimendorf's average of thirty as a reference (Fürer-Haimendorf 1984:151). How was this sudden influx of novices to be understood in the light of the nuns' repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with their situation in 1992? What had they expected of a life as a nun, and in what ways did Tashi Gomba fulfil their expectations, or disappoint them? And, finally, was there a relation between the village headman's decision to found a nunnery and the communities' popularity in the 1980s?

In April 1994, I returned to Tashi Gomba for one year of fieldwork to investigate its history, and the valuations of nunhood among monastics and laity, male and female, that had guided its genesis. The outcome of my investigations and the insights I gained from them, however, turned out be different from what I expected.

*Female religious practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism*

The discussion of the marginal position of nuns in Tibetan Buddhism starts with the ambivalent statements on female religious practitioners as ascribed to the Buddha (Horner 1930; D.Paul 1979; Gross 1993). On the one hand, he never denied women's ability to follow the path. When Ananda asked

> Lord, are women, having gone forth from home into homelessness in the *dhamma* and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, able to realise the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or perfection [i.e. the accomplishment of wisdom and insight, of a *bodhisattva*, and of Buddhahood, respectively]? The Buddha replied they would be able to realise all these goals (*Cullavagga* XI.3, in Gross 1992:32).

On the other hand, he seemed to have been very reluctant in consenting to the admission of women "to go forth from home into homelessness", that is, into the monastic order. At the request of the Buddha's aunt Mahaprajapati, Ananda, the Buddha's favourite disciple, acted as her advocate in her plead to follow the life of chastity in the same way the Buddha had proclaimed for men (*Vinaya Pitaka*, in Paul 1979:82-4). But the Buddha initially refused.

> To go forth from home under the rule of Dharma as announced by me is not suitable for women. There should be no ordination or nunhood. And why? If women go forth from the household life, then the rule of Dharma will not be maintained over a long period. It is just as if, O Ananda, there were a family with many women and few men. It is subject to easy attack and spoilation. It is subject to easy attack, specifically, of thieves and robber bands. Just thus, O Ananda, if women go forth under the rule of the Dharma, this rule of the Dharma will not be long enduring (D.Paul 1979:84).

After repeating Mahaprajapati's request on several occasions, the Buddha finally gave in, but not without prescribing eight additional rules for nuns to be accepted at their ordination. These eight rules, the eight *gurudhammas*, subordinated nuns in every aspect to monks: in matters of admission, in organisational affairs of nunneries, and in teaching (see D.Paul 1979:85-6; cf.Horner 1930:118-61). As such, the Buddha, according to Gross' interpretation (1993:35-6; cf.Yuichi 1982 and Falk 1980), institutionalised gender roles which were current in the society he lived in. Although he did not deny women's individual capacity to spiritual advancement, he did fear that a collective appeal to religious celibate life of women would disrupt society. That male celibacy and an abundance of family life could be equally disruptive, seemed not to have been an issue. Besides, women's association with reproduction fostered misogynic tendencies among his contemporaries as well as among later writers of Buddhist treatises through stressing their "unpleasant bodily functions, ... [and] having more difficulty in controlling their sexual drives" (D.Paul 1979:77). They not only called the plain possibility of female chastity into question, but saw female renouncers as a threat to male celibacy and, as such, to male spirituality as well. Again, the threat concerned male, not female practitioners. Finally, the whole idea of women giving up their social ties for religion must have been unthinkable as monasticism in itself, as an institutionalised truth-seeking path centring around celibacy, was at the time of the Buddha a new phenomenon in India (Gross 1993:35-6).

The ambiguity concerning religious women, thus, signified a discrepancy between the Buddhist ideology of all sentient beings being able to attain Enlightenment, including women, and a social world in which spiritual advancement was largely denied to the female sex. This denial of female spirituality became particularly effectuated in, notably Theravada Buddhist, societies where monasticism became intermittently linked to centralised state power (Samuel 1993). In Tibet, however, where pre-Buddhist Bon Pö, Buddhism and Tantrism had become unfathomably intertwined into what we know now as Tibetan Buddhism, the discrepancy resulted, so far as present literature can attest, in basically two kinds of female religious practitioners: nuns and *yogini*.

Tantric *yogini* were individual women who managed by their personal strength to break away from the patriarchal structure of their society, and to devote their life to a wandering existence of meditation and retreat. It may not be surprising that, because of the personal strength and the obstructions they had to suffer, many of these women gained a high religious reputation among the laity; sometimes as a consort of a famous *yogi*, sometimes as religious specialists and important teachers in their own right (see Allione 1984; Gross 1993).

The *yogini*'s relative independence, however, contrasted sharply with those religious women who put themselves into a subordinate position in an institutionalised religious practice, monasticism. Within this clerical world and due to the eight *gurudhammas*, they formed the lowest ranks, heavily depending on the wishes and whims of their lamas in their opportunities for spiritual advancement, such as access to religious knowledge through texts and teachings, as well as economic support - particularly important during periods of retreat -, and the liberty to go on pilgrimages and to seek teachings outside the refines of their monastery (note the Buddha's concern about women's vulnerability to robbers and rapists above). And although Gross states that

> [t]he eight special rules presented no inherent barrier to women's spiritual development. They mandated institutional subordination, not spiritual subordination (Gross 1993:37),

it will be clear that their subordinate position towards monks made it extremely hard for them to express their spiritual advancement to the laity, to create a religious reputation among both laity and monastics, and to occupy a position in the clerical hierarchy in accordance to their accumulated insights and spiritual advancements.

As such, it seems hardly surprising that, according to Falk's account, the order of nuns (*bhikkuni*) already had disappeared by the twelveth Century in most parts of the Buddhist world, due to the low economic and moral support by the laity, and the indirect effects of the eight *gurudhamma* in combination with misogynous tendencies at work (Falk 1980). In the case of Tibetan nuns, "there is [even] no evidence in the textual material or from oral sources that the full ordination for women ever existed in Tibet" (Havnevik 1989:45). Either it was never introduced with Buddhism in Tibet, as its "missionaries" were mostly men, or it disappeared in the early struggles of converting Tibet to Buddhism, as a full ordination required a certain amount of monks and nuns to commission the taking of the vows. In the ninth Century, for instance, Buddhism had lost so much of its attraction in Tibet, that the number of monks was low (see Samuel 1993). The number of nuns must then have been close to nil. Nevertheless, the broken chain of full ordination did not withhold Tibetan women to shave their heads, to wear the wine-red robes - both which makes their appearance at first glance inseparable from monks -, and to populate a substantive amount of nunneries in the Tibetan cultural area (Havnevik 1989:37-8). Strictly speaking, these religious women remain life-long novices, and are known as, and addressed by, the Tibetan terms, *ani* (i.e. father's brother's wife), *jomo* (i.e. "the female head of the household, a woman that governs as mistress of her own servants"; S. Das in Havnevik 1989:209 n.30), or *gema*.[2]

There is a current development among Tibetan Buddhist anis (in exile) to obtain the *bhiksuni* ordination in other Mahayana societies such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea, where the chain of ordination is still in tact. Although the discussion is still continuing in the echelons of the Tibetan clergy as to whether these ordinations are acceptable within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it signals the anis' desire

[2] Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who herself is a *bhikshuni*, finds particularly the term *ani*, "auntie", derogatory. She holds that the current, more polite term of address are *chöla* ("she who is dedicated to the Dharma", *chö*) or *tsunma*. Like Havnevik, however, I did not come across these terms in my fieldwork (Havnevik 1989:210 n.32). *Ani* was the common word, and "aunties" were as highly respected as "mothers" and "sisters" (common terms of address of catholic nuns), so I saw no reason to avoid the term. I use "*ani*" as well as "nun", although the nuns of Tashi Gomba are not fully ordained.

to improve their current position as religious specialists. However, investigation into the role Western Tibetan Buddhists and, especially, western anis took in this recent development could be very interesting[3], as it opens up a discussion between the religious and social assumed necessity of a full ordination for women by Western and Tibetan anis (cf.Gross 1993), and the growing Western appropriation of Tibetan Buddhism.

In the literature on women and Tibetan Buddhism, a strict distinction between *yogini* and anis prevails. This distinction, however, is only a conceptual one. On the one hand, the female religious roles of *yogini* and anis refer to an equally conceptual separation between tantric and monastic Buddhism. In the section below, on *Dharma and Knowledge*, I will extend on these two patterns of religious practice. Based on Samuel's analysis, outlined in his "Civilised Shamans" (1993), I hope to show how tantric and clerical Buddhism constitute two paths of the Dharma which in practice signify more an emphasis on either meditation (*tantra*) or study (*sutra*) than a straightforward choice between either of the two. This suggests a larger variety of religious roles, as, in fact, the notion of ani already indicates. The question then is how these different roles relate to each other, and how they can be understood from a gender perspective. On the other hand, a conceptual distinction between *yogini* and nun hides the possibility of switching from one role to the other. Up to now, we only know of one example, namely Jetsün Lochen Rimpoch'e, who started as a wandering *yogini* but became abbess of a community of more than three hundred anis in central Tibet towards the end of her life (Dowman 1988:143; Havnevik 1989). As there is at the moment a substantial amount of work in progress on women and Buddhism, we may expect more examples of religious women and their careers, which hopefully will offer more than sole biographies, or hagiographies (cf.Klein 1995:xvii). To assign women an active role in Tibetan Buddhist history, going beyond the stereotypes of the autonomous *yogini* and the subordinate ani, a thorough analysis of their experiences in differing religious and social contexts is needed.

*Women and religion in Tibetan studies*

The above outline not only served as a short introduction into the position of religion women in Tibetan Buddhism, but also offered a background for understanding why so little attention has been devoted to the *ani*, and the particular perspectives scholars on Tibetan culture, whether classical Tibetanists or anthropologists, choose whenever they did write about them.

Tibetanists merely focused on Tibet's almost unfathomable combination of Bon Po - Tibet's pre-Buddhist religion -, Buddhism and Tantrism, and its historiography, relying primarily, if not exclusively, on religious texts and chronicles. Considering the scanty texts written by, or on, Tibetan religious women, it is not surprising that women were considered to be too trivial to discussions about Tibet's religion and history (cf.Klein 1995:xv). As such, female religious practitioners drew particularly the attention of feminist scholars.

The feminist perspective of these scholars resulted in basically two approaches. On the one hand, they tended to stress women's extraordinary liberties and status, a view resulting from "inductive reasoning based on the premise that Tibetan Buddhism itself is an egalitarian ideology" (Aziz 1987:78; cf.Makley 1997, Aziz 1988, Miller 1980). Not surprisingly, these feminists preferred to concentrate on religious heroines, i.e. the *yogini*, who subscribed their "need for women practitioners ... frequently more diligent

[3] Bartholomeusz in her pioneering study on the history of the Srilankan nuns' order (1994), shows eloquently how its reinstallment at the end of the last century was largely the work of Theosophists to be picked up by Sri Lankan nationalist movements. Contrary to the Sri Lankan case, the major impact of Westerners in the Tibetan buddhist field came only after 1959, with the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the following Tibetan diaspora. I imagine that the already existing institution of nunhood must have been very disappointing to those who had come for gender equality they had perceived by booklore on Buddhism. Instead, they found themselves entangled in a subordinated position to monks, to be protected by them, led by them, and taught by them. And foremost, to find their religious careers obstructed by their rejection from the Tibetan buddhist universities in India.

and dedicated than men" (Allione 1984:viii; Willis 1987). On the other hand, they took the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the books of the monastic rules) and the eight *gurudhammas* as their starting point of analysis, i.e. the *bhikkuni*, to stress the misogynous tendencies in Buddhism. In Makley's words, referring to the essentialist attitude towards Tibetan women in general, "she is in the end either extraordinarily liberated or shockingly oppressed" (Makley 1997:6-7).

From this, it could be argued that the clear-cut distinction between *yogini* and *bhikkuni* was, foremost, a constructed binary opposition to support feminist ideas and ideals, based on ideological Buddhist concepts "and not a social history of women's actual behaviour" (D.Paul 1979:xi); "not Tibetan women as locally situated subjectivities" (Makley 1997:6).

This emphasis on textual sources, religious discussions and ideologies, however, was not only indicative of feminist Tibetanists, but of Tibetan studies in general. Moreover, their lack of interest in the social world was not only confined to social history, but also to contemporary Tibetan societies. This had made Aziz, as late as 1987, plead for a sociology of Tibet ("As yet, ... there is no sociology of Tibet"; Aziz 1987:76), which was finally answered by a conference in 1990 in Zurich (see Ramble & Brauen 1993). It's explicit aim was to overcome the schism between the anthropology of Tibet and the more classical Tibetan studies, and to enlarge its geographical focus - that is, from the perspective of Tibetanists - also to the cultural margins of Tibetan civilisation, notably Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim.

In Tibetan studies, thus, the Buddhist notions of detachment from and renouncement of the social world were applied quite literally until the 1990s; a remarkable fact, considering Tibet's political situation and the Tibetan diaspora since 1959. The growing popularity of Tibetan Buddhism with its lamas providing teachings and initiations on almost every continent, and a world-wide preoccupation with the conservation and preservation of the Tibetan cultural heritage (Devine 1993), also did not have seem to lure them out of their orientalist armchairs. Except when studies were to promote an investigation on the impact of Tibetan Buddhism on the scholars 'own' culture and the "formative leadership roles [they are playing] in developing Buddhist communities, both as scholars and as meditation teachers" (Klein 1995; cf.Friedman 1987, Boucher 1988, Tsomo 1988,1995), an interest in contemporality, although rather ethnocentric, was triggered off.

It should be noted that, during the present decade, the aim of the conference of Zurich to blend Tibetanists' textual expertise with anthropological and sociohistorical methodologies and perspectives has become a major trend. Also an interest in Tibetan women and Buddhist practice is booming, considering the growing amount of publications on this subject during the last few years (for instance Tsomo 1988, 1995, 1997; Gutschow 1997; Makley 1997; Huber 1994).[4]

Considering the schism between scholars in classical Tibetan studies and anthropologists working in Himalayas (before the 1990s), I expected from the latter more attention towards both contemporary Tibetan culture and society, and women's part in them.

*Women and religion in Himalayan anthropology*

Although interest in women, religion and social change has been growing considerably since the 1960s (Haddad & Falk 1985), this triad yielded little fruit in the field of Himalayan anthropology up to the present day. Social change in itself seemed hard to acknowledge, but received some attention during the 1990s. Women issues fell out of the major scope of works published on Tibetan ethnic groups, restricted to few marginal articles and an unpublished dissertation.

As Adams aptly points out, also among anthropologists Himalayan ethnic groups were conceived as some archaic remains, and reminders, of their Tibetan forebears (Adams 1996:129). Their practices of economy, polity, and particularly their religion were intermittently linked with the forbidden and remote

[4] See also for a growing interest in women in the Theravada tradition, for instance Bartholomeusz (1994), Salgado (1996), and Kawanami (1990).

Shangri-La, which had already intrigued Westerners for centuries but had been hard to enter and investigate (see also Bishop 1989; Korom 1997). As such, Tibetan peoples outside Tibet's geopolitical boundaries, such as the Sherpas, Tamangs, Limbus and Rais of Nepal, came not only to be representatives of the Tibetan Buddhist culture, but were also seen as isolated and functionally integrated groups which had remained unchanged and unattached by, for instance, the Nepal state, contacts with local Hindu groups and the influence of the British in India. Restricting myself to the literature on Sherpas, one of the most extensively studied people of the Himalayas[5] and also the main subjects of this study, anthropologists such as MacDonald (1979,1983-87), Funke (1967), Oppitz (1973), and Goldstein (1985), have studied Sherpas in the Tibetanists' fashion of reliance on Buddhist texts as found in Sherpa culture, as if these literary sources could "provide more-accurate 'truths' about Sherpa society" (Adams 1996:29). Among those who were more ethnographically oriented, Fürer-Haimendorf (1964) most clearly takes a functionalist stance. But also in Robert Paul's work, and Sherry Ortner's earlier publications, the sociogenesis of the Sherpas received little, if any, attention, preoccupied as they were with the latter's religious ideology, whether from a psycho-analytical perspective (Paul 1976,1979,1982)) or with a Geertzian approach of religion (Ortner 1978a,b,c).

It is hardly surprising that, departing from these ideological approaches, whether textual-historical, functionalist, or symbolic, women stayed largely out of the picture. As in the case of classical Tibetan studies, women's social and religious roles seemed to have been too trivial and too marginal to add valuable insights in the understanding of the societies they were part of. And if they are mentioned, they are pinned down to their roles as sister, wife, or mother, treated as markers of society and culture. Within this framework, there is either no space at all for a category of celibate, religious women, like the Sherpa anis, or it is treated as a most extraordinary, outstanding phenomenon.

Apart from Havnevik's work (1989), the anis have been the subject of four essays (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976; Aziz 1976; Ortner 1983; Reis 1983), a section in March's dissertation (1979), the report of Grimshaw's unsuccessful research in Ladakh (1992:24-25); that is, during the preparatory phase of my Ph.D. fieldwork.[6] Of these, only Ortner tried to combine the themes of religious women and social change.

March, who rightly expresses her complaint that women are too often seen as "markers, not as makers of social transactions" which tends to write personal motivations out of the picture (March 1979:146), nevertheless keeps the anis out of her structural-functionalist analysis. Their personal motivations are summarised as the desire to step outside the structure of a society in which women are restricted to a life "in between" the worlds of men (ibid.:149). As such, she merely renders female religious practice as interpreted by the laity, i.e. motivated by illness, ugliness and physical deformations, widowhood, and vocation "even though they could have married and/or stayed with husbands" (ibid.:289). In short, women are first and foremost motivated by their incapability to live up to the social roles expected of them.

This attitude towards the anis is shared by Fürer-Haimendorf in his essay "A Nunnery in Nepal" (1976).[7] Apart from the motivations he listed, as given in the first section, expressions like "a discipline which imposes stringent sanctions on lapses from the chosen path of celibacy" and "the girls really enjoy

[5] See Dahal (1993) and Dhakal (1991) on the slightly envious tone in which they complain about the abundant attention the Sherpas receive from Western scholars.

[6] I only learnt about Kim Gutschow's work on Karsha nunnery in Zangskar, through her 1997 essay, at a late stage in the process of writing my dissertation. As such, the information she offers on Tibetan buddhist nuns and their nunnery could not shape the notions and intentions with which I went into the field. It would, however, be interesting to devote a separate paper on the comparison between Karsha nunnery and Tashi Gomba, particularly on the basis of their relatedness to a monastery of monks (Karsha nunnery) or not (Tashi Gomba), and on the religious knowledge women in Zangskar and in Bigu already have when opting for nunhood.

[7] "A Nunnery in Nepal" appeared in *Kailash* in 1976, but was taken up as a chapter in Fürer-Haimendorf's "The Sherpas Transformed" (1984) extended with a introductory section on the Sherpas of Bigu. I will refer mainly to the first publication.

life in the *gompa* community and do not pine for the even freer life in their home villages" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:147), left me with an aftertaste of his disbelief of and discomfort with young women willing to give up marriage life for the rest of their lives.[8]

Reis' "Reproduction or Retreat" (1983) shifts our attention from women's role as a wife to that of a mother. This paper, however, is merely a tentative writing as Reis' focus of study was primarily on health care. As such, she concludes that in this Ladakhi community under study women owe their value foremost to their child-bearing ability (Reis 1983: 228). The position of a nun is therefore very low; she is seen as a less successful woman as she has denied herself the value of motherhood. Her answer to the question why women nevertheless choose to lead a religious life is put into one sentence: to redeem a vow, for instance in connection to illness. By this, she comes close to March's most elaborated motivation (March 1979:284-91). Although this might hold in this Ladakhi case, I nevertheless feel dissatisfied with Reis' approach to "religious ideas about womanhood in a Buddhist society" (Reis 1983:217) without her rendering religious ideas of women themselves in this society.

After Havnevik's study (1989), Grimshaw's "Servants of the Buddha" (1992) was the next work that focused on a community of nuns. Even though she distances herself explicitly from the pretence of offering an anthropological study,[9] her report offers a detailed account of the relationships between the monastery and its annex nunnery, of the position of the nuns in the Buddhist clerical hierarchy, their economic situation, their daily routines, and their importance as intermediaries between the monks and the laity. The key role of these nuns in this polyandrous society is that of a younger sister as only the oldest sister can be married off. "Most families could not afford more than one dowry, which was given to the eldest daughter when she married; the usual fate of a younger sister was to become a *chomo* [*ani*], looking after her elderly parents and helping her brother's wife with the running of the household" (Grimshaw 1992:56). Although polyandry and a monastery at such short distance of the nunnery are not the case in Bigu, "Servants of the Buddha" particularly illuminated the many factors which can be involved in studying nunhood in a Buddhist society.

Moreover, Grimshaw's account may lack a historical perspective, but her autobiographical touch gave it that sense of contemporaneity and coevalness - the face-to-face encounter - (cf.Fabian 1983,1994), that I felt missing in the essays on Buddhist nuns mentioned above, but necessary in order to understand women's roles in religion and society, and to render them the credit of being social actors in their own right. I will return to this issue in a next section.

As already indicated above, Sherry Ortner's essay, "The Founding of the First Sherpa Nunnery, and the Problem of 'Women' as an Analytic Category" (1983) was the one trying to deal with the triad of women, religion, and social change. But even Ortner, famous for her theoretical work on gender, acknowledges that

> although I have been systematically concerned with the cultural construction of gender categories, I have done very little on women as social actors. For another, I have never attempted to explore issues pertaining to gender (or women) among the Sherpas, the people among whom I have done all my primary ethnographic research. (Ortner 1983:98)

Why she had not paid any attention to women as social actors before, she does not explain. With this paper on Sherpa anis, she at least makes an attempt to overcome the strong ideological emphasis in feminist anthropology of the 1960s and 70s, "which concentrate[s] heavily on female physiology, sexual-

[8] See Sally Cline's provocative "Women, Celibacy, and Passion" (1993) for the general uneasiness about "sexless women" still prevailing in the late 20th Century United States. An analysis of how this attitude towards women who refrain from sex has directed the research on nuns, Catholic, Greek, Buddhist or otherwise, has, to my knowledge, not been executed yet.

[9] Grimshaw's stay and research in this Ladakhi convent was prematurely broken off (1992:2).

ity, and reproductivity" (ibid.:127). Her new perspective provides a much more nuanced rendering of religious women's personal motivations, than the previously mentioned authors did. Ortner concludes, that

> [i]n becoming a nun, then, a woman can resolve many of the problems of women's lives in Sherpa culture - she can escape certain cultural stigmas, get around certain social and economic restrictions, and feel herself to have reduced certain moral disabilities with respect to present well-being and future rebirth (ibid.:119).

Furthermore, - to focus on the initial theme of this section, i.e. social change - Ortner places the founding of the Devuche nunnery in a larger social context, following Rosaldo's argument "that ultimately gender cannot be adequately understood except in relation to other structures of social asymmetry" (ibid.:99). Sherpa women, who opted for a religious life, were daughters of more well-off families, and from that position comparable to middle sons, both equally disadvantaged in social and economic respect.

It was disappointing, however, that despite Ortner's own acknowledgement of the little attention she spent on women as social actors in her ethnographical work, women again received little attention in her 1989 extensive study on the history of Sherpa Buddhism, "High Religion". The founding of Devuche, the nunnery attached to the first Sherpa monastery Tengboche (which covers only two pages), and the information Ortner offers on its nuns' motivations for a religious life and their role in founding a nunnery clearly play only a subsidiary part to her main argument. This argument is the exposition of a cultural schema underlying the founding of the first celibate monasteries among the Sherpas of Nepal, which centres around the competition among brothers for wealth and prestige, the quest of the most disadvantaged (middle) brother for the support of a charismatic lama and a subsequent founding of a gomba as a religious alternative to the social prestige of the elder brother. An extensive analysis of, for instance, certain cultural stigmas, certain social and economic restrictions, and karmic considerations of women opting for a religious life, clearly did not suit her cultural schema.

Ortner's "High Religion" (1989) was nevertheless indisputably my main textual source of inspiration to investigate the history of Tashi Gomba. As such, I hoped to offer a supplement to her *opus magnum* with this study of yet another early celibate Sherpa monastery that had stayed out of her regional focus[10] and, foremost, as an account on a women's community, a nunnery. Also her theoretical, and methodological, orientation in "High Religion" corresponded with the practice-oriented approach I favoured, and which had led me to criticise the works of the feminist Buddhologists, and of March. In addition, however, Grimshaw had made clear to me that the necessity to treat women as social actors and, as such, to focus on everyday practice also asked for a consciousness of the effects of one's own presence in that world, how short lived that shared experience may have been.

*Gender and the Theory of Practice*

The problems entailed in seeing "women only as markers, not as makers of society" are, in the context of female religious practitioners, twofold. Firstly, by defining women by their key roles as mothers, wives, and sisters, their motivations for opting for a religious life tend to become interpreted only by the restrictions they suffer from them. The emphasis on social "push" factors, however, leaves little, if any, space, for understanding the "pull-factors" that religious life might entail for women. As such, religious women are largely denied aspiring to the spiritual self-realisation commonly attributed to monks as their main motivation. Such a perspective, whether held by a feminist, or any other, scholar, stresses once more women's

[10] Ortner concentrates in "High Religion" (1989) on Solu Khumbu, the main Sherpa regions. The Bigu valley, where Tashi Gomba is situated, however, lies in the Dolakha district, south-west of Solu Khumbu.

assumed spiritual and/or intellectual incompetence, the threats evoked by their sexuality, and their "natural" social roles. Additionally, to accept only nuns' "social motivations" tends in a similar way to overemphasise their "marginal and trivial" role as religious specialists. Grimshaw's Ladakhi nuns (1992), for instance, as intermediaries between the monks and the laity are given more credit in the social and in the religious field than any of the other authors have done.

Secondly, a focus on women as wives, mothers, and sisters does not take into account any alternatives to these roles in order to understand the society they live in. Not only women who opt for a celibate, i.e. non-reproductive, religious life fall out of the picture, but also widows - usually, but not always, women of age -, and women who are deserted and/or divorced are neglected. Especially in the case of the Sherpas, divorce seems to be a common feature; Oppitz observed a 25% divorce rate during his research in the early 1960s (Oppitz 1967). This seems to contradict the image of an ideal and structurally fixed society which is suggested by key roles. Moreover, this static view circumvents the effects of social change on marriage and the upbringing of children, the consequences for all persons involved, and the effects on society as a whole. Looking at how these developments have moulded the life strategies of, particularly, women renouncing social life will tell us more about a religious institution like Tashi Gomba than the image created by Fürer-Haimendorf of a home for the homeless ("a place of refuge"); and does not stop at the conclusion that these anis do not want, or cannot, marry, but also asks "why not?". As such, it forces us to go deeper into the matter, and promises a more down-to-earth understanding of the interrelation between religion and society.

The need to step down into women's everyday life is most appealingly phrased by Linda Alcoff (1994). In order to avoid both nominalism - as a characteristic of post-structuralism, which attempts to transcend the male-female opposition by simply ignoring it -, and essentialism - with its overemphasising of femaleness such as in cultural feminism (see e.g. Allione's "Women of Wisdom") which gives even more reason to uphold the dichotomy even when only interpreted as positive, Alcoff suggests a positional approach centred around the concept of identity. Identity, she elaborates, is "always a construction, yet also a necessary point of departure" (Alcoff 1994:115). As such,

> [...] the concept of positionality includes two points: first [...] that the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context; but, second, that the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilised (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning can be *discovered* (the meaning of femaleness)." (Alcoff 1994:117; emphasis in oiginal)

In other words, the marking roles women have in society are not the end station of investigation, but have to serve as a point of departure in understanding female social participation.

Alcoff's approach of women as social actors, acting and reacting in a constantly changing world, without, however, denying gender relations by which women are restricted in their actions, corresponds with Pierre Bourdieu's "Theory of Practice" (1977 and 1979). His outline of a practice- and actor-oriented approach was not innovative or unique (see Ortner 1984), but most illuminating to me. Bourdieu sees the individual (the actor), and his identity, as a constantly developing entity in the practice of everyday life. The notion of structuring principles, such as gender relations, which structure but simultaneously create space for individual actions, is captured by his concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977:72). The assets individuals have at their disposal, to utilise their positions, to enhance their reputations, to create better or more opportunities, to act out trajectories and strategies - i.e. structure and restructure principles -, Bourdieu divides into *economic, symbolic* and *cultural* capital.[11] With this emphasis on individual actors and their practice, Bourdieu likens the sociocultural field in which they operate to a game (a site of struggle and strategy), the *habitus* being the rules of the game (dispositions, but never fixed; for instance, gender relations) and the capital being the trump cards.

In order to understand the *habitus* of a specific sociocultural field, we thus have to look at the genesis of its practices (de Certeau 1984:58), since it is shaped over time. To use Ortner's words,

> What a practice theory seeks to explain, then, is the genesis, reproduction, and change of form and meaning of a given social/cultural whole, defined in - more or less - this sense (Ortner 1984:149).

In the praxis of research, however, a *de facto* retrospective view on such a history of practice generates methodological and theoretical problems.

*Genesis and historiography*

In the previous sections, we have seen how Tibetan Buddhist nuns, Himalayan people, and women in particular were largely denied a history, muted by Western scholars' preoccupation with texts and male informants (on the ethnographic fixation on texts and dialogues, see Fabian 1996:9,33; cf.Adams 1996:251).[12] As my aim is to offer a case study of the genesis of a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery, lay women (as nuns-to-be) and anis are taken as its main subjects. However, the power relations at hand within the social and religious network they are part of makes them, and their narratives about their monastic world, subordinate to those who are in a dominant position. What we get in investigating a history like Tashi Gomba's is a manifold of accounts of its past, of different categories of actors involved. On the basis of gender differentiation and renouncement of social life, we already can expect different stories, of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. The problem then is how to deal with these different views on the history of Tashi Gomba, and how to deal with the authoritarian claims of the different views; in other words, the problem is historiography and power.

Emphasising gender relations, one might argue for a female counter-narrative of history. However, women's traditional roles outside the public sphere makes them generally less articulate and thoughtful than men about social issues (cf.Anderson & Jack 1991). Like Fisher in his study on social developments in the Khumbu Sherpa society, who found it impossible "to elicit serious responses from women" (Fisher 1990:154), I too was unable to interview women about the gomba's past or Bigu Sherpa history in general. Laywomen boldly referred me to their male relatives whenever I bothered them - and that is how they made me feel - with questions that transcended their personal experiences. Anis equally sent me to their lamas, or felt evidently obliged to follow the lamas' instructions to render only what I conceived as the ideal. As such, one might argue that Sherpa women form, what Ardener has called, a "muted group", who "are silenced by the structures of dominance, and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies" (in Moore 1988:3-4).

However, this "muteness of the suppressed" suggests a hegemony which is merely based on linguistic competence. In the absence of the ability and power to express oneself through language, there seems to be only silence; in its presence, it seems to legitimate its value only by the "countering" of dominant

[11] The structuring quality of economic capital we have, in the context of Buddhist nuns, already encountered in Havnevik's study of the nunneries in and around Dharamsala. Additionally, Ortner's point, that the Devuche anis were all from better-off families - which made a comparison with middle sons possible - similarly points out the influence of economic capital in the process of becoming a nun. Symbolic capital is already touched upon in relation to the imagery of the feminine in Tibetan Buddhism, but also rituals have, as I will show, a decisive part in the status and functioning of anis. The cultural capital, i.e. how knowledge is gained and utilized, will be an important theme of this dissertation. As such, a separate section will be devoted to it below.

[12] The preoccupation with texts and dialogues (see Fabian 1996:9,33) has been, as I have shown above, the main reason why anis received so little attention of Western scholars. As such, the nuns were not only muted by their lamas and, as women, by the laity, but also by anthropologists and Tibetanists, who, whether men or women, were trained in a male-biased discipline in which men were accepted to be the main "informants", whether literally or orally, thus equating "man" with "society" (Ardener 1975:21-3).

narratives, which allocates merely reaction to the dominated, and no initiating, active part in culture and history (Fabian 1998:24). Moreover, the exercise of a female counter-narrative sets out from an undifferentiated category of women. As I already suggested, we can also expect a plurality of narratives based on renounced and secular life, thus between nuns and laywomen, but this differentiation can be expanded on basis of age and personal experiences, social positions, and economic resources; in other words, in differences of *capital* (see Moore 1988, on "differences within and differences between gender").

In his recent work, "Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture" (1998), Fabian tackles both the problems of plurality and dominance by proposing the two concepts of popular culture and genre. His concept of popular culture is directed against elitist culture, which provides the authoritative charter of culture. By accepting this authoritative charter as the only form culture takes, however, the dominated are merely granted a reacting role - as argued above. As such, the people with less power are denied an active part in the transformation of culture, and thus turned into "people without history" (Wolf 1982). As "[o]ppression as such does not generate creative response" (Fabian 1998:11), there must be cracks in dominant, oppressive culture, where popular culture manages to emerge. These cracks are but moments - "moments of freedom" - but are nevertheless important events that make culture a dynamic process. Hence, culture can be imagined "as an entertaining, albeit serious, game", culture as praxis (ibid.:11).

Culture, therefore, is not only expressed through language, but entails the whole range of forms communication can take: rituals, dreams, performance, music, art, story telling, etc.. To account for the manifold of cultural representations, and the varying, often contradictory, historical narratives, they trigger off, Fabian introduces the concept of *genre* (ibid.:24). Genres are acts of distinction within a conceptualised whole. Distinction, however, can only be exercised through power: the power to impose norms and order, and to deny recognition. Genres, thus, are constructions of identities, creations of boundaries, which are endowed with power by giving form to resistance to, or defiance of, hierarchical authority and by serving to mark distinction from, if not competition with, other organised expressions.[13]

This practice, or agency-oriented, approach avoids the pitfalls which an actor-oriented approach creates. When taking a specific category of actors - be it the laity, the male or female religious practitioners, or subcategories like ani or yogini - as points of departure, there is always the risk of denial or neglect of other groups; or, on the contrary, to become engaged in advocacy for, for instance, women (see the feminist search for religious heroines). In focusing on practices, however, an investigation into the process of generic differentiation may not only reveal unanticipated (sets of) actors in play, but also a tracing of the cultural transformation they enacted.

The genesis of female monasticism in Bigu had its beginning with the founding of Tashi Gomba in 1933, which is recalled by two distinct historical narratives. These two genres coincide with the two "forms of the past", with which Appadurai sets out his argument for the debatability of the past (Appadurai 1981; see also Fabian 1983), namely

> a "ritualised" past which denies duration [cf.Mumford 1990:44, "a Malinowskian, mythical charter"], and a non-ritual, mundane past, concerned with such pragmatic activities as agriculture and politics, in which duration is universally recognised (ibid.:202).

In the case of Tashi Gomba, the non-ritual past is ascribed to the village headman and his motivations to initiate its founding within the social and political context of that time.[14] The mythical narrative focuses on the religious founding father, the Drugpa Rimpoche, and his role in the gomba's early history.[15] What

[13] Fabian's study, which has been incentive for his concepts of popular culture and genre, had, like mine, a religious institution as its subject, namely the Jamaa movement in Zaire.

[14] See Ch.II.

[15] See Ch.III.

I hope to show in this study is that these two genres represent two modes of monastic life, promoted by a power-seeking laymen and a spiritual lama, which have been in competition with each other from the very beginning of Tashi Gomba. Moreover, these two modes of monastic practice, which can be characterised as learning on the one hand and meditation on the other, are based on the two different perspectives on religious practice that have been incentive to the genesis of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole (see Samuel 1993).

In the next section, I will elaborate on these two *paths*. Here, it suffices to emphasise, for analytical purposes, that the path of learning constitutes the mundane genre which relates the religious practitioner more to the larger social context than the meditative path which stresses individual spiritual advancement and retreat. Recalling the concepts of woman in Tibetan Buddhism, as explored in a former section, these two paths coincide with the distinction between ani and yogini. As I argued, however, there must be a large range of variations possible between the suppressed, low-ranking nun, and the free-wandering, independent yogini. What I hope to delineate is how these two authoritative genres have generated other genres of female practice within the practice of a community of nuns. Depending on the constantly changing social and religious contexts, ani and ani-to-be have tried to resist the restrictive, suppressive qualities of the one by seeking freedom - economic independence, freedom of mobility, opportunities of self-realisation - through the other, however, without ever managing to create a *status quo*.

> If freedom is conceived, not just as free will plus the absence of domination and constraint, but as the potential to transform one's thoughts, emotions, experiences into creations that can be communicated and shared, and if "potential", unless it is just another abstract condition like the absence of constraint, it is recognised by its realisations, then it follows that there can never be freedom as a state of grace, permanent and continuous. As a quality of the process of human self-realisation, freedom cannot be but contestatory and discontinuous or precarious. (Fabian 1996:12)

The use of a word like freedom is, among social scientists, usually met with much suspicion and derided as romantic fancy. At best, it is aligned with the individual, in opposition with culture as collective (ibid.:11). However, in order to acknowledge the dynamism, the transformative qualities, of culture, we have to accept an individual agency which manages to escape total domination and oppression, and its ability to set transformation into process. As such,

> [c]ulture can be the source of individual freedom in situations of collective oppression and the most significant achievement of popular culture may be to create collective freedom precisely in situations where individual freedom is denied or limited (Fabian 1996:11).

This statement can be taken as a summary of the genesis of female monasticism in Bigu. Nunhood, as I hope to show, is an escape from the social restrictions put on women against the social conventions concerning women and nuns - and it is here where lay interpretations of nunhood stop, but by forming a religious community, a collectivity, anis have been able to gain opportunities they would not have had as laywomen.

Like Appadurai's debatable past, these moments of freedom mean that "culture is open to revision, revitalisation or subversion" (Appadurai 1981:218).[16] Depending on the stronghold of authoritative gen-

[16] Fabian's "moments of freedom" and genres as expressions of norms and order (distinctions, classifications; Fabian 1996:24), and Appadurai's debatability of the past based on "sets of norms" shared with the mythical and durational forms of the past (Appadurai 1983) both resonate, in my opinion, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as "dispositions", structuring structures of practice (Bourdieu 1977).

res, tending to become charters, and the moments of freedom possible to be taken, urged for, created, the impact and speed of cultural transformation can vary. It is from this insight that we also can understand Haddad and Falk's thesis, namely that "women take a more active part in public life, and in the establishment of new religious structures, during periods of social crisis when the normal functioning of society breaks down" (Haddad & Falk 1985:xiii). By interpreting their rather static conception of "normal functioning of society" as authoritative genres at work, and their "periods of social crisis" as breakdowns of the dominating, structuring principles, women might indeed increase their impact on social and religious change.[17]

In Bigu, this "social crisis" emerged in terms of a growing shortage of land, labour migration and its impact on marriages and household affairs, the confrontation with modern urban life and the necessary revaluation of education. Without taking these social changes into account, the history of the Bigu female religious community cannot be understood. Additionally, the opportunities religious life has created as an answer to these transformations cannot be understood without taking the different genres of religious life into account which have been derived from the two paths of learning and retreat. In the case of Tashi Gomba, we can see how the two realms of religious and social life have merged into the genesis of female religious practice. As such, this study offers a micro- study of the development of Tibetan Buddhism and the dynamics of Sherpa culture and society, to which both men and women, religious and lay, have contributed.

As a consequence of the plurality of cultural representations and historical narratives, this nor any other historical ethnography can tell the whole story; neither in all its facets nor as a full chronological outline.

> [T]o perceive and interpret the richness of popular expression requires historically situated, shared knowledge which an ethnographer can never acquire fully. The study of "humble" popular culture teaches us humility. (Fabian 1996:9)

As such, the ethnography presented here is a reflection of, and on, the ethnographic sharing of

> a common ground [that] can be found only in what I called timing, that is, in ways with time which inform the production and performance of historical narratives". (Fabian 1996:53; emphasis in the original)

The sharing of time *and* place, is what timing is all about. Fabian emphasises time shared with certain people at a certain spot, making the ethnographer dependent on what happens during that period of time during which history is produced and historical narratives triggered off - i.e. the timing of the people under study. On the other hand, one could also stress, with De Certeau (1984: see also Fabian 1983), a "common ground", space shared with certain people at a certain time (see also De Certeau 1984). Like events, also specific places can trigger off particular practices and narratives. In Bigu, this space perspective cannot remain out of sight, with its notion of a sacred landscape, the desire for freedom and independence often put in terms of freedom of mobility, women's "voting with their feet" (see the letter quoted at the beginning of this chapter) and the effects of globalisation on their world view.

Anyway, both time and space limit as well as produce knowledge, and put formidable demands on the fieldworker in matters of timing: alertness, recognition and creation of favourable situations, communicative competencies, the ability to remain open-minded without losing track in an abundance of experiences and information, and, often also, pure luck. In the end, it is for the reader to decide whether the ethnographer succeeded.

[17] Cf.Falk (1985:xvi): "[...] heterodoxies [...] seem to have developed at times of declining status for women - in other words, in times that would leave women receptive to proposals for constructing alternative social worlds".

One topic kept on returning time and again, which at a certain point I started to recognise as the sign flags of this dropping game called fieldwork: knowledge.[18] In the next section, I will elaborate on this theme, both in Tibetan Buddhism, as in its secular connotation of school education. What I hope to show is how the dialectical relation between knowledge in its religious and in its secular context have inspired the genesis of Tashi Gomba.

*The paths of Dharma*

Although I am indebted to Ekvall (1969), Tucci (1970), Beyer (1973), Snellgrove (1987), Thurman (1995), and many others, for their extensive work on Tibetan Buddhism, this section is largely based on Samuel's insightful and encyclopaedic "Civilised Shamans" (Samuel 1993) as it explores most explicitly the different forms Tibetan Buddhism has taken in the course of the social and political history of Tibetan societies.

Buddhism is based upon the *Four Noble Truths* the Buddha is said to have preached at Sarnath, namely that all life is suffering, that life is cause and result of suffering (*karma*), such that any attachment to life leads to a cycle of rebirth (the Wheel of Life), and that ultimate salvation from life and suffering is gained by the insight of the former truths (Enlightenment). This progression of insights has in practice led towards three ideologically distinctive orientations. The pursuit of its highest goal, - Enlightenment, Buddhahood, or *bodhi*, - is what Samuel calls the *Bodhi Orientation*. This orientation is preserved for a minority of "religious virtuosi", beyond the scope of ordinary lay people and the majority of monastics (Samuel 1993:26). Most religious practitioners, particularly monastics, focus on *karma*, that is, on death and rebirth, past and future lives, and "the ideology of merit": the *Karma Orientation* (ibid.:26). Ordinary social life, however, constraints the average layman or laywoman to a preoccupation with this-worldly concerns, "which in religious terms is the sphere of interaction with, and protection against, local gods and spirits" (ibid.:26,31). Theirs is merely a *Pragmatic Orientation*.

Buddhism is a salvation tradition centering around the attainment of wisdom (*prajna*). Ignorance, its opposite, is - next to greediness and anger - perceived as one of the forces which ties all sentient beings to this-worldly life (*samsara*), and consequently holds them in the grip of the Wheel of Life, the cycle of life, death and rebirth. In order to attain wisdom, becoming Enlightened (a Buddha), by eventually being able to transcend *samsara* into a state referred to as *nirvana*, one has to accumulate insight and knowledge.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the spiritual path towards wisdom can take two, conceptually distinguishable, modes. The one mode takes knowledge and understanding of the Buddhist texts (*sutra*) as its focus, consequently being the path of scholarship, philosophical analysis, and monastic discipline (ibid.:10). Samuel renders this mode as "Clerical Buddhism". The other mode is based on *tantra*, a system of yogic processes, that aims at insight and understanding through visualisation of, and identification with, tantric deities and those who are more advanced on the spiritual path than oneself. This mode can be summarised as the path of meditation and retreat. The identification with deities and religious heroes is believed to generate a spiritual power equal to these beings; the further one advances on the spiritual path, the higher and more complex the deities one identifies with will be. This *Bodhi Orientation*, however, can also serve the *Pragmatic Orientation* in that it can be used for this-worldly benefit of the laity. Although lamas see this use of tantric practice as a by-product of their path towards Buddhahood, its techniques "function in practical terms as a means of training shamanic practitioners" (ibid.:9). Therefore, Samuel refers to this mode as "Shamanic Buddhism" (ibid.:8).[19]

[18] When taking Fabian's definition of freedom "[a]s a quality of the process of human self-realization" (Fabian 1996:12), this outcome is hardly surprising.

[19] The definition Samuel gives for shamanic practices is: "the regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means which specialists practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience" (Samuel 1993:8).

In Tibetan Buddhism, these two paths of learning and meditation, characterising the two modes of Clerical and Shamanic Buddhism, constitute a complementary set. The whole range of schools (or orders) within Tibetan Buddhism recognise the importance of practising both exegesis of the *sutras* as *tantric* practices in the attainment of wisdom - hence its alternative name of Vajrayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism. It is generally held that the study of texts generates "simply knowledge of the words, where what really matters is internalising and realising the meaning of the words" (ibid.:228); they can only be understood in an intellectualistic, rationalist sense. On the other hand, without knowledge of the texts, tantric practice cannot evoke insight, ensure progress, but instead might even lead to madness through a lack of control over the powers it generates. It is this balance between rationalism needed to control, to "tame" emotions and attachments, through the taming of demons and hostile forces (ibid.:220), that makes of its practitioners "Civilized Shamans" - the title Samuel gave his book.

This ideological complementarity - depicted by the *bodhisattva* of intellectual endeavour, Manjushri, whose sword is to cut through all binary oppositions and concrete perceptions - however, retained varying emphases in practice, depending on the specific sociohistorical contexts Tibetan Buddhist schools, monasteries, and their individual practitioners found themselves in. In effect, it has been by this dialectical process between the social world and the need for a Clerical Buddhism, stressing learning, or a Shamanic Buddhism with its tantric practices, that we can "read" Tibetan Buddhist history. Again, it has never been a matter of either-or, but a matter of what Samuel calls "competing syntheses" (ibid.:23). It goes far beyond the scope of my competence to explore how Tantrism could have become such an inherent part of Tibetan Buddhism, how this was linked to the specific conditions under which Buddhism could be introduced in Tibet, but I will have to present some of the conclusions Samuel has drawn from his analysis of Tibetan Buddhist history. It is from these conclusions he developed by comparing Theravadin and Tibetan societies, that I too interpret the history of Tashi Gomba and legitimate its being a case study of Tibetan Buddhist history - Tibetan Buddhist history under a magnifying glass.

Samuel's analysis is based on the premise that

> small-scale preliterate societies had and have a dominantly shamanic orientation, while premodern states with developed literacy and centralised, bureaucratic government have been predominantly clerical with shamanic elements present in subordinate contexts (ibid.10; see also Samuel 1990:93-133).

Shamanism - and for that matter, tantric practices - legitimates an autonomous role for its practitioner, as he is supposed to be concerned with the well-being of the social group he belongs to, in that he tries to maintain a balance between the individual and the collectivity. This social role can extend easily into the political sphere (ibid.:34), where he may conceived as a threat by other political authorities. In centralised states with strong political hierarchies, thus, shamans became marginalised, only tolerated to operate in the outskirts of society, i.e. on the village level.

Tibet, however, lacked for most of its history the kind of political centralisation to be found in countries like Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka.[20] Although there has been a strong tendency among Tibetanists to reduce political Tibet to the Lhasa state, Samuel argues that, in effect, its state apparatus was seldom able to expand its power to the surrounding areas largely under control of local estate-holders (ibid.:139-40). Tibet's population was too low in density, its means of communication too ineffective, and its dependence on long-distance trade too heavy; "all factors that probably inhibited the development and maintenance of effective centralised regimes" (ibid.:360). As a result, Buddhism in Tibet never evolved into a state religion, as it did in Theravadin societies, with a clericalised set of religious specialists, but instead had to rely heavily on the support of the laity.

Monasticism [in Tibet] survived through the support from the general population, and the general

[20] See Chapter 2 of "Civilized Shamans" (Samuel 1993) for a comparison between Tibetan and Theravadin societies, based on the work of Melford Spiro (1971) and Stanley Tambiah (1984).

population was concerned with the use of shamanic power on behalf of individuals and of village and urban communities, not on its restriction as a potential threat to the relatively weak local rulers (Ibid.:472).

For as much as the above elicits the acceptance and necessity of Tibetan Buddhism's shamanic mode, it also shows the other side of the coin, namely that the clerical aspects of Tibetan Buddhism were stronger where it coincided more with political power. In this respect, one could make a classification of regions, based on their political and economic organisation, to measure the extent to which its religious practice shifted more towards the clerical, or towards the shamanic mode, of Buddhism. Samuel does so by distinguishing four kinds of communities: centralised agricultural communities and urban communities, where a strong political centralisation could be found, and remote agricultural communities and pastoral communities, where little or no effective presence of a centralised political authority was to be found (ibid.:115-38). What he shows, is that in the former communities large monastic complexes could come into existence, supported by and, often grown into large estates themselves, in control of economic surplus. The population density in these areas, in addition, offered a large base for recruitment of monastics. Here, monasteries could turn into powerful institutions "closely integrated with the structures of secular power" (ibid.:23) and, as they requested a strict organisation and a thorough training of its monastic community, into a kind of universities as well, in which besides exegesis of the religious texts also logic, rhetoric, epistemology, Tibetan medicine, astrology, mathematics, and philosophy made up its curriculum.

The competition between the different schools and monasteries in the more political centralised areas generally resulted in the dominance of those more oriented towards the path of learning than those towards shamanic practices. The Gelugpa, one of the five major schools within Tibetan Buddhism, offers the most significant example. From the seventeenth Century onwards, it dominated all major urban centres, including Lhasa, and delivered Tibet's Head of State in the figure of the Dalai Lama. In its course, this school refined its monastic degrees, based on the achievements of study very similar to Western universities, and positions, which gave it its "relatively high bureaucratic and hierarchical nature" (ibid.:63). In consequence, the Gelugpa required celibacy where the other schools perceive this as an alternative, to ensure the monastic discipline (ibid.:275). In the early 1920s, the confidence in its power had grown that much, that the 13th Dalai Lama took up the ambitious plan to create a centralised state. His campaign was directed towards the increase of state power by initialising Tibet's first standing army, to be paid by a tax on all estates within Tibet, attempts to convert non-Gelugpa monastic centres to Gelugpa, by force where necessary, and a strive for modernisation by sending "young men to British schools to receive a Western-style education, while simultaneously introducing Western-type schools within Tibet (ibid.:52). This campaign, however, deteriorated after the death of the 13th Dalai Lama, and came to a complete stand-still in 1950, when the Chinese army invaded Tibet.

What I intend to show with this short exposition of the Gelugpa is how the path of learning, as Clerical Buddhism, is intermittently linked to political power, based on economic and demographic resources. The crux, from a cultural point of view, is literacy. Centralised, bureaucratic governments need a developed literacy. Accordingly, religious practice in these societies will be "predominantly clerical with shamanic elements present in subordinate contexts" (ibid.:10; see also Goody 1986,1987). In contrast, societies with a dominantly shamanic orientation are small-scale, face-to-face, and preliterate. This distinction is mirrored in the more clerical and academic tradition of the Gelugpa compared to the other schools which rely, in their strong tantric emphasis, on oral tradition. This reliance on the oral transmission of tantric teachings is not a feature of the absence of texts, but how these texts are used. Tantra texts "are primarily liturgical [...] subsidiary in importance to the experience, or rather the state of being, ideally brought about when the invocation [of deities] succeeds" (ibid.:19). In tantric practice, the lama, teacher (*guru*), is vital. He acts as the personification of a deity, a *bodhisattva*, or some great lama from the

past, on whoever his student meditates, as the lama has the appropriate skill to contact these figures and to make use of them. These figures, however, must not be viewed as merely historical personae, but as "hypostatisations of human potentialities" (ibid.:20). Dealing with the spiritual and emotional powers that can be evoked through meditation upon such deities or "cultural heroes" without a personal lama's mediation, is bound to become a dangerous affair, with the risk of madness or even death. Tantric practice, thus - even when using texts - requests a face-to-face contact with a lama who instructs and guides his pupil.

Tantric teachings, as such, show all the characteristics of an oral tradition as reflected in the works of Ong (1982) and Goody (1977). They "can be viewed as having originated in a "primal time" or "Great Time" of myth. [They are] regarded not as a text composed by a human author but as a revelation from the primal time" (Samuel 1993:19). "The lineage of teachings is [however] not simply a heritage handed on from a distant past, it is something that is being constantly recreated and revalidated through the experience of contemporary lamas and yogic practitioners" (ibid.:21). The historical perspective of Tantric, or Shamanic Buddhism, constitutes the mythical charter, I referred to in the previous section when I mentioned Appadurai's essay (1983), and which Mumford calls the "ancient matrix" of the shamanic world view (Mumford 1989:16-23). The historical perspective of Clerical Buddhism, as might be expected, shows a stronger tendency to conceive the past in its durational form. The "cultural heroes" of Shamanic Buddhism, for instance, are thus in Clerical Buddhism perceived "as human beings who have lived at a specific time in the past and performed a series of actions recorded in the historical record" (Samuel 1993:20).

Those two historical perspectives related to Shamanic and Clerical Buddhism may already hint at how Samuel's concepts - including the three orientations of *Bodhi, Karma* and *Pragmatic*, the four kinds of communities based on their dominant economic subsistence, and, related to the conceptual distinction between Clerical and Shamanic Buddhism, the notions of scholarly knowledge and oral tradition - have been useful in interpreting the history of Tashi Gomba. Let me devote a next section to this, by offering at the same time a short introduction to the following, ethnographic, chapters.

*The setting*

The Bigu valley is inhabited by several ethnic groups and Hindu castes, notably Magars, Thamis, Tamangs, Chetris, Blacksmiths, but predominantly by Sherpas who constitute about half of its population.[21] The valley is situated three days travelling to the northwest of Kathmandu, close to the Chinese-Tibetan border. Its means of subsistence are agriculture between 1800 and 2600 metres, and husbandry on the alps on higher altitudes. Compared to the other "Sherpa regions" of Solu Khumbu, its geographical site lacks the high peaks which have been drawing mountaineers and hikers ever since Sir Edmund Hillary and his Sherpa guide Tenzing Norbu conquered Mt. Everest. In addition, it also remained outside Hillary's target area of development aid (hospitals, schools, airfields; see Fisher 1990). Although so much closer to Kathmandu, Bigu was left aside the track to Solu Khumbu by both tourists and developmental organisations, until the 1980s.

Bigu, as such, fits Samuel's description of a remote agricultural community with a high measure of political autonomy that goes with its definition. Before the democratisation process started in Nepal with the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951, contacts between the government and the Bigu valley were mediated through the tax collector, the *mizar*. After 1951, the Nepali state tried to encompass its remote regions first by introducing the *panchayat* system in the 1950s, to be replaced by the Village Development Committees (VDC's) in 1980. It was only during the following decade that the impact of Nepal's efforts to centralise its political power, and of its modernisation campaigns, became tangible in Bigu. The flow of cash, school attendance, health care, a motor road and bus connection to Kathmandu

[21] In 1994, I counted 161 Sherpa households out of a total of 362.

at two-days walking distance, labour migration, and a modestly growing amount of tourists belonged to its social implications.

Against this social and political background we have to understand the history of Tashi Gomba. However, - as already suggested - the historical narratives about its foundation could be classified into two forms, namely "mythical" and "secular". These perspectives were based on the transmitted motivations and actions of the two founding fathers of Tashi Gomba, which may be seen as mirroring their tendencies towards Clerical Buddhism (the *mizar*), and Shamanic Buddhism (the Drugpa Rimpoche). The fact that I relate Clerical Buddhism to a layman, and Shamanic Buddhism to a high monk where, based on Samuel's exposition, one might expect it to be the other way around, already indicates the different views on the function and meaning of religion these two men held at the time of the founding of Tashi Gomba. The initial outcome of the unintended competition between these two points of view favoured the latter, primarily based on the Drugpa Rimpoche's religious authority, but also as a consequence of the poor economic and demographic sources the gomba could draw upon.[22] In the course of the history of Tashi Gomba, however, the tensions between Clerical and Shamanic Buddhist tendencies were renewed time and again.

In this context, the school and lineage Tashi Gomba belonged to also has to be mentioned. Unlike the Sherpa monasteries and nunneries in Solu Khumbu, who belong to the Nyingmapa school, Tashi Gomba is Kargyudpa, namely Drugpa Kargyudpa. This suborder of Kargyudpa refers to the historical position the Kargyudpa school gained in Bhutan (Drugyül, country of the Drugpa), where its political power resembled that of the Gelugpa in Lhasa with an equal clerical structure and academic emphasis. Over the whole range, however, the Kargyudpa in general is situated somewhere in the middle of Clerical and Shamanic Buddhism, emphasising neither tantric practice - as the Nyingmapa school does - nor scholarly achievements. Following from this conceptual position, one might conclude that the kind of synthesis of the two paths of Dharma depends, more than in other schools, on the particular lineage a practitioner adheres to in the form of his lama, the social context of the monastery, and the personal inclinations of both the lama and the pupil. As such, one might state that the Kargyudpa tradition is, more than other schools, vulnerable to variations in religious practice, which change over time with the succession of actors involved, and the religious and social context they might find themselves in.

In the case of Bigu, I will argue that, in accordance with the social transformation as perceived during the late 1970s and 1980s, a process of "clericalisation" (see Samuel 1993:35,113) was set into motion. This religious development was not the result of a growing state control on religious practice, nor a growing participation of religious specialists in the realm of politics, but the result of the indirect effects of Nepal's state formation activities had on Sherpa women: education, labour migration, the accessibility of the big city, and the way these affected marriage and family life.

On a higher social level, another development took place that could be summarised by the globalising forces of Tibetan Buddhism. Particularly since the 14th Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet in 1959 and his settling in Dharamsala, a growing amount of Westerners have been converted to Tibetan Buddhism. Lamas started to give teachings and initiate Tibetan Buddhist centres in the West, and Westerners came to visit the home countries of the Dharma. During the 1980s, these developments intruded even this far-off corner of the world, Bigu. Western donations and connections enabled anis to undertake pilgrimages to the holy places of Buddhism in India and Nepal where they encountered monastics from all over the world. Similarly, Western Buddhists and students of various disciplines came to visit them in their little world.

These encounters changed the perception especially the younger anis held of themselves as religious specialists, and of the prestige of their gomba, from a relative contentment into feelings of backwardness and underdevelopment. This realisation, however, was preceded by the anis' turn from a primarily prag-

[22] See Ch.I and II.

matic orientation towards a karma orientation instigated by their former abbot. As I hope to show in Chapter VI and VII, this lama, significantly known as the Guru Lama, not only offered them more profound teachings and ritual practices, but also reorganised the community of Tashi Gomba and tightened its monastic discipline. The implications of these changes intensified the relationship between the anis as religious specialists with the laity, and, with their growing knowledge, also their prestige among the laity. In addition, a shift in motivations for their opting for a religious life, as rendered by different generations of anis, came to the fore.

The move towards a "karma orientation" does in Tibetan Buddhism not necessarily entail a denial of pragmatic-oriented, shamanistic practices. If I have rendered Samuel's analysis in the former section well, it has become clear that the ability and willingness of lamas to operate at all three levels of orientation, be it Bodhi, karmic or pragmatic, has been characteristic for Tibetan Buddhism. However, the trajectories of practitioners from lay towards monastic life, and within the monastic hierarchy, presuppose a gradual accumulation of insights and knowledge necessary to proceed on the spiritual path. This procession, however, depends on the opportunities to receive teachings and initiations from lamas. Focusing on Tibetan Buddhist nuns, I would argue that they are seldom able to transcend the pragmatic orientation, due to their lacking of proper instructions in textual as well as tantric practices. As a matter of fact, then, anis remain laic: ignorant of the deeper truths of the Dharma. The majority of monastics that Samuel denotes to the karma orientation, is thus mainly a male majority (Samuel 1993:31).

In the past, the subordinate, institutional position of nuns - partly because they were not fully ordained, partly because the monks denied women the necessary intellectual capabilities - had resulted in the refusal of their admission to higher religious education. As such, nuns never became major teachers (Havnevik 1989:37). Their role in the history of Buddhism "remained undeveloped - at least as a vehicle for literary expression or as an area in Buddhist culture [i.e. Clerical Buddhism] that needed written commentary and redefinition after the early period" (D.Paul 1979:81). "Participation in an intellectual life by the Mahayana [thus not only Tibetan] Buddhist nun is not recorded. The nun seems not to have been a significant part of the student body of the great Buddhist universities which were the central gem in the crown of the monk's order, an order which was extensive, prosperous, and productive of extraordinary thought and art" (ibid.:82).

However, even a more modest desire of anis to invite lamas to impart higher education has been barred by the nunneries' lacking economic resources and organisational structure (Havnevik 1989:51). Nuns, then, have been confined to the performing of only preliminary tantric practices (*Vajrasattva tsam*), and simple ritual recitations (Havnevik 1989:55) to be performed for lay people aiming at the avoidance of this-worldly distresses as illness and misfortune, related to the most lowest gods. Consequently, the laity tended to see nuns as second rate monastics, assessing them less religious knowledge, expertise, and less spiritual power than monks, thus offering nuns a lower level of economic support (Havnevik 1989). Particularly because of the assumption of their lesser spiritual power, lay people have been preferring to sponsor monks not only for the performance of more elaborate and higher valued rituals, but also for the minor rituals whenever a choice between male and female ritual specialists could be made. Additionally, in situations where monks and nuns were to join in a ritual, monks were given higher rewards than the participating nuns, as their higher spiritual power would render the sponsor also more religious merit.

In the following chapters, we will envision the strategies the Bigu anis applied for augmenting their religious knowledge and expertise and the ways particularly their lamas reacted on their pleas and acts. Above all, we will see how these strategies were based upon, and part of, a larger social and religious context. As asserted above, the encounters with urban and foreign monastics, and with Westerners outside and inside the boundaries of their valley proved to be a decisive factor in their changing self-assertion. This turned out to be particularly the case when individuals came to share their everyday life for a longer period. As these developments are but a recent phenomenon, and the number of guests the gomba

entertained for longer periods of time remained small. Their impact in this small, face-to-face community, however, should not be underestimated. Having been one of these few, the anthropologist herself has become a participant, an actor in this process.

*Reflexivity and coevalness in ethnography*

The balancing of intellectual endeavour and its internalisation by practice as proclaimed in Tibetan Buddhism can be recognised too in the project of writing ethnography, being a synthesis of the anthropologist's years of literary, theoretical study and the subsequent (periods of) fieldwork. Although the sequence from theory to practice represents a Western preference for written texts as sources of knowledge and understanding (see Fabian 1983; Adams 1996:251-5), I would disgrace unjustly those who have taught and guided me all along my anthropological training by suggesting that they emphasised abstract theories and written sources. On the contrary, most of them were fierce adversaries of orientalist perspectives and ideological approaches, and propagated a practice-oriented approach. Their lectures, however, remained but words until I had to put them into an anthropological practice. It was only during the act of field research, and the subsequent writing, that I understood the full nature of their lessons.

In my choice for Tashi Gomba, for instance, some presuppositions had prevailed which I had created after reading Havnevik's account of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in exile (1989). I assumed that nuns, being religious practitioners in their own sociocultural environment, would earn more prestige than nuns in exile, particularly when their gomba had been exclusively founded for them, and no monastery existed within three-days travelling distance. Secretly, I had been hoping for an encounter with wise women high-up in the mystical Himalayas, like the feminist scholars who had been looking for their "religious heroines" of the past. The failure of Bigu's merely potato-digging ani to meet my expectancies not only disappointed me severely, but also triggered me during my preliminary research into an advocacy of scholarly knowledge and their need for more education.

A second example does not deal so much with, what I conceive now as, the naiveté of an inexperienced student, but with the fears of failure and doubts on my abilities in the mental solitude of fieldwork. "History is always a construction", I was taught over and over again. That lesson, however, did not prevent me from lamenting the fact that I only had two ethnographic accounts (namely Fürer-Haimendorf 1976 and Kunwar 1989), and only two written local sources - the founding charter of Tashi Gomba (see Appendix I) and a genealogy, *mendap*, of a high caste Hindu family in the Bigu valley - at my disposal to compare, or to supplement, oral accounts with. With a sense of making up for this lack, I tried for months to establish a "correct" chronology (Fabian 1996:51), and the true history of Tashi Gomba, while the varying narratives brought me to the verge of despair with all their contradictions, different orders of events, lacunae in times recalled, etc. Only much later, I realised I had been acting, despite my teachers, like those scholars who, as Adams points at polemically, hang on to the idea that written sources contain fixed "truths" about social life, and that the ethnographer could "fix" the truth by his research and writing (Adams 1996:251).

How embarrassing these confessions may feel now, the necessity of their rendering supersedes the autobiographical tone of secret expectations and feelings of insecurity. They not only represent the ethnographer's active part in the production of ethnographical knowledge - which made a call for a reflexive analysis of the research outcome - but they also serve to take account of the ethnographer's presence and conduct within the culture under study, and as such becoming part of its history. For this sharing of time with the people under study, I adopted Fabian's notion of *coevalness* (Fabian 1983:30-2). When acknowledging the Theory of Practice (see Adams 1996:196, where she refers to both Fabian and Bourdieu), we can not deny that the ethnographer has become an actor in the field of interest and a part of its history, both through his presence and his writing. In the ethnographical writing, thus, the active side of "participant-observation" has to replace the hiding - particularly in the process of writing - behind the latter part of the anthropological credo for the illusion of objectivity. This attitude of distancing can only result in

the denial of contemporaneity to the people under study, and consequently to a distancing of a culture in time by redirecting it to the past (Fabian 1983).

This insight has been fully elaborated by Vincanne Adams in her recently published "Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas" (1996). In this work, she analyses how the search for the "authentic" Sherpa by Western tourists, Buddhists and scholars has created an imagery among Sherpas of how they were expected to be. Sherpas were held to be the Tibetans scholars have not been able to study until recently. Sherpas were held to be people from the paradisiacal Shangri La, still pure and honest, not defiled by modern times. Sherpas were held to be real Buddhists, permeated by the mysticism and spirituality of the Himalayan snow. This imagery has not been refuted by Sherpas themselves. On the contrary, they attempted to come up to this Western views on who they are and what they are - as an act of *mimesis* (Adams 1996) - for reasons of international fame, individual and collective sponsorship, and "becoming modern"; all aims that were created by their contact with Westerners. Consequently, their culture and history over the past forty-five years has been created in a dialectical, although asymmetric, process between Westerners and themselves.

As I have noted earlier, these developments can also be detected in Bigu, although on a more modest scale than in Solu Khumbu, where Adams is focusing upon. Adams could rely on extensive literature written on the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, and a vast experience of fieldwork among these people, whereupon she could base her analysis. My area of research, however, saw only two ethnographers and their publications (i.e. Fürer-Haimendorf 1976 and Kunwar 1986), and a very recent process of *mimesis* with only few Westerners who have stayed just long enough to instigate such a process. I myself thus became one of the explicit cases of a Westerner who expressed her ideas, consciously and unconsciously, on the people and their culture in comparison with her own social and cultural background. In a case study like this, then, I will have to account for my part in the recent motions in Bigu's culture, illustrating and exemplifying its why and how.

It may follow from the above that the outcome of my research, centring around education, and related notions of independency and freedom of mobility, may not have been something lying out there for me to "find", but partly created, and certainly evoked, by who the Sherpas of Bigu believed me to be, by my conduct during my stay giving them these impressions, and what they hold me to represent. My being a Western woman and student with evidently enough time and money to conduct a research for passing the highest exam in the Western educational structure - comparable to the Tibetan *geshe* degree at the monastic universities, as my assistant tried to explain on several occasions - turned me into a role model for, particularly, anis and lay women. However, young men also took me as a representation of what they desired to be: rich and modern (cf.Pigg 1996).

In this context, my assistant, who has been at my side from the very first day I set foot in Nepal, has also played her part. Dawa is a young Tibetan woman from a small town in Eastern Nepal, who had never been to Bigu before our first fieldwork. She had received her education up to SLC (School Leaving Certificate) at a Tibetan refugee college in Darjeeling, which in the Bigu community rendered her high esteem in both the religious and the secular realm. Her identity as a Tibetan, and her ability to read and understand the religious texts, made her, as the anis used to say, "closer to the Dharma" than they, being Sherpas and the Tibetan language not being their *kha*, "mouth-language", spoken language (Sherpa language is a Tibetan dialect) (cf. Ekvall 1964). On the other hand, her knowledge of English, her Western style of dressing, her working for me, and her visit to the Netherlands (on my invitation, between my M.A. and my Ph.D. research), she represented the Bigu Sherpas' idea of the Tibetans of Kathmandu, city-like, wealthy, knowledgeable, widely-travelled, and with strong relationships with Westerners. On top of that, she fell in love with the only young Sherpa man from Bigu who was striving after an M.A. degree in Kathmandu; a very popular bachelor among the Bigu Sherpa girls. They married in February 1995 in Dawa's home town in Eastern Nepal.

Our role model of educated, modern women turned out most concretely when the present Rimpoche

of Tashi Gomba asked us to teach the anis to read and write English and Tibetan during the last three months of our one-year fieldwork (in spring 1995). Before then, however, many incidents took place that indicated our, but particularly, my perception of what knowledge and history meant. In the descriptive part of the book, I will present some of these events which I think will illustrate how they helped to create the imagery of "The West" and Western education, and have set a process towards a desire for study of anis into motion. By also referring to the other Westerners, however, I hope to have outbalanced the "autobiographical" touch of this ethnography.

One last issue within this context of *coevalness* definitely deserves attention, since it pointed out most confrontingly the necessity of taking the impact of the ethnographer into account, namely Fürer-Haimendorf and his essay on Tashi Gomba (1976). Needless to say that his essay served as the starting point of my research. The amount of information on the nunnery, the nuns, and the lamas he managed to gather within the three months of his stay, have been indispensable in conducting my Ph.D. research in one year. Particularly his listing of the nuns of 1974, their names and backgrounds, and the conflicts among them, have saved me a lot of time-consuming investigations. On the other hand, exactly this information also reveals his lack of anthropological-ethical considerations. Perhaps he never considered the possibility that Tashi Gomba lamas and nuns were ever to read his essay, being illiterate (at least in English) and seemingly far away from the world of the media. He therefore probably never thought that the anis would experience repercussions for the information they offered him on themselves and their community. In other words, he must have assumed that he could go to Bigu, "collect his data", and leave the nunnery as if his presence and his eventual publication would not change it in any way. Especially his publication did, however, have its impact on the nuns' community. In Chapter IV and VIII, I describe not only how the head lama of Tashi Gomba seems to have reprimanded the anis for their communicativeness, but also how the resulting silence of the 1974 generation of anis has complicated my fieldwork, as well as the heading Rimpoche's initial resentment against my staying at the same nunnery as Fürer-Haimendorf. I treat the lama's eventual acceptance of my presence, as a *fait accompli*, and his attempt to turn my being there - and my writing that he knew was my goal - for the best of his nuns' community, as part of the development in which the nunnery is entangled. In response to his request to make the existence of Tashi Gomba known to "the world", I then have chosen not to mystify the location of Tashi Gomba - which would be impossible anyhow after Fürer-Haimendorf's publication and the uniqueness of Tashi Gomba as a nunnery, unrelated to a close-by monastery - and not to use pseudonyms for everybody. In a few cases, I did find it necessary to change a name, or at least to obscure a person quoted, since, in the end, it remains my responsibility to avoid the kind of trouble Fürer-Haimendorf caused.

*Outline*

"House of Birds" intends to be an historical ethnography of a religious institution. Its history is embedded in the social and cultural developments of the people, who have enacted its coming into being, who have supported it, rejected it, manned and womanned it. As such, it depicts a history of the Bigu valley as a whole, focused on the Sherpas. At the same time, a shift in the significance and signification of religion will come to the fore through the differing appreciations, applications, and motivations over time. This religious development cannot be separated from its social context.

> Religious symbols - whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion - cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial. My argument, I must stress, is not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. (Asad 1993:53-4)

Chapter II describes the narratives around the sociopolitical context of the founding of Tashi Gomba, in which the initiator of the founding, the tax collector-to-be of Bigu, plays the leading role. Chapter III is devoted to the Drugpa Rimpoche, who assisted him in this project, and left his mark on the early years of the gomba's existence as its religious leader. In Chapter IV, the effects on the young monastic community of the different views of these two men on what the practice of the Dharma was to accomplish (socially and spiritual) will be explored. Gender distinctions which, in my view, have played a significant role in that unintended competition will be elaborated in Chapter V. The motivations of the first generation of anis in Tashi Gomba will be interpreted from the social roles Sherpa women had to fulfil. In Chapter VI, I will focus on the religious practice of these early anis, with its emphasis on Shamanic Buddhism, and the changes that were introduced by the new abbot, the Guru Lama, since 1959. Chapter VII will show how these new developments and the growing contact with Bigu's outside world between 1970 and 1980 has created a generation gap between the anis who joined the community before 1960 and those after 1960. Chapter VIII is dedicated to recent developments in both the secular and religious sphere which created a tension between tantric practice and study among both the anis and their lamas. In Chapter IX, then, I hope to be able to give some conclusive remarks on the role of gender in the religious development within a sociohistorical context.

II

# The Birth of a Dream

## *The socio-political Context of Tashi Gomba's Founding*

*A Sherpa headman's dream*

It was a week before *Losar*, Tibetan New Year, and the end of my one-year fieldwork was close. Already for days, young Sherpa men were repainting the gomba hall, its outer walls in bright white, its woodwork in fresh red, green and yellow. Dorje, Dawa's fresh Bigu Sherpa husband, had been asked by Ani Hisi to correct the founding dates of the gomba which were written erroneously on both sides of the porch. On the left, the Nepali date had said "1990"; the western date on the right, however, had stated "1922", eleven years too short when considering the approximately fifty-seven years of difference between the Nepali and the Western calendar. After a while, I went to see how Dorje was doing and saw he had painted "1946" on the left and "2003" on the right. A sense of horror erupted into an outburst, "What the hell are you doing? Now both are wrong. The Nepali date was right, only the western one, the one on the right, was wrong." Dorje looked embarrassed. "Ani Hisi told me to change them both. She said that one should be "1946" and so I counted 57 on top of it to get the Nepali date." I pulled myself together again, convinced him of the right "1990" - "1933" set, and he set about erasing his freshly painted numbers.

When I returned to our little guesthouse opposite the gomba entrance, I told Dawa what had happened and reflected upon my outburst. Apart from feeling ashamed about my loss of self-control, I also felt confused. During the many months of my stay with the Anis, they had often replied to my questions with remarks like: "Why do you want to know? Why is it important?" "You know, your knowledge is only good for this life, but our knowledge is for all our next lives!". What did it matter, then, what date was written on the porch, "1946" or "1933", and to whom? Obviously it mattered to me, but I did not stand alone. Ani Hisi had felt the urge to correct what was pointed out to her as apparently being wrong by Western and Nepali visitors of the gomba. To herself, those numbers entailed no meaning whatsoever as she was totally unfamiliar with written calculations and dates, but her visitors had kept questioning her about those two divergent dates, and she had not been able to provide an explanation. So Ani Hisi asked Dorje, a young educated Sherpa, to change them into anything that would stop others bothering her about it. What she cared about was the content of the gomba's donation box when her task as *chöben* (caretaker of the temple) ended. Presumed wrong information might make her visitors less generous.

I not only stuck to 1933 as the correct date of Tashi Gomba's founding because Fürer-Haimendorf states it in his essay. He too could only render this date as it coincided with a great earthquake felt throughout Nepal (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:122; cf.Ortner 1989:101; Bista 1992:134). The disaster had only caused minor landslides in the Bigu valley, but the memory of "the earth coughing and shaking like an old man" was still very much alive among the older generation. With this memory trace, however, the connection between the earthquake and Tashi Gomba's founding stopped. No one ever related these two events spontaneously or, when asked, were able to state whether the plan to build a gomba had occurred before or after the earthquake.

The initiator of the gomba's establishment had been the Sherpa headman of Bigu, Nim Pasang. "One day, God went into his soul", the only, already aged, monk living in Bigu began to tell me. The headman had been spending the night in his son's house next to their fields on a mountain terrace up Bigu northern valley side, when he had a very auspicious dream of temples, and gods descending from the sky. Moved by this experience of beauty and harmony, the old lama went on, Nim Pasang decided to build a


Figure 1 *Nepal and the sites of the Drugpa Rimpoche's gombas*

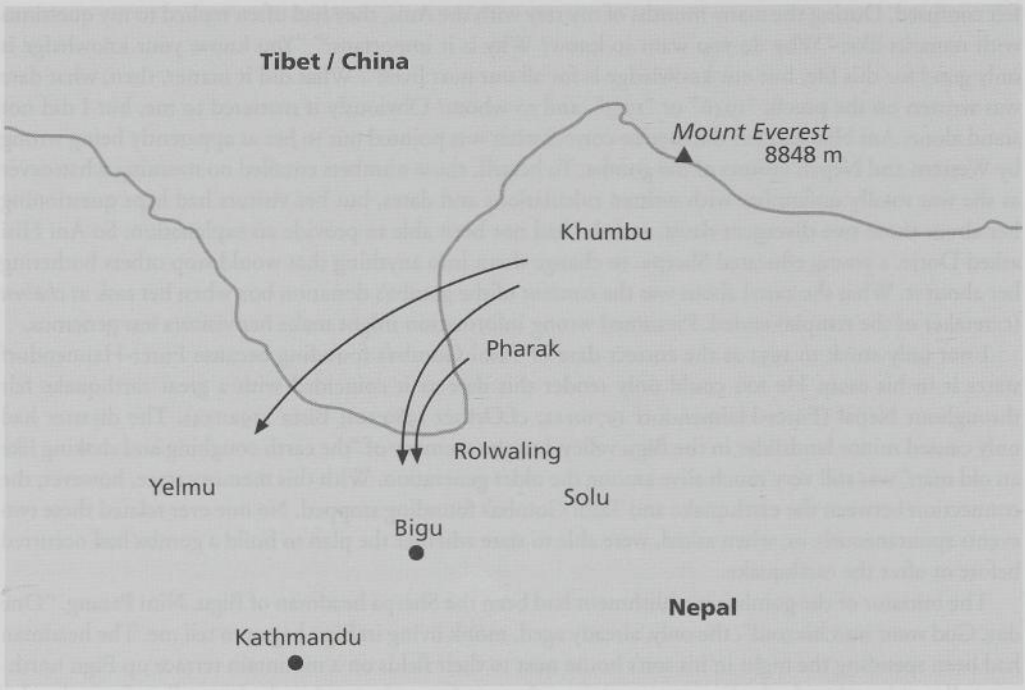



Figure 2 *Sherpa regions*

temple in the same fields he saw when he woke up. This spot would indeed be the perfect location for a gods' house, elevated above the houses dispersed all over the valley and the village temple half-way down to the river.

Not the earthquake, but another event seemed to have brought gods and temples into the dream of a man who otherwise had not impressed his people with his piety. A high lama from Bhutan had passed through Bigu while on pilgrimage through Nepal and the southern Tibetan regions. After his dream, Nim Pasang went after this Rimpoche and asked him for assistance in founding a gomba. The Drugpa Rimpoche agreed. The headman donated the piece of land he had allotted for the gomba, sold his herds of yaks, *dzo* (half-breeds) and goats, and in the end even borrowed money from his relatives, to keep the construction of the gomba going. The Rimpoche sent the monks from his retinue to the people of Bigu and surrounding villages and valleys he had passed during his journey, to urge them to donate their labour, material and foodstuff, to accomplish the project. He even sent monks to Tibet, to bring (among cash, idols and religious texts) a good building plan, and to Bhutan to get fresco painters. The building, started in spring 1934, proceeded only very slowly, but after five years at last the temple hall (*duang*) was ready for consecration (*ramne*). By that time, the Sherpa headman was completely broke. He had put all his land and cattle, even his own house, into his dream. Why?

*The Sherpa headman's ambition*

Nim Pasang had posited himself as the Sherpa headman of Bigu during the gomba founding. In Solu Khumbu, this position would have rendered him the title of *pembu* where it had developed from a clan-elder in clan-based villages into a powerful figure in money and trade. Often these Sherpa "kings" were lamas as well, thus combining political and religious power (Ortner 1989:51). But Nim Pasang was no lama, and Bigu was a multi-clan settlement making him share clan-eldership with five other men, which left him only with a kind of power based on his trading expeditions between Tibet and Kathmandu. His success, however, varied with each enterprise. He never made it to a "Big Man", wealthy and powerful, as they existed in Solu Khumbu (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964; Ortner 1978). In effect, the Sherpas of Bigu dismissed any distinction between "big" and "small" people - "we are all equally poor". What Nim Pasang thus needed was a consolidation of his position as a leader which he only earned by ambitious enterprises.

The theme of a powerful figure initiating the founding of monasteries invites a comparison with Sherry Ortner's work on the political history of religious institutions in Solu Khumbu (1989). Her findings have led her to the development of a cultural schema based on fraternal rivalry. Younger brothers, in competition with their brother's power and wealth, started to build village temples during the nineteenth Century, and celibate monasteries since the turn of the century, to gain prestige and local support. Like Tashi Gomba, these foundings were always initiated with the help of a high and respected lama from Tibet or other monasteries in Solu Khumbu, where they had sought refuge after having been ostracised from their community by their elder brother. The return of the younger brother with a high lama usually resulted in a triumph, materialised in a gomba.

The narratives on Nim Pasang are an exception to this, since they do not include such a fraternal rivalry, nor the need to seek refuge with a lama. What we learn from them is that his competitors were not Sherpas, but a family of high-caste Hindus called Kharka. For the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, Ortner states

> that they were never dominated economically by any other ethnic group, as happened, for example, to the Limbu of eastern Nepal. [...] Either the Sherpas effectively kept out foreign groups, or foreign groups were simply not interested in the high, cold, steep lands of Solu-Khumbu (Ortner 1989:154).

Since the Sherpas migrated from eastern Tibet into these regions south of the Himalayas during the sixteenth Century, they had developed towards "a relatively high standard of living compared to many other (non-high caste) groups in Nepal" (Ortner 1989:153-4). One reason may have been that they were never forced into a subordinate position within their own habitat, as stated above. Another reason, Ortner proposes, may have been that the poorest families among them tended to emigrate, leaving Solu Khumbu with an image of little poverty by taking it elsewhere.

Bigu was such an "elsewhere". It served as a new home for some poor, migrating Sherpa families which they, however, had to share with several other ethnic groups already inhabiting the area. Others arrived after them. In the course of the nineteenth Century, the Sherpas came to terms with all, except the Kharkas. Their rivalry revolved around - what else than - land rights. And the crucial position in this struggle was occupied by the tax collector, the *mizar*, or *mijhar* (Regmi 1978). The *mizar* not only enjoyed a commission on the collected taxes, but often received landholdings as an additional payments for his services. Although the extraction of revenue for the Nepali government did not necessarily imply political power, the *mizar* did serve as a mediator between the Nepali officials and the local community in, for instance, cases of land disputes (cf.Samuel 1993:129). It was this position Nim Pasang was striving for. As a *mizar* he would be able to regulate conflicts over land between the Kharkas and the Sherpas, in favour of the latter, consolidating his position as their headman. At the same time, this position would turn him into one of Bigu's biggest landholders. And like Ortner's younger brothers he felt the need to balance the selfishness he might be accused of by his ambitious personal action, by founding a gomba. However, the gomba was also necessary in his play against the Kharkas.

*Of Sherpa "kings" and the God of Wealth*

Although fraternal rivalry did not appear as a theme in Nim Pasang's biography, it did occur in some other contexts. One of these was the mythical account of early Sherpa settlement in Bigu. However, after the story starts off with a deadly competition between two Sherpa "kings" - clan elders known as *pembu* in Solu Khumbu (Ortner 1989:51) -, situated in an ancient time, it continues with the confrontation of the Sherpas with the state formation activities of the Rana government. In effect, this narrative can be seen as a prelude to the later Sherpa headman's attempts to consolidate his power over the valley.

> Long, long time ago, the Sherpas came down from Tibet. At that time, Bigu was only inhabited by Thamis. One Sherpa king chased them away to Alampu [a hilltop at the eastern end of the valley] and made a border they were not allowed to trespass. He reigned over this mountain side, and his palace was where the village gomba is now. But this king - his name was Gyal Samthso - had enemies and once, when he was in Pari [at the other side of the valley across the river] somebody put a knife in his body. He dragged himself all the way up back to his house again, but his enemies besieged it. Then the king threw a rock out of a window, so that his enemies would think he was escaping from that side. But he run off from the other side and heeded himself at the water mill where they made those wooden cups. His wound, however, bleed heavily and coloured the water red. That is how his enemies found out where he was hiding. They found him and killed him. Then they had to flee, because the king's soldiers sought revenge. They went after them, in the direction of Dolakha [the districts' capital]. At night, they made dinner on three stones. And when some were already preparing themselves to go on, the water of one group was not even boiling yet. Only from the side of one stone the water didn't want to boil. One of the soldiers became so angry that he started to stab into that stone. And the stone started bleeding. Then they took it with them to Dolakha, and there the stone said to them: "You are not taking care of me properly. I want to stay here and I want the Newaris to take care of me." At that time there was one Newari family living in Dolakha. They gave the stone a home up in the village and they [i.e. the Sherpa soldiers] had to slaughter 15,000 cows and goats for that stone. They said the stone was *Krishna*, the god who had created men. *Krishna* is also a god in Tibet, but

then his name is *Chenrezig* [Skt. *Avalokitesvara*], I believe. And ever since, people had to offer cows and goats every year, and always the people from Bigu first, because they had found the stone. Only after them the other villages. That festival was called "Bimsengthan Jatra", because the name of the stone was *Bimseng*. Later, they only asked for fifteen cows and goats. But this offering was stopped ten years ago or so. The government, however, built a big temple for *Bimseng*. Now, there are a lot of Newaris in Dolakha and even here in Bigu. When the king was dead, there was nobody any more to stop other jats from coming to live here. The Thamis nowadays even live uphill next to the big gomba [*thulo gomba* (Nep.), i.e. Tashi Gomba; *sano gomba* is the village gomba downhill].

The man who told me this story was considered by other villagers to be the local authority on the history of Bigu. "Go to Kanchi's father [the storyteller], he knows about these things in the past. He tells them always when we are on the pastures, sitting around the fires at night, like his father once did." We talked many a night together around the fireplace at his house, and he would tell non-stop whatever came into his mind. "You write down everything", he would say, "because my sons are leaving Bigu to work in Kathmandu. They will forget the past of the Sherpas of Bigu, and not telling their children about it. Now, they go to Kathmandu, and they go to school. Then they can read your book". When the children of the neighbours caught word of our sessions, which I taped, they came to join us and to listen to the storyteller's accounts.

I offer here but a short version of the story of the Sherpa kings. On other occasions, the storyteller expanded on the bloody details on the murder or the decline in the amounts of offering the Sherpas had to made for *Bimseng* over the years. It serves as a guide alongside some other, fragmentary historical narratives around the Bigu Sherpa's origins, their contacts with other ethnic groups, and the problems around their identity they faced since their immigration into this area.

According to this tale, the Bigu Sherpas came from Tibet, although in other accounts the storyteller himself, as well as other villagers, stated that they had come from Solu. It seems most likely, that this is not an issue of either/or, but that they had come from Solu through Tibet. Two migration streams have been recorded westwards from Solu. The first occurred between 1725 and 1750, from to Deorali Bhandar over the 11,700 foot Lamjura Pass west of Zhung (Oppitz 1968); a second around 1850, which ended up in Rolwaling (Sacherer 1977, 1981). Genealogies of Sherpa clans of Bigu go back for seven generations[1] and, by taking twenty-five years for a generation as Oppitz does, takes their arrival in the Bigu valley back to at least 150 years ago, thus before 1850. This is about one hundred years after the Deorali Bhandar migration and around the same time of the Rolwaling move. Taking their recalled and present contacts with surrounding regions - through trade, religious practice and marriage - into consideration, however, the earlier migration stream over Tibet must be favoured. Some time between 1750 and 1850, a group of people from Deorali Bhandar may have decided to move on to settle more southwards, back to Nepali territory in regions such as Bigu, Dolangsa and Helambu (see also Goldstein 1980).

When the Sherpas settled in Bigu, they did not occupy an uninhabited area like the Sherpas of Rolwaling (Sacherer 1977), but met with the Thamis. This ethnically Indo-European group is hardly ever mentioned in anthropological literature, and I also only paid attention to them in relation to the Sherpas for whom they seem to have been no match. With the advent of the Sherpas, they have been exiled to a corner area of the valley, called Alampu. Since the beginning of this century, this hill side is known for its slate mine, owned by the Nepali state, where mainly Thamis were set to work. In return for their labour, they were admitted plots of land, according to the Rakam tenure system (see Regmi 1978), which also lent its name to their village at the foot of the hill. Sherpas tend to depict Thamis as honest and rather innocent people. "Their ancestors were born out of pumpkins and they still plant trees for their deceased,

[1] Dorje, the young Sherpa of Bigu Dawa married at the end of our one-year fieldwork, had started to write down the genealogies of the six Sherpa clans of Bigu.

which they worship". The image of "innocence" seems to be primarily based on the Sherpas' inability to categorise them as either Hindu or Buddhist, and underlines their roles as servants and tenants of Sherpa households, of lower, but not untouchable, Nepali caste.

The two Sherpa "kings" had divided the Bigu valley among them along the river that runs through it. One "king", or *pembu*, resided at the south side of the valley (*pari*), controlling the Tinsang La (i.e. Tinsang Pass) on the way to Kathmandu. The north side of the river (*wari*), where traders entered the valley from the way of Tibet, was governed by the other *pembu*. The most fertile section of this *wari* side is still known as *Gyalbashing*, "the kings' fields", although it crosscuts three different wards of present-day Bigu. The two *pembus* fought each other for economic dominance of the whole valley, the right to extract revenues from the cultivated land as well as from tolls, a major source of income, from the trade between Tibet and the Kathmandu valley (Burghart 1984). After the defeat of Gyal Samthso (the king of the *wari* side), the *pari* king may have taken control of the toll collection at two sides of the valley, but he seemed to have encountered resistance from the deceased king's people to accept his authority and right to collect taxes. Hence the pervasive usage of the name *Gyalbashing*. The story mentions the desire for revenge of the dead *pembu*'s relatives, and their chasing their king's murderers.

In Khumbu, when following Ortner's analysis, this situation might have led to an ostracisation of the murderers who would have sought refuge in Tibet with a lama to return eventually under his protection, rehabilitating themselves by founding a gomba. However, Gyal Samthso's rivals may have had another trajectory in mind in order to legitimate their power over the Bigu valley, as they did not turn towards Tibet, but towards Dolakha. The sudden change of subject in the middle of the story, shifting from rivalling Sherpa parties to *Bimseng*, the sacred stone, may offer some clues.

Suddenly, the chasing and fleeing parties are united in the accusation by *Bimseng* that "you are not taking care of me properly". Who is this *Bimseng*? *Bimseng* (Skt. Bhidyah) is one of the five *Pandava* brothers from the *Mahabharata*, a youth who excelled in physical strength and in an insatiable appetite - hence probably his connection to the never-ending cooking of one of the Sherpa groups. During the battle between the *Pandavas* and their cousins, as described in the *Mahabharata*, Bimseng fought atrociously and was recognised by Lord Krishna as "the wrathful Bhairab, the God of Terror who sips blood from a skull cap" (Anderson 1988:235). As such, he was not a manifestation of Krishna, as the storyteller assumed, but a bloodthirsty deity who needed to be pacified by animal sacrifice in order to turn his power and will to the protection of his followers.

The Nepali legend has it that, in ancient time, his idol and cult were introduced into the Kathmandu valley by a princess from Dolakha village (Anderson 1988:236). She brought Bimseng into her marriage as her servant-farmer, who enacted a miracle by finishing all the work on her husband's fields in one single day. Thereupon, the husband, a prince from Kathmandu, fell at the servant's feet who then turned into a stone, a statue of *Bimseng*. This is how *Bimseng* became the God of Wealth and Prosperity in Nepal. However, for the Newaris - the ethnic group who already inhabited the Kathmandu valley before it was conquered by the Malla kings coming from India - wealth and prosperity were not related to agriculture, but to trade. They had developed a brisk commerce between Tibet and India, and *Bimseng* was taken as "their guardian deity of all merchants and tradesmen" and temples dedicated to his worship were to be found all along their trade routes (ibid.:236; cf.Gellner 1992).

The initial awkward shift from the Sherpa rivalry to *Bimseng* now becomes comprehensible when taking wealth accumulated by agriculture and by trade as its covering theme. The *pari* king had pursued the control over land revenues and tollage in the Bigu valley, but he failed as the plot of *Bimseng* and the crucial role given to the Newaris suggests. Although the Bigu valley was aside major trade routes between Tibet and Kathmandu, it must have been a passage for, among others, the Newaris of Dolakha - a village with a presumably long history - who traded with the Tibetan border place now known as Khasa, east of the Lapchi Khang range, and beyond (cf. van Spengen 199). This route, however, entered the Bigu valley at the north, that is the *wari* side of the deceased king. It is not unlikely that after Gyal Samthso's death

the Newaris were unwilling to pay toll to his rival, the *pari* king. The latter may have tried to sort out this conflict with the Newaris in Dolakha, but they clearly did not come to an agreement. *Bimseng*, the Newaris' guardian god of trade, accuses the Bigu Sherpas of not taking care of him, and those he protects, properly.

The Newaris, however, received support in their conflict with the Sherpa king from yet another source. In 1849, Jang Bahadur Rana staged a coup and allocated totalitarian power to the, from then on, inheritable position of prime minister, reducing the king of Nepal to a mere marionette. In 1854, this first of the Ranas to be in power until 1950, launched the *Muluki Ain*, Nepal's caste legislation. According to this law, all non-Hindu, ethnic groups were subordinated to the *Bahun* caste (Skt. Brahman) at the apex, followed by the *Chetris* (Skt. Khastriya), and the Newaris at the third level (Bista 1991:43). As such, it legitimated the Newaris' social supremacy over the Bigu Sherpas, and evidently the latter's defeat in times of conflict.

The *Muluki Ain* was but one of Jang Bahadur Rana's efforts to expand and centralise state power. Another was the enlargement of state control over tax collections, for which he initiated the establishment of revenue offices all over the country. In order to turn the different tax systems favouring local rulers into a centralised, governmental revenue system, the Rana government stimulated the migration of high-caste Hindu families into the hill regions of Nepal (Regmi 1978:514). These families were to achieve control over economic resources, and over political positions as well, in an attempt to decline the local power of ethnic elites (Pfaff 1993:281). In Bigu, the Kharkas were to play this role, and it was through them and their positions as revenue officials and district administrators, that the Bigu Sherpas were confronted with governmental taxes soon after the establishment of a revenue office in Dolakha in 1879 (Regmi 1978:514). As we will see below, the Sherpas of Bigu blamed the Kharka family personally for their confrontations over land, which they could not and did not recognise as part of the Rana strategy to enhance their power in remote areas through a divide-and-rule policy (cf.Pfaff Czarnecka 1993:281). Similarly, the sudden increase of taxes to be paid to some institution in Dolakha became associated with the people the Sherpas situated in that town, the Newaris. As such, the payment of taxes to Dolakha, instead of to their own headman or "king", now seems to be remembered as an obliged provision of animals for sacrifice to *Bimseng* whose annual festival required the statue of this deity to be "drenched in blood from sacrifices of innumerable buffaloes, goats, ducks and chickens" (Anderson 1988:237).

The association of tax payments with the provision of animals for sacrifice did not just arouse from the Bigu Sherpas' imagination. On the contrary, this link had been, according to Pfaff-Czarnecka's historical analysis (1993), one of Jang Bahadur's major political strategies to accomplish a political unification of Nepal. Scattered by cultural differences and spatial distances, what Nepal needed was a symbolical system to centralise state power which would enter even the most remote corners of the kingdom. Obviously, the Newari cult of *Bimseng Puja* did not serve this end, but the Hindu festival in Nepal known as *Dasain* did. This annual festival had been celebrated in Nepal ever since the Malla kings reigned over the Kathmandu valley. It is "consecrated to Durga in her incarnation as Mahisasuramardini, commemorating her killing of the demon Mahisa" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993:273). Like *Bimseng Puja*, its high day focuses on the offering of enormous amounts of animals; but unlike the Newari cult - in which participation was restricted to religious societies attached to distinct temples (*guthi*) - the animals for *Dasain* had to be provided by peasants to their landlords (ibid.:278). As in the Kathmandu valley, these landowners were members of high-caste Hindu families, and related to the religious specialists in charge of the rituals, *Dasain* combined religious notions of purity and caste with control over economic resources (ibid.:278).

Jang Bahadur made use of the framework offered by *Dasain* which paralleled the *Muluki Ain* as the hierarchical structure he imposed on the emerging Nepal society. At its apex stood the king of Nepal, held to be an incarnation of *Vishnu*, who acted as the religious symbol of state power. Instead of the animal provisions the local landlords received from their tenants at *Dasain*, however, the landlords them-

selves had to pay land taxes of which the king was said to be the benefactor. As such, these revenues became interpreted in a political-religious way characteristic of the history of Nepal's state formation (see also Höfer 1979; and Burghart 1984). The festival itself was turned by Jang Bahadur Rana into an elaborate state ritual, to stress the military power and overlordship over economic resources of the rulers (i.e. the Rana family) and, simultaneously, legitimating the *Muluki Ain*, Jang Bahadur Rana turned *Dasain* into an elaborate state ritual (ibid.:271-2). Through much pomp and parades, and public display of the killing of the animals as a ritual purification of the kingdom, *Dasain* was to promote Nepal as a pure Hindu state.

To enforce the spread of the caste ideology as well as to secure the tax collection in remote areas, Jang Bahadur Rana encouraged high-caste Hindu families to migrate into the hill regions and to clear new agricultural lands (Pfaff-Czarnacka 1993:280-281; see also Ortner 1989:97-8)). In time, they were to replace local ethnic authorities through their political positions and their growing control over economic resources, but only after many confrontations with local ethnic elites of which the central powers could make use to increase their share of the collected surplus. Besides this divide-and-rule policy, the land of the new settlers "could be put under new, taxable forms of tenure (e.g. from communal *kipat* to State *raikar* or *jagir*)" (ibid.1993:281; see also Regmi 1978), which would also render higher revenues.

In the face-to-face society of Bigu, Jang Bahadur Rana's political strategy towards a "unified" Nepal became the face of the Kharka family. As we will see below, they were held personally responsible for the Sherpas' encounters with state power. Accordingly, the Newaris died, in the historical narratives of the Bigu Sherpas, a silent death. Although initially associated with the increase of taxes as a reminiscence of earlier conflicts over tollage - *Dasain* and *Bimsengthan Jatra* take place only a few weeks after each other -, their role as competitors diminished. Also the *pari* king disappeared from the scene. He clearly never established his power on the *wari* side of the Bigu valley, as no other accounts of him survived. In effect, the powerful position of "kings", who probably have led the migrating Sherpa families, disappeared. In the narrative, "king" was literally rendered by *gyal* (Sh.-Tib.) or *raj* (Nep.). The Sherpa word *pembu* was only remembered by some older Sherpa men of Bigu.

> In Sherpa, *pembu* means a "Big Man" (Nep. *thulo manche*). But nowadays, we don't have anyone around who is rich and powerful enough to call him a *pembu*. Nobody can give the whole village food from his own wealth. In fact, we don't have any big people in Bigu. Everybody has to work hard to earn a living. Nobody is rich enough to let others do their work.

As the story holds, after Gyal Samthso's death his relatives and followers were not in control of their area any more. "When the king was dead, there was nobody anymore who stopped other *jats* to come and live here." The Sherpas of both sides of the river were to be contested by other "castes" for land. It is with them, that Bigu Sherpa histories continues.

*The Kharka family*

According to the genealogy of the Bigu Kharkas (*mendap*), written by Chandra Bahadur Kharka (1987), their history starts with the settling of their ancestor in Chilanka, a cluster of villages in the adjacent valley south-east of Bigu, around 1700. The direct descendants of this man, Him Kharka - also known as Chilanki Kharka -, established their households between Chilanka and Dolakha, back the way their ancestor had come from. Until, in 1823 - as the *mendap* states - Chattra Singh Kharka (1799-1850) chooses to move west by building a house in Bharang, at the eastern exit of the Bigu valley. For the Sherpas of Bigu, this house marks their shared history with the Kharkas. Built high into a cliff where Bigu's river flows into the Sangawa Khola, the house is referred to as *Jogikuthi*, after the temple adjacent to it, and functions as a memory trace in the Sherpas' narratives on their conflicts with this family of high Hindu caste. From this house, three of Chattra Singh's sons actually moved into the Bigu valley, right into its heart, to Pegu, a cluster of houses just below Gyalbasingh, the murdered Sherpa king's fields.

This specific place and the approximate synchrony of the Kharka's first settlement in Bigu with the Sherpa narrative of their kings' rivalry and the *Bimseng* event triggers off a relatedness between the two. *Wari*-side Bigu no longer had no authority to stop other groups from settling on what they took to be their land. Chattra Singh died, according to the *mendap*, in 1850, suggesting the splitting up of his extended family around that date. The *mendap* does not offer such detailed information. Written in honour and glory of the author's ancestry in Bigu, it does give a few lines of biography on each of the forefathers which focus on their professional activities. Only from these biographies, then, can we elicit some clues as to the part they played in the history of Bigu, particularly from the Sherpas' perspective.

In the context of the political vacuum that occurred after Gyal Samthso's death, the short biography of Chattra Singh is very suggestive. It says that

> he travelled to China [sic!] regularly to pay revenues for the usage of pastures on Tibetan property. When the leader of the tax collection party died, he took over (Kharka 1987:18; cf.Fürer-Haimendorf 1975; Fisher 1986).

Unfortunately, again, the *mendap* is not clear in what year the death of that tax team leader and the transfer of his position took place. The discrepancy of a few years between Chattra Singh's given date of death (1850) and the date of Nepal's caste legislation (1854) - I used as a point of reference in my analysis of the Sherpa narrative - may simply be explained by an error by the *mendap*'s author. However, from the Sherpa narrative we also cannot figure how much time had passed between Gyal Samthso's death and the first "*Bimseng* offerings". If Chattra Singh was this king's successor, he obviously was not blamed for the increased taxes and tax control the Sherpas related to the Newaris, for he also had to pay. What he and his descendants who inherited his position (cf.Regmi 1978) were blamed for, was that they used their power to hog the best of Sherpa land. The Kharkas actually suffered from one disadvantage: according to the Kipat system, a customary communal tenure form also used in Bigu, the right to clear virgin land lay in the hands of members of particular ethnic groups who traditionally occupied the land (Regmi 1978:545). In the case of Bigu, these rights were held by the Sherpas - despite the former occupation of the valley by the Thamis. Also the *Muluki Ain* could not undermine this law.

Nevertheless, their mediating position as tax collectors with the officials in Dolakha was strengthened by their social status as Chetris with - as the biographies in the *mendap* show - positions within the Gorkha army, and in political institutions on district (Dolakha) and national level.[2] This capital, to use Bourdieu's notion (1977), of education, knowledge, and connections, the Sherpas experienced as weapons they could not fight.

> The Kharkas came only much later to this valley. They came from India, through Charikot and Dolakha. They were much more educated than we [Sherpas] were, they knew much more about the world, and they knew about the rules and laws of Nepal much better than we did. That is why they were so powerful. But they were not allowed to clear land themselves. They used the Sherpas to do that for them.

The same knowledgability of the Kharkas, this Sherpa villager expressed, returns in a statement of a Bigu school teacher, linking it up with their practices of getting hold of Sherpa land.

[2] "For knowledge to Benares, and to Gorkha for justice" had become a widespread adage in the late 18th and early 19th Century in Nepal, before the Ranas took over (Bista 1992:46). The custom to send their children to India for education was also common among the Chetri Kharkas. This is probably also why the Sherpas assume the Kharkas to originate in India, while their *mendap* states they came from the Gorkha district, East Nepal.

You know that house built in the rock on the way to Sangba? There one such a Kharka lived, Himkarna [sic!] was his name. Once a Sherpa had been shitting on the path and had cleaned himself with twigs from an incense tree. That Kharka had seen that and demanded four bags of seeds as a kind of fee. I don't know what gave him the right to do that. But he threatened to call the police, and the Sherpa got so scared that he gave him all his land to put him off the idea of going to the police.

"Why did the Kharkas have so much power?", I asked the schoolmaster.

Because they were rich and highly educated, and they had many relatives in Dolakha and Kathmandu.

The following account of the storyteller shows an instance of the Sherpas' fighting the Kharkas' scrupulous practices successfully not, however, without losing some land as payment for help anyway.

The Kharkas, they were brothers and they first settled in Laduk and near Sangba, down at the river side. But this was Sherpa land and here they were not allowed to clear land. So they bought it from the Sherpas. But they were much more educated than we were, they knew how to read and write. And when paperwork about the land had to be done, the Sherpas were depending on them. But the Kharkas cheated and they literally ascribed themselves more and better land. And when that didn't work, they started to play dirty tricks. There is this story about the copper mine, close to Deodunga [the sacred rock], that the Kharkas accused a rich Sherpa of hiding ore in his granary and had called the police. The Sherpa was locked up in the *duk* [jail]. But his wife was a very big and strong woman, like Dorje's mother, and one night she broke open the door and freed him. But her husband was chained, so she had to carry him and hid him in a cave. And then she went back to the village to find a blacksmith who could release him from his chains. But the blacksmiths were all supporting the Kharkas [presumably because they both Hindu], so only when she promised him a piece of land, he agreed to come with her. The Sherpa was released and they went to court, and everything was settled.

Another account relates to the issue of purity, the Kharkas used as a weapon to seize land from the Sherpas. The ethnic, non-Hindu *jats* in the Nepali caste system, except for the Untouchables (*Pani Nachalne*, "Water Unacceptables"), are called *Matwalis*, "liquor drinkers" (Bista 1991:41). The Sherpas' being *matwalis*, but often the Kharkas' landlords too, made them vulnerable to accusations.

In the past, there were many *raksi* shops around the village gomba. There, a lot of drinking and fighting took place, and then the Kharkas, who don't drink liquor, threatened to go to the police. And then the Sherpas got afraid and gave them pieces of land, to avoid any contact with the police. That is how they got, through the years, the best land. But still they who also farmed Sherpa land come for Dasain with jars of milk and curd, instead of *raksi* and *chang* [i.e. beer], because they don't drink, and the Sherpas as their landlords give them a *tika*.

The Kharkas' strategy to get hold of Sherpa land was, thus, to accuse a Sherpa of some serious crime, like murder, theft (from the copper mine), or impure practices (shitting on the road and covering it up with incense leaves, drinking alcohol), and threaten them with the police and courts. The Sherpas did not feel able to match the Kharkas in their knowledge of, and connections with, the Nepali legal system. They rather tried to avoid contact with Nepali officials, by bargaining with the accusers their endangered freedom for cultivated fields.

This situation seemed to have gone on until Nim Pasang took up the challenge of the Kharkas.

*Nim Pasang for mizar*

"Do you remember Sukusing's son, Nim Pasang?" I asked the storyteller.

> Oh yes, I was small at that time, but I remember many stories about him. His family didn't come from Solu, as the other Sherpas of Bigu, but from Pharak. He was very clever, but very unlucky in trade. He once started to trade horses, but that enterprise failed, and then he started to trade sheep and that failed as well. He travelled through entire Solu Khumbu, to Kham and has also been to Lhasa. But he had many debts and had to give away all his land. Of course he gave the best to his brothers, of whom he had borrowed money, and lesser land to other moneylenders. Then he went upwards, where now the gomba is, and started to clear virgin land there. One piece eventually went to the gomba. The rest he used for himself.

This tale is supplemented by the recall of Nim Pasang's grandson, who was Bigu's *mizar* during my fieldwork,

> And then he went to the father of the village lama at that time, Wongchu. He was quite wealthy. To him he went to set up a horse trade between Tibet and Kathmandu, and the man agreed. And then they went to Tibet together and bought nearly forty horses. But on their way they lost many. Some just died, others fell into ravines. This enterprise took all their wealth. Twelve horses were left when they had to cross the last pass and in that night also those disappeared into the ravine.

Nim Pasang's father, Sukusing, migrated to Bigu from Pharak, a small Sherpa region between Khumbu and Solu (see map 2). Why he had left his home area, we do not know. Maybe he had been one of those "Big" people who had fought over political power but lost and had to leave, as in Ortner's accounts (Ortner 1989:69-70,91). He, however, never sought to go back. Instead, the stories about him and his son centre around their ambitions to become wealthy and powerful in Bigu itself. Accumulations of wealth within a short time was only possible through trade (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975; Fisher 1986; Ortner 1989:155). Nim Pasang, however, was not very succesful, and that did not enhance his chances of gaining some respect among the Sherpas of Bigu, with whom his family only shared a short history. Although he kept on initiating trade expeditions once in a while, he followed his father in shifting his ambition towards politics during the late 1920s.

> The father of Nim Pasang had the biggest mouth, they always stood up in public affairs, and so that family was appointed as *mizar*. They were not afraid of the Kharkas or any other Nepali. They walked around here like *daanlh* [mountain peacock]. That is how Nim Pasang became a *mizar* of their clan, but in 2005 his son was appointed by the Nepali government as the *mizar* of the whole Bigu *panchayat*. *Daanlh* with big mouths. The whole family has always been like that [*ongchermu*, cf.Ortner 1989:53]. Even now, the villagers don't like to give their daughters away to them. They have loose hands too.

Their reputation among the Bigu Sherpas has clearly not been very charming, but Nim Pasang's grandson replies,

> The people here were afraid to stand up for themselves, very afraid of the police. But my grandfather wasn't. His parents [Sukusing and his wife] had come to live here much later than the other Sherpa families. He was a Tibetan from Pharak and his wife a Sherpani, who had worked in the King's palace. That is why they were much more mature than the others. Because my mother had worked at the palace, they knew people and finally won the position of *mizar* and the land that went with that position.

Sukusing had managed to become a member of the tax collecting party by taking care of the revenues to be paid by the *Kambadzen* clan. His wife had been *Kambadzen*, but whether he had been a Tibetan is unknown. Other Sherpas hold that his family only made up their Tibetan origin to enlarge their status and to veil their history in Pharak. Equally, his wife may have served in the king's palace - one of the first nuns of Tashi Gomba also stated to have worked in the palace - but whether this position had rendered them useful connections remains doubtful.[3]

In any case, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth Century, Ortner asserts that "the Sherpas were apparently squeezed by Rana exactions" (Ortner 1989:117), as the Ranas "became progressively revenue oriented" (Regmi 1978:26; see also Pfaff-Czernacka 1993). In the Dolakha district, a revenue office was established in 1879. This "increasing intrusion of the Nepal state and [...] the Sherpas ethnic (construed as "caste") smallness vis-a-vis the Hindu Ranas, that was operating at the time", Ortner records for Solu Khumbu (Ortner 1989:165; cf. Höfer 1979) were personified in Bigu in the Kharkas. Their *mendap* recalls Bhauraba Singh (1831-1919), Chandra Singh (1870-1933), and Amrit Bahadur (1911-1980) as *shukbar*, local administrators with the responsibility over tax extractions. From Dal Bahadur (1925-1974) onwards, three Kharkas are said to have held the position of *Panchayat* administrator, stationed in Laduk. This post was created after 1926, when "the government decided to establish Panchayats at the village level with the power to exercise judicial authority in certain local matters" (Regmi 1978:572). A village *panchayat* in the hill districts had to comprise a population of one thousand. The Bigu valley, however, consisted in 1994 of only about 1400 people, which in the 1920s must have been half this size. As the Kharkas as *Pradhan Panchayat* (head of the village council) were stationed in Laduk, we may conclude that Bigu had become incorporated into Laduk *panchayat*.

The Bigu valley the Sherpas considered to be theirs was, thus, in total control of the Kharka elite as the extension of the Rana government as state agents and functionaries (cf.Ortner 1989:119). The only position left to Nim Pasang, to stand up against Kharka domination and to fight for the Sherpa-ness of their valley, was the one of *mizar*. As the local tax officer, the *mizar* would also represent the Bigu valley in the Laduk *panchayat*. Although the careers of the Kharkas during the 20th Century show a focus on the district and national level (as members of the High Court, and positions as governmental secretaries), they obviously disliked Nim Pasang's strive for attaining the sub-post of local *mizar*. Yet he succeeded. With his attitude of a peacock with a "big mouth", and whatever connections he could have made use of, he succeeded in holding the Sherpas' claim on customary rights on the area, by referring to the Kipat tenure system. Around 1930, he was appointed as *mizar* of Bigu, and became known as the local headman.

Nim Pasang's appointment, however, did not improve his reputation among the Bigu Sherpas, but rather enforced his image as an ambitious, rather selfish and arrogant man. He remained an outsider. In my opinion, he needed, like the ostracized brothers and *nouveaux riches* in Solu Khumbu, something to justify his personal ambitions and to secure his status among the Sherpa community. Although his personal circumstances differed from his fellow Sherpas of Solu Khumbu - if we take Ortner's fraternal rivalry for granted (1989) - he too chose to found a gomba.

Similarly, his initiating the founding of a monastery can also be interpreted as a sociopolitical act, aiming to protect the endangered Sherpa-ness of the Bigu valley. Nim Pasang's political position as *mizar* did not safeguard the cultural Sherpa identity of the valley. The expanding network of the Rana government had not only led the Kharkas into the Bigu valley, but opened up the mountain areas also for the immigration of groups like the untouchable blacksmith caste (*Kami*), Magars, and Hindu-oriented Newaris and Tamangs. And if Ortner in the far-northern regions of Solu Khumbu already detects

[3] Bista mentions serfdom and slavery to which "many non-Hindu indigenes in the plains were forced to do" under the Malla kings (Bista 1992:42).

evidence from oral history interviews that certain Nepali religious customs made their way into the region during this period (Ortner 1989:97-8)

the more so in a middle hill region like Bigu where, because of its greater accessibility, Jang Bahadur Rana's migration policy became particularly successful (Pfaff-Czanecka 1993:281). According to Pfaff-Czarnecka, local ethnic elites were ready to accept cultural innovations, such as *Dasain*, as well as the language of power it communicated in terms of caste (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993:282). She did not detect "resistance on large scale", revealed in ethno-historical material (ibid.:281). However, the scale of resistance in face-to-face societies, which the Ranas sought to unify into a Nepal state, could only be as large as the boundaries of its society allowed. In the long run, ethnic groups seem to have lost their battle against Hindu domination, but that does not imply they simply accepted its political language which rendered them a tribal stigma, nor the cultural forms in which they were presented from the very beginning. The foundings of village temples and monasteries in the northern Sherpa regions, for instance, can be understood as such an act of resisting "the policy of pushing Hindu values, and despising the "dirtiness" of ethnically Tibetan peoples like the Sherpas, partly acted to unite the Sherpas around their common Buddhist religion and Sherpa identity" (Ortner 1989:98). As in the Solu Khumbu region, in Bigu too this development was put in a religious frame. Although the founding of the village temple as such is not remembered as a conscious act against Hindu values by present-day Bigu Sherpas, a festival that must have occured with or after the founding of the village temple, on the other hand, does imply that efforts have been made towards a manifestation of a Sherpa identity vis-à-vis the immigrated Hindu groups: the Sherpa counter-ritual of *Dasain*.

*The Narak festival*

During the three high days of *Dasain*, the Bigu Sherpas celebrate their own festival which they call *Narak*. According to them, *narak* is a Sherpa word meaning both "protest" and "hell". Neither the word nor the festival in itself, however, were known to Sherpas of Solu Khumbu I asked about it. In effect, we are not dealing here with a Sherpa term, but with a corruption of the Nepali word for "hell" which is *narka* (Sh. *njewa*); a linguistic adaption which in itself might be considered as significant. The given meaning of "protest" refers to the expressed purpose of the *Narak* festival, that is a protest against the excessive slaughtering of animals during *Dasain*. Furthermore, *Narak* is meant to compensate for the sins caused by these animal sacrifices, to soothe the gods and to dispel the demons who were attracted by the running blood and the red meat. *Narak*, thus, can be interpreted as a "protest" against "hell" as evoked by *Dasain*, and thought to become the Buddhist Sherpas' next-life destiny if they did not denounce their responsibility for the killings in the face of the gods.

Although the *Narak* festival is not known in Solu Khumbu, Robert Paul does refer to merit-making ceremonies to offset the sins caused during the *Dasain* offerings (R.Paul 1982:98). According to his description, however, these ceremonies are a religious specialists' affair as he mentions only Sherpa lamas performing a *tshogs* (communion) ritual of their own. In Bigu, however, *Narak* is definitely a communal ritual in which both village lamas and laity participate.[4] Its outline, on the other hand, resembles a major festival celebrated by the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, called *Dumje* (see also Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:130). Although ethnographical renderings of *Dumje* show textual and ritual variations from one village to another, the essence of *Dumje* can be summarized as a fertility rite, to expiate demons, soothe the *lü* (Skt. *naga*) and to exact protection of the gods, at the start of a new agricultural cycle in spring (see Fürer-

[4] I restrict myself to the *Narak* celebrations I witnessed in October 1994, with some references to the one I observed in 1995. Fürer-Haimendorf, however, mentions also participation of the monastics of Tashi Gomba in the *Narak* rituals (1976), which was confirmed to me by the nuns. Their present abstinence from participation forms part of reforms initiated by the abbot the Guru Lama, in the 1960s and 1970s, and will be discussed in Chapter VI.

Haimendorf 1964; Funke 1969; R.Paul 1979; Ortner 1978). It is the only seasonal ritual in which the whole Sherpa community partakes, sponsored by laymen (*jindak*), and lasting from three to six days. Its highlight are the mask dances (*cham*) on the second or third day, during which village lamas display the gods and demons to whom the ritual is dedicated, as well as figures which express the rite's fertility purpose in terms of sexual joking. Next to fertility, of both soil and its people, *Dumje* also entails a ritual to honour descendancy, in the form of offerings to the "lord of respectful bone(s)" (R.Paul 1979:278), i.e. the clan-protecting deities.

As the description below will show, all these aspects can be recognized as structuring the *Narak* festival of Bigu as well. With these differences, however, that *Narak* is not celebrated in spring but in autumn, coinciding with the *Dasain* festival, and that *Dumje* as such is not known at all in Bigu - nor any other communal spring rite, for that matter. From this, we might deduce that the Bigu Sherpas either shifted their celebration of *Dumje* to coincide with *Dasain*, or never had celebrated *Dumje* since their migration from Khumbu, but introduced it specifically to counter the Nepali festival of *Dasain*. Neither the story-teller, nor anyone else, could shed some light on this, but their - although obscure - accounts on the history of Bigu's village *gomba* and its lamas seem to favour the latter (see below).[5]

The choice for *Dumje* as a structuring framework for *Narak* is not very surprising, as it shares some important features with the pre-Rana celebration of *Dasain* as investigated by Pfaff-Czarnecka (1993) too. First of all, *Dasain* is also related to the agricultural cycle, namely to the planting of the holy *jamaro* (barley) "demarcating the start of the main harvest time - a period which is usually connected with prosperity and joy" (ibid.:276). Secondly, the celebration of *Dasain* was in many places a communal affair, also before it became a national festival (ibid.:273). Thirdly, in 1802-3 an official of the East India Company also described mask dances in the context of *Dasain* (ibid.:274). Although we have no evidence whether these were also part of *Dasain* celebrations in the Dolakha district, it is too striking to not at least mention it. Finally, for the celebration of *Dasain* not only the worship and sacrificial grounds had to be purified, but the entire city or village had to be purified as well (ibid.:273). No other recorded Sherpa ritual could have equalled *Dasain* better than *Dumje*.

In 1994, in the early morning of the first day of *Narak*, seven processions led by white banners could be seen moving up and downhill from both sides of the river, in the direction of the village gomba. Each procession had started from the houses of the seven sponsoring families, consisting of relatives, neighbours and friends, while rifle shots echoed through the valley. When they reach the village gomba, they were welcomed by the village lama and his assistants. The banners of the sponsors - some imprinted with Tibetan *mantras*, most however just plain white - were put up on the courtyard of the gomba, while the temple's banners that always adorn its site were exchanged for new ones. The lay people gathered inside and the sponsors started to prepare the first meals in the outhouse, to serve *arak* (home-made liquor) and *chang* (Tibetan beer). Meanwhile the village lama consecrated the new banners and assistants engaged in the making of *tormas*, effigies for the deity. Lay men and the temple's guardian (*konier*) built up the shrine with butter lamps, foodstuffs offered to the gods and the effigies (see Ortner 1978).

When the meal was finally served, late in the afternoon, the *arak* and *chang* had created a jolly atmosphere both in the temple and in the outhouse. Outside it was raining, the tail of the monsoon. The women had been singing already for hours, teasing each other in new lyrics to known melodies. When, just after sunset, all except the sponsoring families left for home, their voices faded away in the dark of

[5] According to women originating from Dolangsa, a Sherpa village just over the Tinsang Pass, and from Helambu, a region west of the Kathmandu-China motor road, *Dasain* is celebrated also there in the village temple, but without the mask dances. While the village lama recites *mantras*, the laity is primarily enjoying itself with eating and drinking and singing. These celebrations, however, were not known by the name of *Narak*, which the women called typical for Bigu. It must be stated too, that also *Dumje* was not known to them.

the valley. Along with the sponsors, the village lama and his students also remained. They recited *mantras*, while the sponsors offered butter lamps, and performed prostrations in front of the statues on the temple's shrine. At about ten o'clock, the inauguration ceremony was over, and also the village lama retired. His assistants and the sponsors shifted to the outhouse again and resumed their drinking and singing till late at night.

The second day started at about ten o'clock in the morning, when the sponsors lighted the fires again for the preparation of lunch and the lama and his somewhat drowsy students took up their reading again. Outside, Sherpa families came trickling in, chatting, drinking, playing, until the meal was served. Afterwards, a small table was placed in the centre of the courtyard next to the banners where the village lama put his copper jar with purification water, a plate with *tormas* and offerings, and a jar with *raksi*. Before he sat down, he and his students led the whole congregation three times around the village gomba compound, including its labyrinth of *mani* walls. I noticed that only older people, and merely older women, were having a rosary in their hands to mumble a "Om Mani Pe Me Hum" with each bead. Some of the men tried to strike up a cheerful Sherpa song, but didn't manage to get everyone sing with them wholeheartedly. This procession was only accompanied by drums; other instruments, used in monasteries and during a similar procession I witnessed around a village gomba in a nearby valley, like the *geling* and the *sangdung* were absent. After the third round, the village lama took a seat at his prepared table while the congregation moved into a wide circle around him. The next moment the three assistants were dancing around their lama and the banners, in a slow rotating way, pulling their knees up high, on the beat of the drum. Each of them made several turns, but as the *arak* had been lavishly poured while circumambulating the gomba compound and the dancing, the dancers soon had to struggle to keep their balance. Just when they really inclined to fall into the crowd, the drum stopped. The village lama blessed the offerings on his table, threw the effigies to the birds and dogs roaming around, and offered his jar of *arak* and the plate of foodstuff to the dancers. The next day, this performance seemed to have been a kind of rehearsal for the real big show.

After the dances, the people gathered again in the temple for dinner. This night was dedicated to the commemoration of the dead (*korchang*), whereby close relatives either pay respect to a person who died during the last year, or, having made a vow to do this *puja* for five subsequent years, for an earlier deceased family member. In 1994, for example, two young women enacted a *puja* for their deceased grandfathers. One who finished her fifth year motivated her act with the simple reason that she had not been in Bigu at the time of his death, his funeral and the subsequent *gyewa*, a merit-making ritual to help the deceased to find his way through *bardö*. The other was the granddaughter of Nim Pasang's middle brother, known as Calcuttako, who had loved him very much and felt sorry for the sorrow her mother had caused him during his lifetime. Both women have a history of their own, the former being divorced after a five-year, childless marriage; the latter having a deformed face, said to be the result of her mother's inert irresponsible character, which after many years became confirmed when the mother ran off to Ktm with another man, leaving her children in the care of their grandmother - I will return to these life histories in Chapter V, dealing with images of womanhood. These commemorations lasted until dawn, giving every one who wanted to perform this *puja* a chance to do so.

At noon the next and last day, the Sherpas who had participated so far, were joined by many others, including people of other castes such as Thamis, Tamangs, and Kamis; however, no Chetris. All were gathered in the temple yard and were provided with food and drinks. It was commonly known throughout the valley, that this was the day the dance performance with the masks and costumes was going to take place. After the meal, a purification fire was lit at a corner of the courtyard, a sign for the audience to create space, like the day before, for the dancers. This day, however, the village lama remained out of sight. The drums started and three dancers dressed up as Kingly gods appeared, in blue, red and green costumes, wearing roughly painted, wooden masks and crowns. Having been somewhat spoiled, I guess, I expected a drama to be played out between the three, but the action consisted of the same simple

spinning and turning as the day before. The three gods were followed up by three dancers dressed up as the Grim Reaper, skeletons painted on a black suit. Also their movements were only a turning around on the drone of a drum; no songs, no words, no acting. They left to make way for the same gods as before again, who after their rounds were chased away by three monkeys.

With them the action started. The crowd stirred as the monkeys made obscene gestures with their hands and tails, and enacted sexual poses. Much to the delight of the audience, they tried to pull people of different sex together, or to embarrass specific persons - like me - in other ways. After a while they were joined by two sadhus with caricature masks and a white cloth over the dancers' casual clothing. They made their rounds among the public to beg for money, stuffing the banknotes of one, two or five rupees in their bags. They were supported by the monkeys: those who did not give were ridiculed even more. After this scene, the performance was over. The Thamis and Kami people went home, the Sherpas went to sit together again in small groups, still teasing each other with the attention they had gotten from the monkeys. The purification fire died out.

Dinner was served for the last time, and the evening was spent on the transfer of the responsibilities of the festival by the present sponsors to the seven sponsoring next year's Narak. All were seated at a long table in the temple, specifically constructed for the occasion, with next year's sponsors sitting opposite those of this year. Each *jindak* handed a jar of *arak* and a bowl of boiled eggs or potato curry to the village lama which, after the latter's blessing, were offered to next year's sponsors. After this ritual was performed seven times, all took a sip of the lama's sacred water, and a small torma ball (*torsil*) made of *tsampa* and butter. Then, everybody stood up and deconstructed the table. I thought that this would be the end, and went outside for some fresh air. But what happened then particularly struck me. During my research in 1992 and in the last couple of months I had found the Bigu Sherpas to be rather poor on their own folklore. Neither at marriage parties, on jatra days or other festivals, did I ever hear them sing Sherpa songs, or dance together. During the last three days, I had heard them singing melancholic sounding ballads for the first time, and mocking lyrics to a popular Nepali song. Their group dancing, at night, however, were always of the same simple circular shuffling on either of the two tunes they could play on a mouth organ. But that night, suddenly men's voices were heard singing songs in Sherpa language. I went into the temple instantly and saw the singers in a semi-circle, with their arms around each other's waists or shoulders, shuffling intricate steps. Women also joined in, while others watched with a pride I had never noticed on their harsh features before. This festival was different from anything else I had participated in this valley before, and to the Bigu Sherpas this was also definitely the highlight in their community life.

The above description has to display *Narak*'s importance as a communal festival of the Bigu Sherpas. Neither the amount of participation, nor its elaborateness, were to be compared with any other celebration in Bigu I witnessed. Additionally, no other celebration had been restricted to Sherpas only. Other castes, however, were much welcomed as spectators of the mask dances, the highlight of the Sherpa festival. Furthermore, *Narak* as a statement of Bigu's Sherpa community vis-à-vis outsiders, as we may conclude from the above, also involved internal discussions on reputation and membership. These disparities centred around the privilege of being one of *Narak*'s sponsors, *jindak*, besides the family's economic ability to come up with a one-seventh share of the necessary amounts of *arak* and *chang*, rice and vegetables, for hosting the participants for three days. To gain the right of becoming a *jindak*, a family has to approach a sponsor of the coming *Narak*. As the coming *jindak* will usually receive more than one request, he will have to select one family. As I indicated above, the transference of sponsorship from one family to another was explicitly played out on the last evening of the festival. This event can not only be interpreted as the public acceptance of the duties by next year's sponsors, but also as a show of trust by the present *jindak* families in their successors. The displayed relationship between the two families supersedes, however, a confidence in economic capacity.

On the day after the *Narak* celebrations in the village gomba, yesterday's sponsoring families visited each other, led by the village lama. In the company of their relatives and immediate neighbours, each of them was invited to take a seat behind an offering table constructed in their respective courtyards. During the ceremony that followed, the *jindak* family was honoured for its generosity, and the hope for its future prosperity was expressed in a song, while they were offered *khata* (ceremonial scarves), *arak*, and fruits. From this celebration of the sponsoring families, as honorous members of the Sherpa communtity, it becomes clear why the role of *Narak*'s *jindak* was considered to be a privilege by a family, who was finally accepted as next year's sponsors, after already applying for it for five years. It turned out that the father had left his wife and three children twenty-four years earlier, to run away with another woman. When they and their children returned to Bigu after thirteen years, they were debarred from community life. In course of time, relationships with the father's and his ex-wife's relatives, and neighbouring families, softened, until the man and his ex-wife were also on speaking terms again. A full rehabilitation, however, was only proven by the acceptance of the family as a *Narak jindak*, which finally occured in 1994 as their succeeding no less than the chairman of the VDC.

Concerning *Narak*'s content as celebrating Sherpa-ness, the commemorations of the death in the *korsang* ritual, the communities' prosperity - exposed by the *jindaks* - and the references to sexuality - eggs, fruit, and the monkeys - speak for themselves. Compared to the ethnographical accounts of *Dumje*, however, the central religious practice of *Narak* turned out to be quite meagre. The *lingam torma*, so prominent in the *Dumje* ritual as the symbol of fertility, was totally absent in the *Narak* rituals I observed. Besides, the religious texts recited during *Narak* differed in 1994 and in 1995, as the religious ceremonies were led by the two village lamas of Bigu respectively. The lama in charge of the 1994 celebration had been a student of the man who was the presiding lama in 1995. When the latter had taken the monastic vows in the early 1980s, he appointed his pupil as Bigu's village lama. The monk - hereafter referred to as the Meme Lama - however, was still considered to be Bigu's true village lama by the laity, as he was more knowledgable than his student. In the context of *Narak*, this came to the fore in the different texts they used. Whereas the monk recited the *Chetor* texts from the *Kangyur* (the compiled body of Tibetan Buddhist texts), invoking the forty-two benign gods and the fifty-eight horrendous gods, the lay lama only recited basic *mantras* for the *Guru Rimpoche* (Skt. *Padmasambhava*) and *Pawa Chenrezig* (Skt. *Avalokitesvara*). As the lay lama, according to his own statement, did not feel the urge to study and use the *Chetor* texts, this may imply that textual sophistication in the *Narak* ritual was not considered to be of major importance. The invocation of the introducer of Buddhism to Tibet and the Buddha of Compassion seemed to be sufficient for the purpose, namely of exhibiting the Bigu Sherpas as Buddhists, and of purifying themselves of the sins enacted by the Hindu sacrifices.

The suggestion, as expressed above, of *Narak* emphasising a political statement rather than elaborating on a religious understanding, is supported by two other aspects. The first is, that the present Drugpa Rimpoche (a reincarnation of the co-founder) did not approve of his monastics participating in the ritual. They have done so before 1980, but when the young Rimpoche came in charge of his monasteries he claimed *Narak* to be merely a communal ritual and not a religious one. The monastics were to counter the sins provoked by the *Dasain* slaughters with rituals in their own temple, although they are too curious not to peep down over the ridge to watch the mask dances.

The second aspect deals with the central role the *sadhus* - as the people of Bigu call them - play in the mask dances, and the way they are played out. Although in *Dumje* celebrations in Tibet acrobats with exagerated Indian *yogi*-like faces usually take the stage, there they only act as interludes (Funke 1969:126). In Bigu, however, the *sadhus* form, together with the monkeys, the major act of the dance; the hilarious scene the audience is really waiting for. The Meme Lama attempted to lecture on the play, the day before when all were awaiting their meal in the temple, explaining the meaning of the danced deities, but his words were lost in the buzz of the crowd. To them also, *Narak* seemed first and foremost a communal festival, and the next day's performance merely entertainment.

The similarity between the masks worn by the Tibetan acrobats, as described by Funke (1969), and those of the Bigu *sadhus*, suggest existing long-term anti-Hindu sentiments enacted by ridiculing its holy men. Variations in performances, however, must be considered to render local interpretations of relationships between Hindus and Buddhists. In Bigu, then, not the physical preoccupations of the *yogis* were played out, but the greediness, the money-grubbing of some sort of Brahman priests. It may be obvious that these characters represent the Sherpas' opinion of the Kharka family, I presented earlier. Being the main and most powerful Hindu representatives in the Bigu Sherpas' habitat, their display of power and greediness were put into religious terms, in opposition to the most basic Buddhist notion of generosity and compassion - as we will also see in a speech offered to me by the Meme Lama (see below).[6] Buddhism, as such, offered the Bigu Sherpas a framework to uphold their self-esteem, as being morally better human beings than Hindus, in the light of the social oppression suffered by them. Reference to a Buddhist identity, however, requested a display of their religion.

*Constructing a Sherpa identity*

As the context of *Narak* (in opposing *Dasain*) suggests, the Bigu Sherpas constructed their identity vis-à-vis the Hindu Kharkas. *Narak*, however, needed a location and a religious specialist to be performed in the first place, that is, a village temple and a village lama. Before elaborating on these, however, I would first like to render the speech the Meme Lama volunteered. This speech focused on the construction of religious buildings, as the most obvious manifestation of Buddhist faith and its ideology of generosity and compassion. As such, it had to counter the sheer fact that the Hindu population of Bigu had not constructed one single Hindu temple in the valley,[7] which signalled the selfishness and greediness of Hindu priests, i.e. as a characteristic of Hindu religion as a whole. Although he does not mention the Kharkas explicitly - which would be similar to "gossip behind someone's back" - his reference to them as the Hindu, and Nepali, representatives in the valley, should be evident. Moreover, he starts off with stating a "religious victory" over a people I introduced as the Bigu Sherpas' first powerful adversaries, the Newaris. Jumping from them to Dasain, to continue with Bahun priests and the moral issues of generosity and greediness, he then makes a political statement by comparing faith in gods to dealing with the police and bribes. As such, his speech acts like a summary of the themes addressed in this chapter.

> *Marga* [New. "path to salvation"; Gellner 1992:5], they call it [instead of *karma*]. They are born in it, they do *gyewa* too, they bury their dead, and they know they will be reborn. So that's why they are doing *bare* [life-cycle rites; see Gellner 1992], a Hindu ritual that is. And if they are not reborn, so why should they offer to their *pitha* [shrine]? But yes, there is a next life. For that they are doing prayers, for that they do *pitha* for dead people, and offer during Dasain. But, they are not doing so much rituals as lamas do. We, lamas, live the Dharma and give more. But they are only doing a job, finish it, and they never try to understand and think about the Dharma. Since two or three years, there are conferences in Kathmandu with Newaris, and we are also invited. And the students are abusing their [Newari] lamas. "They don't know anything, so we think of *Devi* as our god and *Madel* [?] as our god. Our lama is a Newari lama. But only if you tell us, than we know [about the dharma]". And since then

6 In 1994, the *sadhu* performers were also wearing the ochre, cotton bags as belonging to the outfit of the monks and nuns, to stuff their banknotes in. The dancers, clearly, wanted to make a political statement, in the course of the national elections to be held one month later. Being members of the communist party, they equated the Buddhist monastics with the Hindu *sadhus*, displaying their anti-religious feelings. Their monastic bags did not remain unnoticed and triggered off political discussions among the groups of Sherpa men, after the mask dances.

7 Jogikhuti was a hermit place, not a temple as a centre of rituals. From the old Kharka still living in Bigu I came to understand that, as far as he could remember, deceased members of his family were taken to Laduk, or even to Pashupathinath in Kathmandu. The first Hindu temple in the Bigu valley itself was founded in 1993 on the school compound, dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge.

the lamas have to teach, and they go east and south, and explain. And then they know about the Dharma. Dharma will arrive to all people. But to the Bahuns, if they do extensive *puja*, people pay a lot, to gain *punya* [merit] afterwards. And when the people offer, whatever they offer, they [the Bahuns] keep to themselves. For the lama, whatever he is given, he will collect all. And if we got one rupee, or five, ten, twenty, one hundred, we would collect all. And when I would have 10.000 rupees, I would make a new thing. That *mani* [prayer wheel] I have made. And if I think of making something, it will help all people a little bit. If people are not thinking and talking about making things, than nothing will be accomplished. That *mani* I have made. We put it there, and it will spread the Dharma. And all of us, we need the *dharma*. When we express it that way, then we accomplish it for all. And for them [the Bahuns], they are not making even one *kuthi*, a Brahman's temple house. But to Bahuns, people also give for those who die, cows, a house, a golden ring. Yes, rich people even give a golden ring, a cow or a horse to a Bahun. And they, they bring it to their own house and eat [the offerings]. They are not making anything, not even a *kuthi*. They do not go on pilgrimage or make something to promote the Dharma. To lamas, people give a lot. If they give them a lot, they can make a gomba. In Bouddha [Kathmandu], there are many, many gomba, and all are given by people. It's not lamas' money, it's the people's. (...) Now, they are building here a *tsamkhang* [retreat house], and, after you stay for one year, four nuns will live there and they will get more knowledge. And you are going back and you tell the people that in Bigu we have this and more people will come. That is how the Dharma will grow. Now there is a lot of prosperity here. When people give to Bahuns, these all collect it for their own house, and they collect it for their son, and later on it all will be finished in that way. Even if they are rich, Bahuns are not making anything. You can go and ask in the village: "What did the Bahuns make?" Nothing they accomplished. They eat it all themselves. And if I eat all myself, others don't have enough. If we have ten families, and I am eating alone, than there is not enough. We have to give as well, we have to think that way. (...) They respect *Devi*, and do *puja* in Pashupati. If you are going to another village and a big house to ask if you can stay there, they will give you food and a blanket. Even if it's a poorer family, you get what you need if you pay a little. [But] if you go to them, you get nothing. In this world, nowadays, Lord Buddha is big. If you follow his path, then you get knowledge, but if you follow Mahadevi, then you become a *shrindi* [ghost]. They will be like that and they will not to get into *sange*, heaven. What to do? They do prostration and *puja*, but accomplish nothing. Our Buddha, we follow him and we do not do like that. They are not respecting. If we do not follow Buddha and we die, nothing will happen [after death] if we did not do *dharma puja*. To them, gossip behind someone's back does not matter, but for Buddha we should not do like that. It is as if the police came: if we give them bribes, still they do not make a decision. But if we talk to the officer, then the decision is made. Buddha is the officer. With the police, again and again we give them tea and have to negotiate. The same happens with *Devi*.

What is particularly interesting about this speech, is the historical and political touch this Buddhist monk, who otherwise refrains from political involvement but ceaselessly exploits every occasion to teach his lay followers about the Dharma, gives to it. His plead for the Buddhist Dharma with its converting tendency, in which also I as an ethnographer am alloted a role, is shaped against those who have been the Bigu Sherpas' most powerful adversaries since their settling in the valley. The "us Buddhists" against them "ignorant, and by Hindu religion contaminated, Buddhists" (the Newaris), and "them Bahuns" underscores an already long-lasting opposition.[8] The former are overpowered at last, in the name of

[8] When Nepal's Prime Minister Koirala was forced to resign in August 1994, Lama Kalsang remarked: "Nepalis are monkeys [sic!]. Their democracy is an Indian one, based on bribes and corruption. They should look at European democracy instead." Also this remark has a religious note to it, as the lama, although Nepalese citizen himself, does not identify himself with his Nepali nationality. Like the Indians, Nepalis are Hindu, while Europeans, from his perspective, bcome more and more engaged with Buddhism (see also Ch.VIII).

Dharma; the latter still the "evil" superiors whose religion relies on bribery and corruption as their own attitude does.

His references to Buddhist constructions in the Bigu valley, however, are only directed towards his own activities, in the reconstruction of the village temple and Tashi Gomba's retreat house, putting himself forward as a non-selfish, non-greedy religious specialist. When asked explicitely about the motivations, or political circumstances, of the founding of the village temple and the monastery, he would take up his role as a lama and mention only the religious intentions. As such, we have to turn to others willing to offer information about the two biggest objects of Buddhism in the area, the village temple and the monastery (there were no archeological data, nor illuminating oral accounts, available on Bigu's *chörten* and *mani* walls).

According to Ortner (1989), the first village temples in the Solu Khumbu region came into being the second half of the seventeenth Century. The Bigu Sherpas, therefore, must have been familiar with the phenomenon before their migration. According to their accounts, however, there had been a time when the Bigu Sherpas had neither a gomba, nor a village lama.[9] Then they invited a lama from a village, called Marming, to settle at Bigu. It was this Marmingko lama who founded the village temple. When he passed away, however, the gomba - so the story goes - fell into ruins, as he seemed to have left no students to succeed his position. The narratives offered made it impossible to distil even an approximate time indication of these events. Recollections of the village temple's history only continue with a village lama named Mangalsingh, who happened to be Nim Pasang's nephew, the son of his father's elder brother. However, accounts neither suggested a rivalry between the two men - which would be in line with Ortner's cultural schema -, nor shed any light on Mangalsingh's religious past that would enable him to become Bigu's village lama. Some suggested he inherited the position of village lama from his father, but even the present *mizar* could not confirm this. The history of the village gomba seems to have faded in the light of the founding of the monastery.

The celebration of *Narak*, however, implies that the village temple was put back into use, at least, when the Bigu Sherpas felt the need to counter *Dasain*. The emergence of Sukusing and his family in the valley, their ambitions, and Mangalsingh (and his father) as lamas, we might speculate that the village temple served as an initial attempt to consolidate the families' reputation in Bigu. Finding it unattended, they may have postulated themselves as religious specialists, and introduced *Narak*, structured upon their experiences of *Dumje*, as its main festival - as it is still to the present day.[10] Whatever its history has been, however, it clearly did not serve Nim Pasang's ends. The legitimation of the Sherpa-ness of the valley in order to resist a changing of the Kipat taxation system and the Kharkas' economic and political dominancy, the countering of the Sherpas' stigmatisation as "tribal mountain people" (see also Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993:282), the legitimation of Nim Pasang's ambition for *mizar*, and the generation of some sense of "solidarity among Sherpas of all levels" (Ortner 1989:164), needed more than the old village temple and the ridiculing of the Hindus during its main festival.

In 1974, when Fürer-Haimendorf visited Bigu, Nim Pasang was still alive. According to the ethnographer, the then former *mizar* said to have visited many monasteries on his trips to Tibet: "Greatly impressed by their role as centres of religious and artistic activities, he had conceived the idea of promoting in his own village the foundation of a *gompa* similar to those of Tibet" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:123). In this rendered statement, Nim Pasang takes all the credit for the idea of founding a monastery in Bigu, but it is not unlikely that he has been inspired by the new religious developments in Solu Khumbu as well.

9 I will elaborate these accounts in the next chapter where it serves another argument, namely that religious practice among the Bigu Sherpas was rather scanty. Although they set out to promote themselves as Buddhists in opposition to the Hindu Kharkas, they were not ready for the practical implications for this "identity". As such, it had major implications for the development of the monastery.

10 See also Ch.VI.

Recalling earlier described accounts that he had also been travelling through entire Solu-Khumbu and Kham (the Tibetan area north of Khumbu), he may have seen - or even witnessed - the foundings of the first celibate monasteries in Sherpa regions. As ambitious as he is depicted, the prestige of the Solu Khumbu "big men" gained by their founding of monasteries and their support by reknown lamas, can not have escaped his notice. Combined with his own impressions of Tibetan monasteries as centres of learning and art, which could counter the Sherpas' stigma of "tribal, primitve, uncivilized" people by the display of religious power and splendour, the founding of a monastery must have sounded like perfect.[11]

Unlike the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, however, neither he nor his Bigu Sherpa fellows were engaged in close contacts with a Tibetan monastery and its lamas. The idea to found a monastery must have been, at best, slumbering in Nim Pasang's mind, until destiny (or *karma*?) brought the Drugpa Rimpoche on his pilgrimage to Bigu. Nim Pasang's dream, which is said to have occured after the high lama had passed Bigu already, then brought the idea to the surface of his mind. The Sherpa went after the Drugpa Rimpoche to ask for his help and religious consolidation, and the high lama agreed. In 1933, the building could commence.

Nim Pasang remained Bigu's *mizar* under the leadership of the Laduk Kharka, until 1951 (Nep.2008). Then, according to Phulba, "the Nepali government appointed one *mizar* per *panchayat* ", referring to the law that changed the definition of a *panchayat* from its population quota (of one thousand) into the amount of cultivated land (see Regmi 1976). Not Nim Pasang, however, but his son Tsering Ngutu was then appointed as Bigu's head *mizar*. And this position did not render him much political power, as the chair (*pradhan)* of the Bigu *panchayat* was given in the hands of the Kharkas. Only in 1975, Deb Bahadur Kharka was succeeded by a Sherpa by the name of Sarki as the new *pradhan*.[12] As concerning the taxation system, it did not change until 1995, when, during my extended fieldwork, a team of governemental land surveyors (*napis*) came to the valley to record landownership per household, after which the new, general taxation system was to put an end to all former systems. It then turned out, that the Kharkas owned nearly double the amount of land of the Sherpas, and - according to a young Sherpa - the most fertile land of the valley too. In the end, then, the existence of Tashi Gomba shows to have had little effect on both Nim Pasang's career and reputation, and the Sherpas' economic and political power over the valley. Also its religious and, more general, cultural impact remained fallible, as - as we see - it was built on one man's dream and not on solid faith.

*Reflection*

In this chapter, I tried to show how Nim Pasang's plan to found a monastery has been evolved from the Bigu Sherpas' encounters with the Kharkas. Living in a face-to-face society, the latter's were not conceived as representatives of a larger development of state formation, instigated by the Ranas, but taken as "personal" enemies. This perspective indicates Bigu as a remote agricultural area, according to Samuel's analysis (1993), but also shows how Nepal's first steps of a transition towards a nation-state was responded to locally. The intrusion of the Hindu values through the Kharka family prompted the Bigu Sherpas to construct their own identity, for instance by countering *Dasain* with *Narak* and the founding of a monastery. Nevertheless, the latter respons suggests an influence of religious developments going on in Solu

[11] As such, I would like to make a comparison between Nim Pasang and his founding of Tashi Gomba and the founder of Chiwong monastery in Khumbu, Sangye Tenzing: "The whole point of Sangye's religious career was to underscore the Buddhist identity of the Sherpa people, and his own identity as a Sherpa and a Buddhist in the larger Nepal context in which he operated" (Ortner 1989:147). Sangye's founding of Chiwong monastery (1923-32) is interpreted by Ortner as a counteract to his brother Karma's founding of Tengboche monastery (1916-19). These two were the first Sherpa monasteries.

[12] Sarki Sherpa remained *pradhan* in 1980, when the governmental appointment of village *panchayat* councils was displaced by local elections. In 1985, he was reelected, but stepped back in 1990, when the *panchayat* councils made place for the Village Development Cooperations (VDC's).

Khumbu at the time as well, which reached Bigu through trading contacts of, primarily, Nim Pasang.

Nim Pasang's expressed impression of Tibetan monasteries as centres of learning and art, is particularly illuminating in the context of the Sherpas' stigmatisation as "tribal hill people" and impure *matwalis*. The recurrence of the recollection of these accusations and the Kharkas' being more knowledgable and better educated, and therefore more powerful, underlines the also at present persisting feelings of inferiority in terms of education. As the respons of the young nun to the confusing dates painted on the gomba's porch points out, the process of creating an identity in relation to an Other may, in Bigu, have started off with the Kharkas, only to continue with westerners and other outsiders like in other Sherpa regions (see Adams 1996). As a western student, I willingly and unwillingly took part in this process, by simply "being there", acting and reacting, but also by being recognized as one of the educated ones, who can write down their history for them (the storyteller) and urge others to practice - and spend money on - the Dharma at Tashi Gomba (the Meme Lama).

The monastery, then, may have been a first attempt to introduce a sense of learning into the valley, but failed to become recognized as such among the Sherpas of Bigu. That is, it did not develop into the powerful centre, Nim Pasang had in mind, and Ortner describes for the monasteries in the Solu Khumbu region, and, as such, did not create a self-esteem which could counter their stigmatisation; for reasons to be elaborated in the next two chapters.

III

# Constructing a House of Dharma

## *The religious Soil of the Founding of Tashi Gomba*

*The Drugpa Rimpoche's arrival*

We sat on a low garden wall until our hostess reappeared from the house with buttertea, sluggishly gazing into the green valley. The wheat and millet stood high, but not yet at the point when it ripens into a golden yellow. Suddenly, Dawa exclaimed "Look!". Down the path that leads from Tinsang La's dark green forests into the fresh green fields, a tiny wine-red serpentine was winding itself along the hillsides. "That is the Tulku. The nuns must have gone to meet him at Ruphtang." For days, the arrival of the Drugpa Rimpoche's reincarnation had been announced by porters and villagers, who had overtaken him and his monks on the way from Barabise. After three days of waiting, however, there was still no sign of his approach, so I decided to make that visit I had already promised weeks ago to a Sherpa woman, who lived at the *pari* side of the valley. And, as so often happens, what we had been waiting for occurred precisely on the day I had become impatient. I would have loved to watch the Tulku being welcomed at Tashi Gomba, but I knew that we would never make it in time. So we remained where we were, and watched the red serpentine writhing up to the mountain slope to disappear among the trees that took the gomba out of our sight.

It had taken the Tulku five days from Barabise to Bigu, a distance which the villagers managed to cover in two days. At every rest place, in every village along the trek, people had sought his blessing and advice and had invited him to take a seat at small offering tables of tea and food. Besides, in Dolangsa three porters were hired to take turns to carry the Tulku over the 3319 metres high Tinsang La. The venerable's knees were causing him trouble. He was a heavy load as he clenched his porter's back, which delayed his arrival in Bigu even more.

While I was peeling the boiled potatoes we took as a snack and looked at that scene at the other side of the valley, I mused on how impressive the arrival of the Drugpa Rimpoche must have been with "as much as eighty monks and nuns in his retinue". What a track this high religious lama must have left in this valley, attracting everyone's eye and awe, a sight surely imprinted in the memory of the *mizar* as an experience presenting itself shortly afterwards in his dream of gods and temples.

*The recognition of the valley's sacredness*

Nim Pasang, Bigu's ambitious headman, must have been deeply impressed by the advent of the Drugpa Rimpoche. The people's awe for a high lama like him held promise for the growth of his own reputation among his fellow Sherpa's, if he would get the lama to support his ideal of founding a gomba. The Drugpa Rimpoche had, however, already gone forth to his next destination. Nim Pasang went after him, and when he put his request, the high lama seems to have asked, "Where?". Thereupon, the headman had handed the Rimpoche a handful of mud and described to him the place where he had taken it from.

The Meme Lama, one of the first monks of Tashi Gomba, gave Nim Pasang much credit for his meritorious act. He called him inspired by the gods, and in turn able to inspire others to give for the Dharma:

> The *mizar*'s grandfather, he thought to make a gomba. God went into his soul, so he got this idea. He donated his land and from all directions, north, south, east, west, gifts were donated. From east, where is Bhutan, and money from Tibet.

But when I asked the *mizar*'s grandson - who was now living in the house where his grandfather had his dream - about Nim Pasang's religious act of donating the land for a gomba, a less *dharma*-devoted picture was given.

> After they [Nim Pasang and his father] had cleared it, they probably first cultivated it for themselves, but it wasn't very good land. The wheat didn't grow properly. It still doesn't grow well around here. It's poor land. And because there was also water running [from a spring only a few hundred feet up mountain], they decided to build a gomba there.

According to his grandson, then, Nim Pasang had very practical reasons for planning the gomba at exactly its present site.[1] The site of a house of the Dharma, be it a temple, monastery or chörten, however, needed to be a sacred place, a place endowed by spiritual and/or magical features (cf. Stein 1972). These religious signs were to be discovered by the Drugpa Rimpoche.

A flyer, which was authored in 1993 by Tashi Gomba's present Rimpoche, to whom I will refer as the Tulku,[2] offers an account of the Drugpa Rimpoche's role in the founding of the gomba and the gomba's present condition.[3] Copies were pinned up at the temple hall door and in the kitchen, and distributed among the nuns who did not understand its content, as the text was in English. As the Tulku does not master the English language in speech or writing, the flyer's text was either a translation by his brother, who is a United States citizen and visited Tashi Gomba in the summer of 1993, or written by him with the Rimpoche's consent. Because of the choice of language, the circular was obviously meant for English-speaking visitors of the gomba such as Westerners, Indians and well-educated Nepalis. The information offered in the flyer, thus, has to be read with this audience in mind. Nevertheless, I base my account of the Drugpa Rimpoche's actions merely on this circular as it became my only written source on that matter. After Dawa and I had translated it several times for the nuns orally, it was turned into an authoritative text. The nuns dared to tell very little of what they were told about the Drugpa Rimpoche in the gomba's founding phase, too afraid to deviate from what the Tulku had written down on paper. Thus, the following is now part of what is to be believed.

> In 1932 the devoted dharma practitioner Nyima pasang sherpa requested Sherab Dorjee [i.e. the Drugpa Rimpoche] to build a monastery and he offered the land where it is now standing. In response to the request, Sherpa Dorje performed a special ritual offering (Torma) in the meditation cave (Drupok) and later, when he clapped his hands, a spring immediately arose from the ground which can even be seen today. After drinking the water from the spring, he soon went to sleep, and that evening in his dream he had signs of a hand print above and the foot print below a span of mountain area which

[1] Regmi notes three other economic reasons for donating land for religious purposes (*guthi*), namely (1) to insure "economic security for his descendants", (2) "to safeguard [the family's] landed property from arbitrary confiscation by the State", and (3) to convert sectors of land property into tax exempt land (Regmi 1978:641; cf. Snellgrove 1957:217; cf. Ortner 1989:146). In Nim Pasang's case, the first reason sounds plausible when thinking of his risky trading expeditions. By donating land to temples and monasteries, namely, its surplus remained the donor's acquisition. Nim Pasang's endowed land, however, seemed to be too arid to expect much surplus out of it. The second reason would entail a personal strategy against the Kharka threat of snapping up Sherpa land, but, again, with the poorness of Nim Pasang's endowed land it seems very unlikely that the Kharkas would go for it. Only the third reason is very likely to have played a role in Nim Pasang's decision. See also the section below "The construction of the monastery".

[2] The anis use for both the Drugpa Rimpoche's reincarnation and Kusho Tsetsu, the Drugpa Rimpoche's youngest nephew and supervisor of the Drugpa Rimpoche's gombas after the latter's death (see Ch.IV), as "the Rimpoche" as a term of address. To avoid confusion, I call the former simply "the Tulku" (Tib. *sprul sku*; "reincarnated lama"), and the latter by his name Kusho Tsetsu.

[3] See Appendix II for a full rendering of the flyer's text, and below particular quotes.

were imprinted on the stone. The span of mountain land which is the land of Zambala, and its surrounding range is the body of Zambala (Yidam deity of wealth). The dream professed that this area is good to build the monastery. When he awoke he sent out a messenger to see if there was a hand and foot print as in his dream. The messenger returned with positive reply, which he could see even when looking from a far distance. This mountain ranges resemble Zambala and then he called it Gowri Shankar. Thus, Sherab Dorjee built Begu monastery, where later on jewels and riches ceaselessly pour from Zambala's hand. (after the original)

Continuing Nim Pasang's profile I offered in the former chapter, the headman's determination must have been impressive, as well as his willingness and presumed ability to spend a fortune on the cause of the Dharma, and his dream of gods and temples he very likely had shared with the high lama. So the Drugpa Rimpoche immediately gave his consent to Nim Pasang's plan, as the text in the flyer mentions his performance of an offering ritual in the same meditation cave where they met. Offering rituals in general are dedicated to the gods to acquire their protection and help to keep demons at bay, thus the high lama seems to have called them at the gods on the spot where the request was made, to ensure the realisation of what had become their joint venture (cf.Ortner 1973, 1989:73).[4]

The Drugpa Rimpoche approved not only of the plan as such, but also the site the headman proposed. After they returned to Bigu, as the flyer renders, the high lama created a spring with a clap of his hands. It would be rather trivial to argue whether or not the Drugpa Rimpoche truly created that spring "which is even seen today" (according to Nim Pasang's grandson - see above - it was already there before the Drugpa Rimpoche entered the scene). Foremost, this magical act - as one of several the high lama was said to have enacted - was to emphasize the lama's role in the founding of the gomba, his religious power, his charisma and authority, in later narratives. In fact, this story of the spring was merely known among the monastics of Tashi Gomba, as it narrates how the Drugpa Rimpoche turned Nim Pasang's arid plot into a fertile soil for the Dharma. As a result, the high lama's ritual act also transformed Nim Pasang's worldly motivations for building a gomba and his practical reasoning for this site into the generosity of "a devoted dharma practitioner", a benefactor of the Dharma "inspired by the gods" in the words of the Meme Lama. For Nim Pasang, this new image must have felt like a first step to glory (cf.Ortner 1989:79).

Besides the building lot which had to be endowed with magic, however, the whole area offered enough auspicious marks and presences for acknowledging it as an auspicious place for a monastery. Firstly, there are the hand and footprint. The handprint, which a young nun thought looked like a lama's hat, is to be found in the rock next to where the spring appears out of the mountain. The footprint is half-way down the mountain slope, but obscured by a *chörten* which is built over it. They mark the boundaries of an area that is still known as *Gyalbasing* today (the "King's Fields", see Ch.II), with in its centre Nim Pasang's former property. Foot and handprints like these can be found all over the Tibetan Buddhist world and are said to have been made by flying lamas on their touch-downs. In Solu Khumbu, stories are told about founding lamas of local village gombas who left such imprints, some three hundred years ago (Ortner 1989:52). The Drugpa Rimpoche, however, only discovered the existence of such traces in Bigu, but then again - as is suggested by the flyer text - could only do so thanks to the water of the spring which he had created with his own spiritual power. This does not necessarily mean that the Drugpa Rimpoche's spiritual power had less potency than that of his founding colleagues in Solu Khumbu; nor that all memory of his magical powers needs is time in order to erode his discovery into prints of his own making - already some nuns expressed their belief that he too could fly. Rather, the prints waiting there to be found by the

[4] The link between offering rituals and the founding of a house of *dharma* goes even further, as Ortner writes that "offering rituals are said to have originated in the context of the founding of a temple. Thus it is told in another tale, widely known among both Tibetans and Sherpas, that the ritual was initially taught to people when they were trying to build Samye, the very first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, in the eighth Century" (Ortner 1989:73).

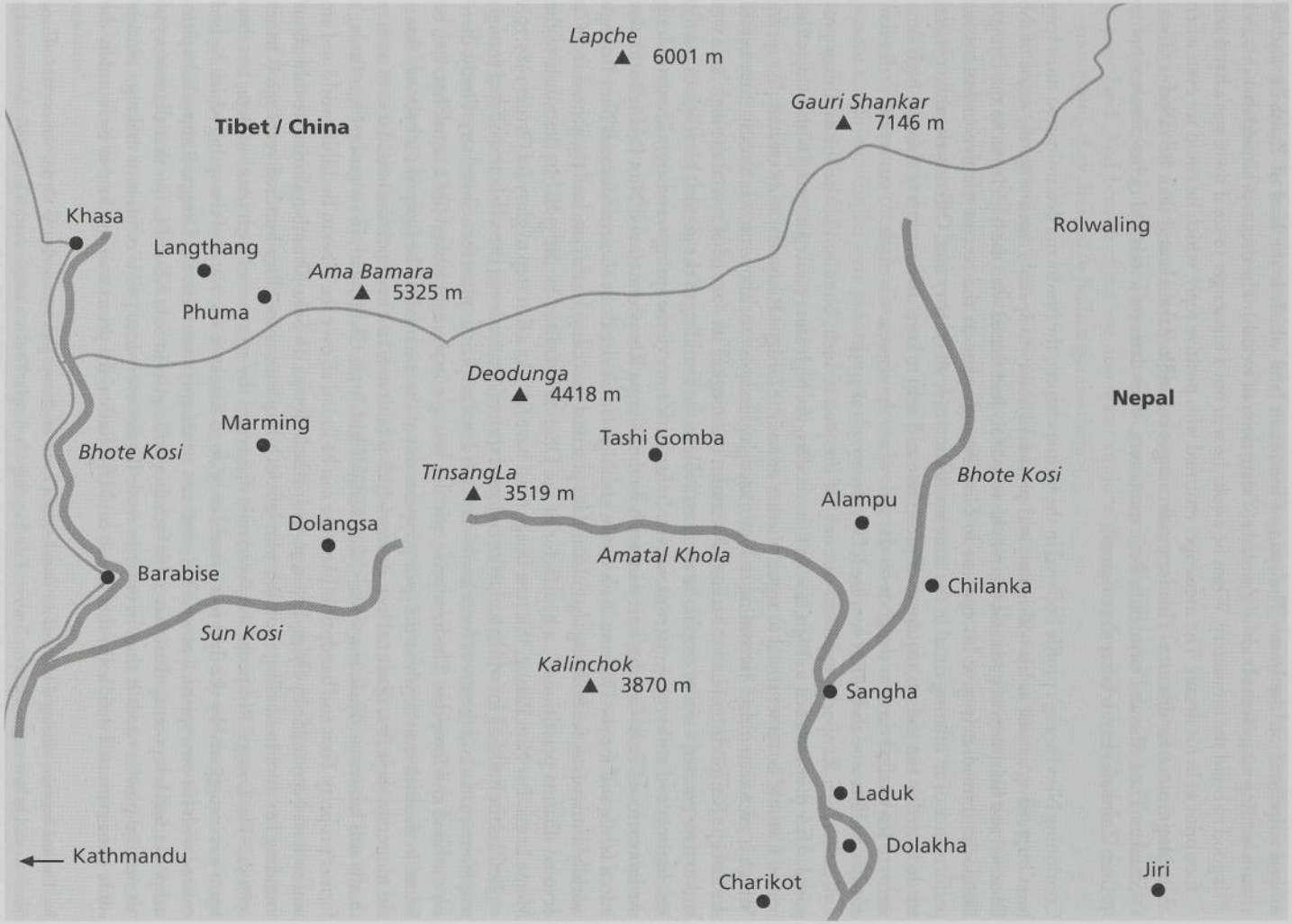



Figure 3 *Dolakha district*

high lama pointed towards an earlier visit of an important lama to this valley, long before the immigration of the Sherpas who never knew of the presence of these holy signs. Who were thought to have made them then?

When I asked the young nun, who coaxed me up and down the mountain slope to show me the prints, whom she thought they were made by, she replied, "the Guru Rimpoche. Why? Because he could fly from one side of the valley to the other". The Guru Rimpoche (Skt. Padmasambhava) is the legendary introducer of Buddhism in Tibet, and the central religious figure of the old Nyingmapa order to which Sherpa Buddhism belongs. Also in Bigu's village gomba, his was the central statue of the altar and the monthly rituals performed by the village lama were focused on this religious hero. Therefore, I went to consult the Meme Lama, as the former village lama, and he came up with an interesting addition.

> The Guru Rimpoche, he could fly like an eagle, a *garuda*, and fought against the demons who threatened *dharma*. He also protected the people of the Dharma. That is why he made "hidden valleys", where they could hide from the demons. Bigu is also a *beyül* [i.e. "hidden valley"]. It's name, in fact, means *beyül*.[5]

In the Nyingmapa sect, it is believed that the Guru Rimpoche set aside places where Tibetans could seek refuge in times of need, called *beyül*. In the past, several places were recognised as such. "Some of these *beyül* were quiet refuges set aside for meditation, but others [...] were places where lay people could settle to escape political turmoil" (Samuel 1993:517). If my historical reconstruction of the Sherpa families who migrated into the Bigu valley[6] makes sense, it is not difficult to imagine why they may have named this valley a *beyül*. After having left their homelands in Solu, poverty stricken and probably ostracised, the green largely virgin valley surrounded by mountain ranges, perfect for pasturing yaks, cows and goats, must have given them new hope for the future. The hand and footprint, then, could only have been imprinted by their highest protector-deity.

Against this background it is not surprising that the flyer did not mention the word *beyül*. In the local context of 1993 - when the circular was produced - for decades already a slumbering competition between the village gomba (Nyingmapa) and Tashi Gomba (Kargyudpa) was going on.[7] The adoption of a Nyingmapa concept in the circular might give rise to the idea that Tashi Gomba also belonged to the Nyingmapa tradition, thus endangering its Kargyudpa identity and religious superiority as a celibate monastic institution. As we will see below, there was a tendency among the laity to conceive the village gomba as more important. As such, an overt rejection of lay beliefs would be equally dangerous as the monastic institution still relied heavily on the support of the local Buddhists of Bigu.

But then the Tulku (or his brother) seems to have played a linguistic trick by referring to *Zambala*. I have not been able to find any entry in the literature on Buddhism with this spelling. The first association that came to my mind by its phonetic resemblance - me being one of those ignorant, English-speaking foreigners for whom the flyer was meant - was *Shambhala*. The paradisical land of *Shambhala*, in New Tantric traditions like the Kargyudpa, is believed to be a hidden realm "situated apparently somewhere to the north of Tibet" and "believed to be ruled by a succession of wise Buddhist kings, the last of whom would emerge at some future date to liberate the world from its oppressive and evil rulers" (Samuel 1993:517).[8] As such, the concept of *Shambhala* forms the "nearest equivalent" of the Nyingmapa *beyül*

[5] In comparing the Guru Rimpoche to an eagle who defeats the demons and creates places of refuge, he equates him with "the mythical *cha-gyun*, the *garuda* eagle, [...] a symbol widely found in Southern Asia, representing the triumph of the upper world, the sky, or spirit, over the underworld, earth, or matter" (R.Paul 1976b:140).

[6] See Ch.II, *The Sherpa headman's ambition*.

[7] See Ch.IV and VI for the role the village gomba played in the history of Tashi Gomba.

[8] The Kalachakra Tantra (see also Ch.VII) is said to have originated in this hidden realm called Shambhala during the last days of Indian Buddhism, "and contains clear references to the threat of Muslim invasion" (Samuel 1993:410 and 517).

(ibid.:517), which in the flyer text is confirmed by the resemblance between the "land of *Zambala*" (*Shambhala*) and Bigu (*beyül*). If this association between *Zambala* and *Shambhala* was intended to promote the image of beauty and peacefulness of Bigu, while at the same time adapting to the local oral tradition without blurring the distinctions between Nyingmapa (the village gomba) and Kargyudpa (the monastery), then it was a very creative one. Nevertheless, the association with *Shambhala* is not so far-fetched as it may sound from the above, as the name of the monastery also supports it - but let me first turn to another explanation of *Zambala*.

The description of *Zambala* as a *yidam* deity of wealth leads to the phoneme "Jambhala", the name of the Buddhist god of wealth, and specifically to "The Yellow *Jambhala*, the only Lord":

> the colour of this one-faced and two-handed deity is said to be like that of purified gold (*gser btso*). In the palm of his right hand, which rests in the posture of gift-bestowing, lies a citron. The left hand holds a mongoose, from whose mouth a rain of wish-granting jewels issues. The deity has black hair, wears a diadem of jewels and a flowing dress of multicoloured silks. A garland of blue lotus hangs around his neck and he treads on a treasure of emeralds, rubies, and other gems" (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993:73-4; cf.Tucci 1949).

This was how the Drugpa Rimpoche supposedly conceived of Bigu and its surrounding mountain range in his dream, of which the monastery "where later on jewels and riches ceaselessly pour from Zambala's hand" would become its centre (see quote from flyer text above). The placement of the monastery in the hand of *Jambhala* seems to hold the prophesy, or at least the hope, that the gomba was going to become a rich and thriving centre of the Dharma - a hope Nim Pasang may have shared wholeheartedly.

Why the Tulku should choose to refer to *Jambhala*, however, is still unsolved. The gomba owes no image of this Buddhist god, nor is he mentioned in the "charter" text painted next to the temple hall entrance of the monastery (see below). In this context, it is interesting to dwell for a moment on the reference to *Zambala* as a *yidam* deity. To call *Jambhala* a *yidam*, a personal protection deity on one's spiritual path, is according to Nebesky-Wojkowitz dubious: "it has been alleged in Western publications that he is a *yi dam*; this has, however, been denied by my Tibetan informants" (ibid.:68). Can we then take the Tulku's brother responsible for this statement, affected as he may have become by Western interpretations during his stay in the United States? On the other hand, *Jambhala* being the god of wealth would have suited Nim Pasang very well, perhaps not as his *yidam* but surely as his favourite deity.

*Jambhala* was not unknown to the Bigu Sherpas I questioned, although his name was only recalled when I brought it up. In Bigu, the God of wealth and prosperity was first and foremost identified with a mountain which was - unlike the Drugpa Rimpoche's association with Gauri Shankar mentioned earlier - Deodunga (God's Rock). The shape of this rock and its relation to another mountain nearby, however, lead us away from *Jambhala* as the ancient Buddhist God, towards the Hindu pantheon. According to oral tradition, Deodunga was once married to Tseringma, the "goddess of long life" who resides on Ama Bamare mountain. They made a fine couple, combining wealth and prosperity with long life, until they started to quarrel. Deodunga blamed Tseringma for having caused their dispute and subsequently cursed her: her mountain was never again to be visited by human beings and thus no longer to be worshipped, while his would be the site of a yearly festival, the *Deodunga Jatra*. The Nepali name for Tseringma's home mountain Ama Bamare ("Blessing Mother") signifies her (former) Hindu identity, and thus of her Deodunga husband. For Ama Bamare is the Nepali Gauri Parbati, merging Tseringma's identity with that of the Hindu goddess of long life and conjugal happiness Parbati; and the wife of Shiva, the Great Destroyer (of the Hindu triad Brahman-Vishnu-Shiva) but also worshipped as the God of fertility and procreation. As such, he is symbolised by the *lingam*, "a vertical stone-carved pillar or simple oblong rock representing the male genital organ" (Anderson 1988:24). Deodunga is such a *lingam*, rising erect about two hundred metres out of a ridge. Deodunga, then, is in fact Shiva, and Tseringma Parbati.

Not surprisingly, the multiple identity of Deodunga is a reflection of his multi-ethnic worshipping on the day of *Deodunga Jatra* at the end of the monsoon. In fact, this *jatra* was led by, and celebrated as, the gathering of all shamans (*jhankri*) of the area, whether Sherpa, Thami, Magar or Tamang. We may assume that the worship of Deodunga as a Shiva *lingam* cult already existed before the advent of the Sherpas in the Bigu valley but, at a certain point in the past, a change in the offerings seems to have occurred, as a remark of a Sherpa man who was carrying a large trident up to Deodunga in 1994 suggests.

> If you offer Deodunga a trident [*trisul*], you may make a wish. But this [pointing at his gift] is a repayment, afterwards. My son has been very ill and we made a vow that we would offer a trident if he would get better. And he got better. **My grandfather already said that it was no problem to offer to Deodunga. That they don't make animal sacrifices any longer, so that it's all right now.** He said, Deodunga was a kind of a Tibetan god, like Ama Bamare. A kind of *srung ma* [i.e. protection deity], with fire in his body. That's why we offer him a trident, that's his emblem, because it has to be forged in fire. The Hindus also have a God like this, *Mahadev* [i.e. Shiva]. They say Deodunga is theirs. But it's all the same.

While Shiva/Mahadev's trident, symbolising his exorcism qualities (cf. Bouiller 1993), was appropriated by the Sherpas, the animal sacrifices were replaced by more life-respecting offerings, like milk and butter. This change in offerings suggests that a campaign was issued against animal sacrifices, in accordance with the first of the ten Buddhist precepts, to abstain from killing (Skt. *ahimsa*). The time this change took place, presumably during the speaker's grandfather's lifetime, could have coincided with the introduction of the *Dasain* counter-festival *Narak*;[9] possibly it should be linked up with the advent of the Drugpa Rimpoche whom we may ascribe such a campaign. In any case, the Tulku's flyer text suggests the latter.

> The Buddhist Community of Rolbaling[10] is quite friendly with Begu monastery. Since 1932, under the influence of Sherab Dorjee and Dukpa Rimpoche, the killings of animals both for ritual and daily life purposes have been completely stopped. (after the original)

Is this why the Tulku came upwith the name of *Jambhala*? The worship of this "innocent" god of wealth did not require bloody sacrifices (and liquor) as the Shiva *lingam* annex Deodunga did. In addition, the shift of his locus from Deodunga to Gauri Shankar, which in Khumbu is known as the mountain of Tseringma, hushes the worshipped god back into an acceptable Buddhist frame, by circumventing his shamanic centre of Bigu. Besides, in Khumbu both *Jambhala* and Tseringma belong to a collectivity of eight protective deities called *Gombu Dodin* (R.Paul 1989:111). What I am suggesting is that *Jambhala* may have been an introduction of the Drugpa Rimpoche - which would also explain the fact that the Bigu Sherpas recognise but amply use his name - with the aim to supersede the shamanic tendencies he encountered in this valley.

The appropriation of Bigu's religious geography, whether rooted in shamanistic or Nyingmapa beliefs and practices, were caught to redirect them into the universe as the Dharma through the purifying lens of its celibate community. Tashi Gomba was meant to become the centre of Bigu's religious life, to supersede and to, finally, replace both local shamanism and the village gomba as the representative of the Nyingmapa order.[11] This intention of the Drugpa Rimpoche, and the *Jambhala*/Deodunga/Shiva, Tseringma/Parbati, and *Shambhala/beyül* connections, can not only to be elicited from the flyer text. Next to

[9] See Ch.II, *The Narak festival.*

[10] The suggestion that Bigy belongs to Rolwaling can be taken as a misconception. As I already indicated in Ch.II, there are no connections between the Sherpas of Rolwaling and the Sherpas of Bigu. Nor is Bigu administratively part of that region.

[11] See the next two sections of this chapter, *The village lamas and the village gomba* and *The shamans.*

the entrance of the temple hall, the Drugpa Rimpoche himself had authorised the painting of a Song of Praise,[12] which celebrates the new monastery by the name he has given to it and the function he hoped it to fulfil. The last stanza goes as follows.

> Thus [ends this] praise of the [holy] place [of Bkra-shis-'chi-med-dga'-tshal], [which came about] through the admonition by the wind of spiritual faith in [this] garden [?] where complete taming of the mind [was accomplished] by me, Shes-rab rdo-rje.May [by] the virtue [resulting from this praise] of [i.e.: which is like] a subtle fragrance spreading, happiness increase for all places and their inhabitants.
>
> May the goals all be swiftly realised. *Sarva-mangalam* [i.e. a mantra, lit: "All-auspicious"]. (after the original)

In the full name the Drugpa Rimpoche had given to the new monastery, *Bkra-is 'Ch-med-dga'-tshal* (read: Tashi Chime Gatsal), means "Pleasure Garden of Deathless Good Fortune". The *Jambhala*/Deodunga/Shiva feature, then, can be read in its "Good Fortune", the Tseringma/Parbati in "Deathless", and *Shambhala/beyül* evidently in "Pleasure Garden", which also can be translated as "Paradise". And by the virtue of this "garden" he hopes to have accomplished the taming of the mind of those who have not yet given themselves to the spiritual faith, in succession of those who are already "tamed" in the interpretation and practice of the Dharma he himself promoted - to which I will return in a later section.

The keyword to his intentions here is the verb "to tame", *dulwa*. Its range of meanings is so illuminating that I have copied the list Samuel gives from Jäschke's dictionary:

> (1) to tame, to break in [of horses]; to subdue, conquer, vanquish [of enemies]; sometimes even to kill, to annihilate; (2) to till, to cultivate, waste land; to civilise, a nation, which with the Buddhist is the same as to convert, frq.; to educate, to discipline, to punish; *dulwé rigpa*, those fit for and predestined for conversion; *dulcha*, id. frq.; also used substantively: *drowa ngé dulcha yin*, the beings are to be converted by me; *dag ky'edki dulcha shogchig* may we welcome your converts! (Jäschke 1968:278, in Samuel 1993:219).

Following my interpretation of how the Drugpa Rimpoche appropriated Bigu's religious landscape as given by the flyer and his song/charter, one might argue that he tried to cultivate Bigu's religious land, by bringing civilisation and education (which must have pleased Nim Pasang) through discipline, i.e. monastic practice.[13] Whether he and his disciples succeeded, I leave for later reflection. What I would like to offer in the next two sections is a tentative sketch of competitive religious authorities, that is the village lamas and the shamans, the Drugpa Rimpoche may have encountered in Bigu at his arrival.

*The village lamas and the village gomba*

The brother of the storyteller was one of the two Sherpa shamans still in practice in the Bigu valley. Like his brother, he liked to talk about times past, so I asked him about the village gomba: "I've heard there was a time when Bigu had no lama. Who was in charge of conducting the funerals at that time? The shaman?" He replied:

> There was a time when Bigu had no lama, that's right. But not the shaman, but some clever elders performed *puja* then. They put a red cloth around a *doko* [basket to carry goods] and pretended that that was the lama. Later, people of Bigu went to Marming and called a lama. That was a long time ago.

[12] See Appendix I for a full rendering.

[13] "The monastic disciplinary code, the Vinaya, is in Tibetan Dulwa" (Samuel 1993:219).

When my father was a little boy, his grandfather already told him about the Marmingko lama [*ko* meaning "from"]. He came to live here and has built that small gomba. And he taught them how to do *puja* properly, with offering incense and *chang* and so on. He went to Solu and came back with *pecha* [religious texts]. He has been a lama here for the rest of his life. But when he died, again there was no lama.

The account of Phulba, a Sherpa elder, confirms the shaman's reply:

The village gomba was built by a lama from Marming, that village up north of Dolangsa towards the Tibetan border. Bigu didn't have a village lama [before the Marmingko lama came], and every time they had to conduct a funeral or some other ritual, they had to get one from there [i.e. Marming], where many lamas lived. Once, people decided one of the lamas had to come to live in Bigu permanently. They assigned one by lot and that was the one who built the small gomba here with beautiful things from Tibet. But when he died, there was no successor and the gomba stood there unattended. The beautiful things were stolen, and put into household shrines, and the temple deteriorated. After that, it has been renovated two times by the people of Bigu: when the Meme Lama became village lama [in 1942], and some ten years ago.

The story of Bigu having no village lama becomes understandable when one takes Ortner's finding into consideration that in Solu-Khumbu these non-celibate religious specialists belonged to three specific clans, namely the Lama, Takto and Paldorje clans, none of which was represented in Bigu (Ortner 1989:43).[14] This might explain why the Sherpa families who had settled in the Bigu valley literally had to import a trained lama from another village. In Marming, "many lamas lived", but nobody from Bigu could explain to me why (see map 3). Nor could any one tell me why the succession of the Marmingko lama seemed to have been problematic. Did the Marmingko lama have no sons willing to take up their father's position as often happened in Solu Khumbu? Did the lama, who went all the way to Solu to fetch religious textbooks, have no students in Bigu? Why did not one of them take up the position of village lama, when the Marmingko lama died? Nobody could provide an answer.

The oral tradition picks up the issue of the village lama with a man called Mangalsingh. The storyteller narrated, inspired by the nightly *Narak* revelling.[15]

Previously, people did not stay so late in the gomba. But the lama got afraid, alone at night. So the next year, they introduced also nightly *pujas*. Consequently, the *jindak* [i.e. sponsors] had to bring more *rakshi* and in the morning the *puja* started much later, because everybody had to sleep off their hangover. Who that lama was? Mangalsingh. That was some fifty years ago, when I was still a little boy, seven or eight or so. Mangalsingh, that was quite a fellow. He had an uncle, Kushi Lama was his name, and this one became jealous because his nephew became a village lama. Because that meant that his nephew was sitting higher in the village gomba than he who was older [his senior in age and family hierarchy]. Kushi Lama set himself up as the lama's assistant, but the two were constantly quarrelling. Once, during a *gyewa* [a memorial rite], Kushi Lama got so angry that he broke a pot on Mangalsingh's head. I asked my mother why he was doing that and she said: "Because uncle cannot stand it that the nephew is sitting higher. He is jealous." I remember that very well, I must have been eight or ten years old at the time. After that [event], it went from bad to worse. Then they started to

[14] See Ch.II, n.2. Robert Paul states that "[a]lthough their eponymous ancestor was a married *lama*, the Lama clan has no particular religious attributes today, any more than does, say, Thelonious Monk" (1976b:133). I assume, however, that Ortner's finding holds for the time Sherpa clans migrated from Solu to the Bekung valley, about 150 years ago.

[15] See Ch.II, *The Narak festival.*

fight each other with black *mantras* [sic!] and after a couple of months Kushi Lama died. And Mangalsingh, he was so happy that his rival was dead that he even did not perform the funeral *puja* [sic! he being the village lama], but stayed at home and asked his wife to cook him a feast with meat and *tongba* [millet beer] and rice and *raksi*. That happy he was that the old man died.

Mangalsingh, however, got what was coming to him. He used to beat his wife, and one day she ran out on him with their little son and a servant, to Dolakha. He went after them, but got killed by the servant who threw his body in the river to hide it. Mangalsingh's corpse was found only a year later. His wife identified him by his shoes. The storyteller concluded with ironic twinkle, "his soul had been jailed in his rotting body for over a year. But he defeated Kushi Lama once more: he got his funeral and *gyewa* at the same time!" Kushi Lama and Mangalsingh both contributed to the reputation of Nim Pasang's family, being his younger brother and his nephew, with their desire for power, their jealousy and ambition, and their subsequent violent deaths.[16] Unfortunately, the storyteller could not tell where Mangalsingh had learned his trade as a religious specialist, nor when he had taken up the position of village lama.

Mangalsingh died in the early 1930s and was succeeded by a man called Nim To, who had been one of Mangalsingh's ritual assistants. However, when the Drugpa Rimpoche appeared on the scene and founded the monastery, he became a celibate monk which yielded him the name of Kubre Lama. Then again, the village gomba remained untended for some years, until in 1942 a Sherpa who had recently returned from Darjeeling (cf.Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:140) took up the empty position of village lama. Two years later this Pem Tarke died and the Meme Lama took over.[17]

The jolting succession of Bigu's village lamas, most of whom were outsiders, makes evident that religious practice centring around the village gomba did not get off the ground. The Marmingko lama was chosen by lot from a village at two-days hiking distance. Although he left a gomba with statues and books, his succession seems to have been problematic for unknown reasons. Mangalsingh was also an outsider, as his family had only recently settled in Bigu. Where his youngest uncle, Nim Pasang, was trying to become accepted in the Bigu Sherpa community by appointing himself as their spokesman, striving for the position of *mizar*, Mangalsingh may have seen his way to power through the position of village lama. Obviously, however, he did not take much pride in the locus of his power, for the village temple, deteriorating since the Marmingko lama's death, had to wait for restoration until the Meme Lama came in charge in 1942. His religious impact must have been equally feeble. With Nim To, being the first lama born and raised in Bigu, a proper lineage could have been initiated. He, however, made his choice when the monastery was founded. And again an outsider, although a Bigu Sherpa by birth, became a village lama. There is the real possibility that he too, like Mangalsingh, saw the position of village lama as a way to become (re)integrated into the community. Like his predecessor's, his term was, however, too short to extend his religious practice beyond the presiding of funerary rites, memorial rites (*gyewa*), and the *Narak* festival. At least, these were the only rituals the Bigu Sherpas remembered to be performed by the village lama at that time. For seasonal rites, curing rituals, and life cycle rites - such as the purification of a child after birth, and marriages - were in the hands of shamans.

The history of the village gomba and its lamas reveals that the Bigu Sherpas were rather unfamiliar with an institutionalised kind of *dharma* practice. This held true for Nyingmapa practices focused on the village lama, but more so for celibate monasticism. Bigu Sherpas had no tradition of sending their sons

[16] Only when I asked the storyteller whether one could consider Nim Pasang and his relatives to be *ongchermu* people - dominant, politically forceful, ambitious - a word I had learned from Ortner (1989:53), he agreed, although he had never volunteered this word. Similarly one could describe the Drugpa Rimpoche as *tsachermu*, magically potent. "Both kinds of power [...] are politcally effective. Both may be mobilised in competitions between politcal rivals, and either one may bring about success in a given context" (ibid.:52).

[17] See Ch.IV, *The religious alternative for men.*

and daughters to Tibetan monasteries, like the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu where these monastics played their part in the founding and inhabiting of monasteries and nunneries in their home area (cf. Ortner 1989). The Bigu Sherpas even had a much closer opportunity for monastic life than Tibet. At the east side of the valley, high up in the mountains and hidden in the forest, a monastery was known to exist, but, probably because of its reclusive, hermitage-like character, had never invited a Sherpa from Bigu to get in touch with its monks.[18]

If we recall the various meanings *dulwa* ("to tame") carries, it appears that the Drugpa Rimpoche, in relation to religious life centring around the village gomba, indeed encountered religious "waste land", ready for him to cultivate. Bigu Sherpas' obvious disinterest in the position of village lama, was defended by their descendants by pointing at a lack of time and energy to study and perform the Dharma next to the responsibilities of herds and fields. Also their lacking monastic tradition was defended on economic grounds. As Phulba argued,

> of course my grandfather knew about monasteries in Tibet, but they needed their sons to work on the fields and on the pastures. They couldn't spare their sons. Sending them to a monastery was too expensive.

There were thus neither monks attached to other monasteries nor local village lamas, who could have contested the Drugpa Rimpoche's role of Bigu's cultivator, or "civiliser". In Chapter IV, I will try to show how the Drugpa Rimpoche's efforts to educate the Bigu Sherpas into the Buddhist faith took hold in the village gomba, by way of his initial follower, the Meme Lama. However, as we will see, this development could only take off thanks to the Bigu Sherpas' unfamiliarity with institutions of the Dharma which was to take its toll from the monastic community already during the first decade of Tashi Gomba's existence.

*The shamans*

The shamans constituted quite a different case. In contrast to the "waste lands" the Drugpa Rimpoche encountered in relation to the village lamas, theirs was a flourishing, although from the Drugpa Rimpoche's point of view, wild realm.

That the Drugpa Rimpoche's efforts to "tame their minds", in the sense of subduing and converting them to the Buddhist faith, have not been very successful, is already obvious from the very fact that there were still two Sherpa shamans (and several colleagues from other ethnic origins) in practice during my fieldwork in 1994. While, in 1966, Ortner already had problems even finding practising shamans in Khumbu or one's at least ready to expose themselves to the anthropologist, they sent me invitations to come and observe their performances on several occasions (Ortner 1978b, 1995; cf.R.Paul 1976b; and Pigg 1996). Although it was also claimed in Bigu that shamanism was in decline - two generations ago every cluster of households had a Sherpa shaman among them, whereas nowadays they were only to be found in Asek (below the village gomba) and in Rakham - this process was not so much related to the monastic campaign of "religious upgrading" as in Khumbu (Ortner 1995:359). Rather, the practice of shamanism came under attack of yet another "converting" force, namely that of "modernity". Shamanic practice became less and less appealing to young Bigu Sherpa men, as it was primarily linked to village life, whereas their focus was on Kathmandu and its modern life style (cf. Pigg 1996).

This is not the place to engage in a lengthy discussion of these recent developments, nor to elaborate extensively on the shamanic practices in Bigu. The fact is, however, that despite the depletion of their

[18] According to the Tulku's flyer, the name of this monastery, close to the village of Bulugpa, is called "Jangchup Metok Monastery (the flower of enlightened mind)". I never came to ask him whether he knew where these monks originated from. Definitely not one of them had his roots in Bigu, as no Sherpa I questioned about it recalled having had any relative who had become a monk there.

numbers, the Bigu shamans still dedicated much of their daily routine to the performance of curing rituals, exorcisms, rain-making rites, etc., next to their annual festivals of worship. And some of these rituals seemed to contain indications to former times, when they, and not the village lamas, were in charge of Bigu's religious life, and when they were confronted with the Drugpa Rimpoche's efforts to replace them for the monastics. In order to finish my rough sketch of the religious soil on which Tashi Gomba was to be built, I will have to give some attention to these rituals.

The first ritual is the festival *Deodunga Jatra*, to which I already referred in the context of the Drugpa Rimpoche's appropriation of Bigu's geography. The replacement of animal offerings by milk and butter at the Deodunga site may have suggested a victory of the Buddhist precept of abstinence from killing. However, it did not necessarily mean that the shamans surrendered themselves to the authority of the Drugpa Rimpoche. First of all, the redirection of a focus on Deodunga in favour of Gauri Shankar, as the flyer text seemed to suggest, clearly failed. *Deodunga Jatra* turned out to be still the largest festival in the area, more than half a century after the Drugpa Rimpoche's presence, not only attended by Sherpas (as in the case of *Narak*), but by people from every ethnic group or caste - except for the Kharkas - of Bigu and surroundings. A day before the August full moon, hundreds of people climbed for the seven hours up to this huge *lingam*, withstanding the monsoon showers and the innumerable leeches which make grass and branches move. Rucksacks with food and *raksi* were carried along with butter and milk jars, and tridents ranging from the size of a pencil to the height of a man. While most of the pilgrims spent the night in pasture huts, the youngsters went on to the holy rock to watch the shamans performing their rituals in the moonlight. The next morning, the Sherpa, Thami, and Magar shamans danced in turn through the crowd, after which each person wanting to make a wish smashed the butter and milk offering against the rock and stuck their trident into one of the clefts.[19] In the afternoon, the crowd slithered back down to disperse on the paths leading to the different parts of the valley.

Secondly, an interesting stop by one party led by a Sherpa and a Thami shaman on their way down, namely at Tashi Gomba, suggested another act of resistance against the Drugpa Rimpoche's converting efforts. On the gomba courtyard, overcrowded by pilgrims, the shamans started to recite *mantras* accompanying themselves by their drums. The monastics remained at a distance, watching the scene from the temple hall porch and the kitchen. They told me that in former times all the shamans would gather here, in front of the *duang*, but that nowadays only a few came. They could not (or would not?) give an explanation for this event, and I unfortunately failed to pick up on it when I spoke to the shamans on other occasions. However, from the whole performance I did not get the impression that they stopped by to ask for a blessing from the Buddhist gods and the (absent) lamas. Rather, I got the impression that it was a showing off, an exposition, of power to the monastic community in particular. The remark that, in the past, all shamans of all ethnic origins used to assemble here as what seems to have been a closing off of the shamanic Deodunga festival only seems to confirm my assumption. The Drugpa Rimpoche may have succeeded in imposing an adaptation - that is a restrain from killing - on their worship, but the shamans' performance was obviously meant to denote that they were not "tamed" yet.[20]

Moreover, the shamans and their clients may had abolished animal offerings in the case of Deodunga, the killing of chickens remained essential in many a curing ritual as well as during *Bumi puja*. *Bumi puja* is a fertility rite which is repeated twice a year, in April and in October. All shamans, whether Sherpa,

[19] Once, I was told, the foot of *Deodunga* was covered with a forest of tridents, but nowadays "people" steal them to sell them to tourist shops in Kathmandu after every *jatra*.

[20] Besides Deodunga, three other shrines within the Bigu valley formed the centres of annual *jatras* led by shamans, namely Kalinchok Mai, Maisingthan, and Devithan. At these shrines, powerful female deities were worshipped primarily by the people living in their immediate surroundings. They offered food and *chang*, but again no animal slaughterings, in return for advice of the "Mother" or "Grandmother Goddesses" (cf. Anderson 1988:194). The questions and answers were communicated by the shamans in a state of trance.

Thami, or Magar, are supposed to conduct this ritual on the same day, dispersed over the valley, each on a piece of rock surrounded by cultivated fields. People from the vicinity come to offer chickens they had crammed for months, and eggs they had saved for weeks, to extort a good harvest, protection of the crops and herds, against natural disasters, from the goddess of the soil. In Solu Khumbu, this rite has it's double in the *Dumje* festivals, led by the local village lama, if it was not completely replaced by them, probably during the second half of this century (see R.Paul 1976c and 1979; cf. Ortner 1978 and 1995). In Bigu, however, the performance of *Bumi puja* was not contested by a *Dumje* celebration, nor was it abandoned after the latter festival's adaptation into *Narak*. The statement of the flyer text that animal killing has been "completely stopped" was thus merely a matter of wishful thinking.

My last example here will also show that the Drugpa Rimpoche's metaphorical usage of *dulwa* ("cultivate", "tame", "convert", "discipline") did not manage to transcend the Bigu Sherpas' means of sustaining life, particularly agriculture. In fact, this festival is not shamanistic in essence - as the Asek shaman stressed - but exactly because of that, its celebration not only signals the little impact the monastics have had on Bigu Sherpa life, but also illuminates the shamans' prior role in Bigu Sherpa society as compared to the village lamas. Tibetan New Year, *Gyalpo Losar* (King's New Year), is determined according to the official astrology in February or early March. In Bigu, however, this *losar* is celebrated mainly by the monastics. The Sherpa laity holds on to their local New Year, in the beginning of December. When I asked the Asek shaman why *Sherpa Losar*, as it is called in Bigu,[21] is celebrated in December, he replied

> I have been wondering about that too. For us New Year does not start with *Dasain* nor with *Gyalpo Losar*. Our ancestors have decided upon its date and people have told me it's only like this in Bigu. But who would think of celebrating *losar* in February [i.e. on *Gyalpo Losar*]? The potatoes will be finished by then. Now, we just bought oranges, and sugar cane, and sweet potatoes at *Devithan Jatra* [two weeks earlier]. Then, at least, you can have a feast.

*Sherpa Losar* is, however, not a particular Bigu phenomenon, as the Asek shaman assumed. The celebration of the agricultural turn of the year at the end of the tenth or the beginning of the eleventh moon, has been a common festival in Tibet to which Stein refers to as the "Old Farmers' New Year (*so-nam lo-sar*)" (Stein 1972:213). As in Stein's account, the Bigu Sherpas also celebrated not only the beginning of a new agricultural cycle, but also the creation of the world during this New Year. This Song of Creation was not performed during the celebration of *losar* itself, but during *Bulako Losar*, the "Call for New Year" two weeks before the set New Year's Day and one day after *Devithan Jatra*. In Stein's case, it is not clear who the specialists were who "sing about subjects connected with the creation, and chant wishes of good omen" (Stein 1972:218), but in Bigu this singing was assigned to the Sherpa shamans. Accompanied by Sherpa elders, the Asek shaman - like his colleague in Rakham - went from household to household at the *gombas'* side of the valley to sing the Song of Creation and to bless each household in return for food and drinks. When I asked the Asek shaman why he, and not - for instance - the village lama, performed this rite, he answered,

> because I am the only one who knows all the stanzas. Even in Rakham, Pari and Jimthang they don't know them all. I know that in Solu village lamas do the *Bulako Losar*, but we had never a village lama who knew the song. I learned it from my grandfather, at the pastures at night with the herds, when all the work was done. My grandfather was a shaman and he knew many things. So, he also taught me this song. But actually, it has nothing to do with my being a shaman. Everybody willing to learn the words can do *Bulako Losar*.

[21] Local Magars, Thamis, Tamangs and the Kami caste see *Dasain* as their New Year. Nepali New Year, in April, is only celebrated by Deb Bahadur Kharka and his family, who go to visit their relatives in Kathmandu for the occasion.

The point is that nobody seemed to have felt like learning the lyrics, but left it to the shaman who was considered to be trained in memorising. Even his brother, the storyteller, could not sing the song. "My grandfather taught me them once, but as *Bulako Losar* was my brother's job, I forgot them." The ritual, however, has much more to it - I will return to its practice in Chapter V,[22] as it is primarily directed towards the mistress of the house. Here it suffices to state that again we find the shaman in charge of a seasonal ritual, which was not abandoned after - as we may assume - the Drugpa Rimpoche's introduction of the clerical determined *Gyalpo Losar*.

The Drugpa Rimpoche's attempts to weaken the position of the shamans, by re-identifying Gauri Shankar, by promoting the Buddhist precept of not killing, and by introducing the monastic time structure, can be extended by one last act which had to compete with the shamans' role as curing agents. Over the footprint, which the Drugpa Rimpoche had discovered in his dream, he had a *chörten*-like temple built with inside a statue of the Medicine-Buddha, *Bhaishajyaguru*. According to Tibetan belief, merely touching his statue would cure illness and disease. The choice for the site of the footprint is clearly not at random, as it is not only a holy Buddhist place, but stands also in the middle of a concentration of Sherpa households. Except for the monastics, however, no Sherpa I questioned ever visited the *chörten* with the hope of being cured. Their first choice was still a shaman.

In this section, I have tried to indicate some of the means by which the Drugpa Rimpoche attempted to replace Bigu's shamanic orientation by what he considered as Buddhist faith. Taking the rituals described above as already existing before the arrival of the Drugpa Rimpoche in the form I witnessed them - which I realise to be disputable - I not only wanted to imply his failing, but also to the shamans' stronghold on Bigu's religious life when the monastery was to be founded. They represented the pragmatic attitude which the Sherpa laity held towards religious practice; they formed the religious soil on which the monastery was built.

*The construction of the monastery*

The Drugpa Rimpoche returned from Lapchi to Bigu with, in his shadow, the sixty to eighty men and women who had joined him along his path during the many years of his pilgrimage. "And the Rimpoche did the *sallang* ritual to initiate the land for building a gomba", the Meme Lama told me. Then he sent monks to Tibet to get a building plan, and to Bhutan to call two fresco painters. Meanwhile, Nim Pasang started to organise the stone cutting for the monastery's walls, and the tree cutting to make a wooden roof construction. Skilled craftsmen from Bigu and surrounding villages were called for work, and monks, nuns and laymen helped in carrying stone and wood to the construction site. At first many villagers gave their labour without expecting payment (Fürer-Haimendorf 1984:124), but then, after already four months of building, the monsoon started and their fields had to be ploughed and sown, and they began to ask for compensation. By that time only the outer walls of the temple hall were standing; the roof was still under construction. Nim Pasang, who had already sold much of his land and had offered about his entire herd of *yaks* and *dzo* cross-breeds for the feeding of the craftsmen, and of the monks and nuns, ran out of funds. So, under the authority of the Drugpa Rimpoche donations were demanded from villagers all over the region. The Nim Pasang's grandson, the present *mizar*, recalled:

> Three times they went to the villagers to ask for donations. Because it took a long time to build the gomba. Months, years actually. The villagers got angry with my grandfather: "How often will you come to ask for more?" First he came to ask them to donate money and food, butter and *chang* (Tibetan beer), then he came again, and again. After the third time there still wasn't a roof, and when it started raining everything inside became wet. So again, they had to go to the village, to ask bags to cover the construction site, and that was not enough, so he went to ask again for *lukuni*, Sherpa

[22] See Ch.V, *Marriage, nuclear families and Bigu Sherpa wives.*

blankets, you know: the white ones with brown stripes. Everything they had to ask, even food for themselves, even coats. Then the villagers were fed up with it. Only after five years they managed to build a roof. After a while they felt ashamed, because it took so long. They didn't dare to build in daytime anymore, only at night. They broke their fingers, because they couldn't see properly. They only had the light of the moon. And then to know that the donations asked for were never more than five or ten paisa, sometimes twenty-five.

How many Sherpa families were there at that time?, I asked.

I don't know. Sixty households maybe. But I am not sure whether that includes the Nepali families as well. They wouldn't donate anything anyway. When they were still building, the Nepalis [read: the Kharkas] caused a lot of trouble. They had told the police that my grandfather had killed somebody and had buried the body under the gomba's foundation. Why would they ever make donations for the gomba, then? My grandfather went on building anyway. And now all kinds of people are coming to visit this gomba. Before, the Sailung Lama, Lobsang Zigme [the Guru Lama, see Ch.VI], came, and many others have come here as well, like the one from Kyirong. And now many foreigners are coming, especially for the gomba. You two [i.e. Dawa and I], you wouldn't have come here if the gomba had not existed, right? How can people say, then, that this gomba is only built for my family? Isn't it everybody's gomba, for all people?

The *mizar*'s shifting from the obstructions his grandfather suffered to the present is no coincidence. Nim Pasang's donation of land to the new monastery (*guthi*)[23] had preserved his inheritable, legal rights on the appropriation of the *guthi* surplus income.[24] This right gave him and his descendants not only access to the gomba administration, but indirectly also the responsibility for the gomba's maintenance as it would depend on the donor family how much of the surplus would be redirected to the gomba. Nim Pasang's donated lands, however, yielded barely enough for the monastic community as basic food supply, let alone that its harvests would suffice to also maintain the gomba buildings (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:123; cf. Snellgrove 1957:217)[25]. During the last decade, he and the Meme Lama applied several times for funds with the VDC (Village Development Committee), to build additional housing quarters for the monastics. Their applications, however, were turned down over and over again. The VDC's yearly grants by the government for development projects was but small, and Bigu needed much improvement (see Ch.VIII). In 1994, the *mizar* tried again, emphasising the growing gomba's role as Bigu's face to the outside world, which concerned all people - not only the Buddhist Sherpas - of Bigu. After the meeting, we met him on his way up, back home from the district capital.

[23] *Guthi* means land endowment to religious or charitable institutions, such as temples, monasteries, schools, health centres, orphanages, etc., to be managed and administered by a *Guthi* association. In the case of Tashi Gomba, this association was constituted of Nim Pasang, after his death, his grandson the present *misar*, and the temple manager who was a nephew of the Drugpa Rimpoche until the Meme Lama took over.

[24] In return for this right on the *guthi* surplus, he and his descendants had to pay a nominal rent of Rps. 1 to the state (*chhu ghuti*). As property of religious and charity institutions were tax exempt, the *guthi* construction was often misused to avoid revenue payments while still enjoying income from the donated land's surplus (Regmi 1978:653-5; see also n.1).

[25] The Rana government appropriated private religious endowments (*chhu guthi*) into a state-controlled religious tenureship (*amanat guthi*), when the surplus incomes were interesting. In case a *guthi* operated at a deficit, however, private *guthi* tenureship was welcomed, as it would prevent the state to be responsible for the maintenance of the *guthi* buildings (e.g. temples, monasteries) (Regmi 1978:654-5). Tashi Gomba remained under a *Chhu Guthi* tenureship, for reasons evident.

You know what they said? They said: "We have no money. The gomba was made by your grandfather, it belongs to your family. Why don't you take care of it?" You see, they want to harvest, but not to sow. It has always been like that.

The *mizar* accepted that the VDC's funds were not limitless, like the capacity of the villagers in his grandfather's day's, but reproached them for the ease at which they denoted the gomba as his family's project. So, he - and Tashi Gomba's lamas - sought help from Buddhist associations, both inside and outside Nepal, making use of the Drugpa Rimpoche's influence like his grandfather had done. "And from all directions, north, south, east, west, gifts were donated. From east, where Bhutan is, and money from Tibet", the Meme Lama vividly narrated. Books, statues, *thanka* paintings, the temple's interior, all was taken care of; but what about the rest of the monastery, its outbuildings, housing quarters, guest room, kitchen, its furnishings and so on, when the mere construction of the temple hall already raised financing problems?

The Bigu Sherpas' unfamiliarity with the institutions of the Dharma, their evident lack of economic resources, and Nim Pasang's individual ambition, resisted the creation of "a religious artistic centre" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:123). It was largely due to the Drugpa Rimpoche's efforts, whose religious authority in the region grew and whose network extended along the Tibetan border, that the monastery materialised.

*The establishment of a lineage*

After five years, the wooden roof was finally ready, the fresco painters had finished the interior decoration, and a *mani* house with a six-feet high prayer wheel. The Meme Khepa, now like the Meme Lama, a "Meme", a grandfather (and *khepa* or *khapa* meaning "painter"), was the apprentice painter at the time. He became a monk, two years after his arriving in Bigu, until he fell in love with a nun. They married, had one daughter and are still living close to the *gomba*. In 1994, he was about 80 years old and tried to recall those early years through the mists of a memory faded by old age and excessive alcohol consumption. Still, his following account gives a nice summary of the Drugpa Rimpoche's actions:

When I arrived here, there was no roof yet on the gomba. We came with the four of us: me, my master, his sister and her daughter. The Rimpoche had called us for help. Kusho Tsetsu [a nephew of the Drugpa Rimpoche] was one of three brothers: Kusho Pema and Kusho Tendzen. They all were already here and had sent a message for us to come. When I came here, I was twenty-two years of age. In the second, third and fourth Tibetan months [i.e. March until May] they had been building, Bhutanese anis were here also. They were only half way with the building. In the fourth, fifth and sixth month, the Rimpoche went to a place called Nyalam, in Tibet (see map). From there he went to Kimbalung [?]. From Kimbalung he went to Tsum. The Rimpoche stayed there for three years. In Kyirong, there is also an ani gomba. The Rimpoche has five gomba. The first one was Kyirong [Tutshe Chöling]. Then he came here and built this one. When he was here, he sent a message to Tsum to start a gomba there as well. Then I stayed there twelve years. Here, and in Yelmu, in Kyirong and in Tsum, everywhere I have made paintings. Afterwards I went back with my master to Bhutan. The Rimpoche went to Yelmu and stayed there for one year. Then he came back and stayed here for three years and by that time he was already old. There is a place called Phuma Bhanjyan, that is in the mountains. There [the Drugpa Rimpoche] went into retreat. To meet the Rimpoche, people came from Tibet, from Bhutan, from down there [i.e. the Kathmandu valley] and from India. People came and he gave teachings, *wong* and *lung*. For all those people there was no place to stay, so they camped out on the meadow. When the Rimpoche did *ramne* [i.e. consecration ritual of the gomba], water, sweat, started streaming from the frescoes. Everywhere where Gods were painted, the walls became wet, the pillars became wet. On that day of *ramne* all the paintings became wet, but without the colours running.

How could that happen? It was a miracle, because the Rimpoche had so much spiritual power [*tsach-ermu*]. When the Rimpoche died, he was seventy-three years old."

A convenient arrangement of the Meme Khepa's muddled overview looks as follows.

| | |
|---|---|
| 19 ? | The founding of Kyirong Gomba |
| 1933 | The founding of Tashi Gomba |
| 1934 | The founding of Tsum Gomba[26] |
| 1935 | The founding of Bakang Gomba[27] |
| 1936 | The arrival of Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Tsetsu and Kusho Pema (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:125) |
| 1936-7 | The arrival of Meme Khepa, his master and relatives |
| 1936-8 | The Drugpa Rimpoche resides in Tsum |
| 1938 | The consecration of Tashi Gomba (cf. ibid.:125) |
| 1939 | The Drugpa Rimpoche goes into retreat at Phuma (cf. ibid.:126) |
| 1941 | The Drugpa Rimpoche dies (cf. ibid.:126) |
| 1948 | The Meme Khepa returns to Bhutan to come back to Bigu before 1953 (birth of his daughter in 1954) |

We know very little about the Drugpa Rimpoche before he came to Bigu. The Meme Khepa could not recall the monastery in Bhutan, from where the lama had started his pilgrimage. We also do not know more about the trajectory of his pilgrimage than that, at one point, he arrived at Kyirong and founded his first monastery there. Taking the large revenue into account of which the Meme Lama and the Meme Khepa spoke, the Drugpa Rimpoche clearly gathered a substantial amount of followers from the start of his pilgrimage in Bhutan and along his path. These disciples must have initiated an urge to found his own spiritual lineage, starting at Kyirong to be extended by the three monasteries on Nepali territory. As such, the Drugpa Rimpoche became a twentieth-century example of a long Tibetan, religious history, for Snellgrove states:

> The eventual development of religious orders in Tibet is closely related to the great importance attached to devotion to one's chosen teacher, whence there derives immediately the concept of a spiritual lineage. [...] Tibetan religious orders developed more or less accidentally as the result of the fixing of such a spiritual lineage at a particular place, namely a monastic establishment, which happened to become a recognised religious centre of importance, consequently growing in wealth and prestige (Snellgrove 1987:486).

In this context of the Drugpa Rimpoche founding his own spiritual lineage, the Meme Khepa's reference to the freshly painted frescoes and pillars getting wet again during the Drugpa Rimpoche's initiation

[26] Holmberg, who conducted his research in this region, mentions a Drugpa lama who founded "a Dukpa school of lamas" and, like the Drugpa Rimpoche, "embellished the lore of local geography by linking it to Buddhist prophesies and legends" (1989:233). Holmberg does not offer much more detailed information about this "Dukpa lama", except that he died not very long ago at the age of ninety-six. This lama could not have been the Drugpa Rimpoche then, but may have been one of his disciples from Tsum Gomba.

[27] This monastery the Meme Khepa does not mention by name. After having mentioned Kyirong, Bekung and Tsum, he just states: "The Rimpoche has five *gomba*". Tsum, however, was followed by a monastery in Bakang (Yulmo or Helambu) in 1935, which was going to play a decisive role in the development of Tashi Gomba after the Drugpa Rimpoche's death (see Ch.IV). The fifth monastery, Sailung Gomba, was not founded by the Drugpa Rimpoche himself, but was going to belong to his lineage (see Ch.VII).

of the temple should not be read as a casual detail. This event was not only to assign the Drugpa Rimpoche with a spiritual power to make the paint moist again, but it also reflects the blessings of the gods painted in the frescoes for his newly established gomba, and lineage. For the latter, we have to look at the symbolical meaning of "pillars".

According to Tibetan mythology, the earth is connected with the universe by the central pillar of the world, the sacred mountain Mount Kailash, in the north-west of Tibet. This macrocosmic image is mirrored in the microcosmic entity of the family.[28] In Tibet, "a family was defined as a house, four pillars in size", denoting the married couple and their manservant and maidservant" (Stein 1972:120). A family's genealogy was based on this definition, thus not represented as a tree with branches, but as a house with pillars, beams and rafters. As the relationship between a lama and his disciples was often compared to a father-son relationship, the lama's lineage was also compared to that of a family genealogy.

> These metaphors [of a house] were [also] applied to the spiritual descent of a religious school. The principal disciples of Marpa are the "Four Pillars", the disciples of Mila Rêpa [being one of Marpa's disciples] the "Eight Brothers". Those of the Nyingma-pa Lama Gyawo-pa are labelled "Four Pillars, Eight Beams, Sixteen Rafters and Thirty-Two Planks" (ibid.:120-1).

In this light, Tashi Gomba and the three other gombas can be interpreted as the four pillars of the house in which the Drugpa Rimpoche's lineage was to develop. As in a family house, the "pillar of the sky and fixing peg of the earth" - still holding a connotation to the tents of the nomadic Tibetans - were the synonyms of the house's "god of soil", also the moistening of the pillars of Tashi Gomba can be interpreted as a fertilising act, the fertilising of the Dharma enacted by the Drugpa Rimpoche by founding his own lineage and his gomba(s).

Kyirong, with its long and famous religious past dating back to the introduction of Buddhism in Nepal[29], was no doubt a perfect place to start one's own lineage, but there was an additional reason to which I will return later. It is unknown how long the Drugpa Rimpoche stayed in Kyirong before he was going to make his final pilgrimage to Lapchi, accompanied by many of his monks and nuns.

As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, it was at Lapchi, in one of Milarepa's caves, that Nim Pasang came to ask him to found a gomba at Bigu. This monastery was to become his second and it obviously inspired him to also found monasteries in religious centres along the Nepal-Tibetan border. First, "he sent message to Tsum, to start a gomba there as well", as the Meme Khepa accounted, which was already a pilgrimage site in the last century (see Havnevik 1998). Similarly, Yelmu/Helambu was renown as a conglomeration of monasteries already for centuries, so Bakang Monastery was to become the Drugpa Rimpoche's fourth gomba (ibid.:1998).

From accounts, we can assume that the Drugpa Rimpoche supervised the founding of Bakang Gomba, while messengers went to Bhutan to fetch his three nephews, Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Tsetsu and Kusho Pema (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:125). These three youths were monks (*thawa*) and, as we will see in the next chapter, each of them was to take charge of one of the gombas the Drugpa Rimpoche had established, following the custom that the office of abbot (*kempu*) was handed down from uncle to nephew (Stein 1972:76). When they arrived in Nepal, he made a return to Tsum to supervise the construction of the monastery there. He left the construction of Bigu and Bakang monasteries in the hands of a lama from Kyirong, the local laity, the locally recruited monastics, and some of his followers. During the three years the Drugpa Rimpoche stayed in Tsum, the Meme Khepa and his master painted the frescoes of the *duang* and its porch. The Drugpa Rimpoche presumably came back with the necessary religious objects, such as statues and religious texts, acquired in Nyalam and Kimbalung (?), and Tashi Gomba was ready for consecration in 1938. Bakang Gomba followed shortly afterwards.

[28] And of the human body, see Stein (1972:120) and R.Paul (1976c).

[29] Thus even before Buddhism got a hold on Tibet, see Snellgrove (1987:373).

From the four monasteries the Drugpa Rimpoche founded during his lifetime, only Tashi Gomba was not part of an already existing conglomeration of monasteries. Standing all by itself, in a remote valley, it also had to be allotted with a different purpose than the other gombas. While these seemed to serve the affirmation of his own spiritual lineage by the vicinity of monasteries of other orders and suborders, Tashi Gomba in the quietness of its environment was the perfect place to put his chosen path of the Dharma into practice. A year after its consecration, the Drugpa Rimpoche set the example by going into retreat in a cave in Phuma, a journey of two days north of Bigu, until his death in 1941, at the age of seventy-three. His expressed wish to have his funeral at Bigu seems to underline the importance this gomba had for him at the end of his life.

Now that we have sketched his external path, let us turn to his internal path.

*The guru of the path of tantra*

In his youth, the Drugpa Rimpoche had obviously belonged to a Drugpa Kargyudpa lineage which emphasised the study of the *sutra*, as Fürer-Haimendorf reports him to be a *geshé*, a lama with the highest degree (like a doctoral degree) in the Tibetan monastic educational system (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:122-3; cf. Stein 1972:156-7).[30] His long retreat at the end of his life, however, denotes a shift from the path of study to the path of meditation during his religious career.

In the Gelugpa order and certain Kargyudpa lineages, Tantric practice is (only) open to those who hold the *geshé* degree, thus after they finished an approximately twenty-year study "based on books, which is bound up with discursive thought, dialectics and formal logic" (ibid.:157). The faculty of Tantric practice to *geshés*, however, does not mean this path is obligatory. On the contrary, the path of *tantra* in these orders was considered to be a difficult, and sometimes dangerous, step towards a higher level of spiritual accomplishment. A *guru lama* would only give permission to a student to take that path if he considered him to be spiritually talented and sufficiently advanced. Usually, the choice for Tantra would lead the student away from the monastery in which he was educated, towards other, tantric, teachers at other monasteries or hermitages. Many monks who choose to proceed on the path of *tantra* lead a itinerary life, constantly in a quest for Tantric knowledge and initiations (ibid.:122).

The Drugpa Rimpoche obviously belonged to those monks, as he had left Bhutan and had spent a large part of his life on his pilgrimage tour through Tibet and Nepal. We will probably never be able to trace when exactly his quest began, which religious sites he called at, and who the teachers he sought were. What we know about the Drugpa Rimpoche concerns only the last phase of his life, when he was already a highly respected *guru* himself, and at a site which was exemplary to his chosen path.

The flyer text of the Tulku contains the following passage.

> In two days from Begu to Lapchi, we find two caves in which Milarepa did his meditation. Towards the northern side, if we walk for another two days, we find another mountain [i.e. another from Gauri Shankar] calls Gowri Parbath mountain, where Sherab Dorjee did his ten year [?] solitary retreat in an area of the snow mountains. (after the original)

Milarepa (1040-1123 AD), one of the most famous religious heroes in Tibetan Buddhism, was a tantric yogi and a poet, who was quite outspoken in his critique of those who believed solely in the path of *sutra*:

> Your belly filled with pride, you belch vanity and vomit jealousy. You fart contempt for others and excrete sarcasm! (Stein 1972:153).

[30] Fürer-Haimendorf offers us also the Drugpa Rimpoche's monk's name, Ngawang Paldzen, while Sherap Dorje was his *geshé* name. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is common to get an other, additional, name at every important initiation.

His most important disciple, a monk called Gampopa (1079-1153), "combined the esoteric teachings transmitted to him by Mi-la Ras-pa with the monastic traditions and non-tantric teachings of the bKa'-gdams-pas"[31] (Snellgrove 1987:493). Creating as such a new *dharma* (path) within the monastic structure, this disciple of Milarepa became the founder of a new lineage, which dissected itself from the Kadam-pa order from which it originated, to become known as the Kargyudpa order. The Kargyudpa order split up into six suborders, one of these being the Drugpa Kargyudpa to the Drugpa Rimpoche adhered. The fact that a Sherpa headman had requested a gomba close to the cave where Milarepa, the proto-founder of the Kargyudpa order, was said to have reached Enlightenment must have occurred to the Drugpa Rimpoche as yet another auspicious sign. Moreover, it inspired him to dedicate the last years of his life to following Milarepa's example by going into retreat in a cave, not near Kyirong, Tsum or Helambu, but near Bigu.

However, Milarepa was not the central figure of the Drugpa Rimpoche's devotion. The spiritual ancestor of his order is neither addressed in the fresco text next to the porch[32]; nor is his statue central on Tashi Gomba's altar which was said to be furnished by the Drugpa Rimpoche himself.[33] Instead, the main role, both in the text and on the altar, is given to Pawa Chenrezig (Skt. *Avalokitesvara*),[34] the *bodhisattva* of Compassion; however not in his general association with the Gelugpa order - the Dalai Lama, also head of this order, is regarded as a reincarnation of Pawa Chenrezig - but in his Tantric quality. To see this meaning Pawa Chenrezig had for the Drugpa Rimpoche, we have to avert our eyes away from the statues on the altar, to the right-side wall of the *duang* which is covered with dozens of the same muddied, clock-shaped images in relief.

These small reliefs depict Pawa Chenrezig as its largest figure, in the middle, however, flanked by two others: to his right *'Jam-dpal-dbyangs* (Skt. Manjusri), the *bodhisattva* of wisdom who cuts through the clouds of ignorance with his sword; and to his right the ferocious protector of the Dharma *Phyag-na-rdo-rje* (Skt. Vajrapani). This triad of deities is known as *rigs-gsum-mgon-po*, the "Three Protectors of Tibet", or the Three Lineage Protectors (Lessing and Wayman 1968:105,125,129; Stein 1972:228; Samuel 1993:281-2; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993:221; R. Paul 1982:64-5).[35] In Bigu, they were called *Thupten Rig 'dzin*, the "Three Knowledge bearing Gods" (Skt. Vidyadhara). Pawa Chenrezig may be the *bodhisattva* at the apex of the Tibetan pantheon, in combination of Jampalbyang and Chagna Dorje, he is part of a Tantric entity.

In Tantric practice, a disciple's personal teacher, *guru lama*, is also called *tsawé lama*. This "root lama" is the disciple's personal guide on the path of *tantra*, who initiates and instructs the practitioner through oral transmission of the Word of the Buddha (Dharma). In this protective and generating function of the Dharma, the lama represents all former important lamas of the lineage, all deities, all *bodhisattvas*, and all Buddhas. During the meditation practice, the "root lama" has to be visualised as being one of them. We do not know who the Drugpa Rimpoche's *tsawé lama* was, but in the opening lines of his Song of Praise of Tashi Gomba, he pays

[31] i.e. the later Gelug-pa order, headed by the Dalai Lamas belong.

[32] See above, and Appendix I.

[33] To the right of the central altar piece, we find a wooden case containing a statue of *Srungma Chundin* (the protecting deity of the Three Precious Ones, i.e. Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; see R. Paul 1989:75), *Opame* (Skt. *Amitabha*), *Tsepame* (Skt. *Amitayus*), *Chitin Drolma* (*Green Tara*), and *Milarepa*. Separate to this row is also a closed shrine with *Mahakala* (the wrathful protector of the Dharma). To the left are statues of *Temba Rimpoche* (?), the *Guru Rimpoche* (Skt. *Padmasambhava*) and a smaller *Pawa Chenrezig* (Skt. *Avalokitesvara*), each in their separate alcoves (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:124).

[34] Three times, this *bodhisattva* is mentioned in the text - namely as "the Holder of the Lotus" [Skt. *Padmapani*, i.e. *Avalokitesvara*] (see Appendix I, stanza 2.), as "the god of compassion" (9.), and by his famous *mantra "Om mani-padme hum"* (10.).

[35] "Of Lhasa's three hills, Chakpo-ri is the soul mountain (*bla-ri*) of Vajrapani, Pongwa-ri that of Manjusri, and Marpo-ri, on which also the Potala stands, that of Avalokitesvara" (Stein 1972:228).

homage to the gurus of the Root lineage that fulfils the hopes of those who have been tamed by the results of the threefold [turning of] the wheel of the Dharma

With "the gurus of the Root lineage", he most certainly refers to the Three Protectors, but also to the gurus of his lineage, including Marpa, Milarepa and Gampopa, and all their disciples. He himself had become a "root lama" for his disciples as well, but he was more than just generating a lineage. I was told by Bigu monastics that an image of *Thupten Rig 'dzin* had been found among the Drugpa Rimpoche's ashes after his funeral. It was after this original that the dozens of copies were made which now decorate the temple hall. This account was to render him an additional status: not only a "root lama" of recognised high status, a *rin po che* (a "very precious one"), representing and being visualised as a Tantric deity, but "an 'emanation' of one or more specific Tantric deities, most commonly Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, or Vajrapani", that is, a *tulku* (Tib. *sprul-sku,* Samuel 1993:281-5).

From Pawa Chenrezig's prominent presence in the Song of Praise and on the altar, we may conclude that the Drugpa Rimpoche identified himself, and was identified by his followers, foremost with Pawa Chenrezig, the *bodhisattva* of compassion. This also becomes obvious if we look at the specific Tantric practice to which he was said to have dedicated the last years of his life at that cave at Phuma. This meditation retreat called *Nyungne* is also Pawa Chenrezig as its central deity (Paul 1989:75; Ortner 1978). This meditational practice was to become the most important meditation practised at Tashi Gomba.[36]

There is, however, one more association worth mentioning, as it offers a clue as to why the Drugpa Rimpoche choose to fix his spiritual lineage at Kyirong. Snellgrove renders "the curious story of the four images of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, all made from the same trunk of a sandalwood tree, and brought, one to Lhasa, one to the village of Bungamati near Patan [in the Kathmandu valley], one to Kyirong in the Tibetan-Nepalese frontier area and another to Purang (southern border of Tibet)" (Snellgrove 1987:373). Kyirong, then, seems to have been one of the first and most important places of the Avalokitesvara cult, dating back to the first half of the seventh century.

The recognition of the Drugpa Rimpoche as a *tulku* went along with the emphasis of his spiritual, tantric, powers (above "factual" information on his life) among his disciples. His dream by which the hand and footprints were discovered, the myth of his creating a spring, the account of the moistened pillars, were but a few. One story, however, also deals with a materialised form of his spiritual power, through his dead body. Once again, I cite one of his disciples, the Mema Khepa, at length:

> But before [he died], he had given instruction as to which side they were to put his head when he was dying. He said: "Put my face into the direction of Bigu". Why? Because Bigu is a good place, and because it is a good gomba. And when the paintings started to cry, that was a good sign. The people are good and the place is good. This we call *phusum tsokpa* [*phun-sum tshogs-pa*, i.e. "perfect"]. That is why this place is called *Tashi Chime Ghatsal. Tashi* means good. "So turn my face to it", he said. And then he died. And when they had to bury him, Kusho Tsetsu took charge. But the Rimpoche had a good friend [from Kyirong], Tsutsa Rimpoche, and the Drugpa Rimpoche had said he needed no other Rimpoche than this one. Because it was his friend, and because he already had put in a paper that this Rimpoche had to be called in the case of his death. The Rimpoche died up there, and in this same *simsum* [the Rimpoche's living quarter] - it was very small then - they laid out his body, and they made small pieces of salt and put the salt next to the body in a coffin (*phurtsa*). They laid the body in a bed of salt and that salt absorbed all the bodily fluids. That is how they left the body in the *simsum* and Kusho Tsetsu went to Tibet to call Tsutsa Rimpoche."

[36] A detailed description of *Nyungne tsam*, and its differing character as compared to Ortner's accounts of the *Nyungne* lay festival in Khumbu (Ortner 1978; cf.Fürer-Haimendorf 1964; Funke 1969) will be given in Chapter VI.

It must have taken Kusho Tsetsu six months to bring Tsutsa Rimpoche from Kyirong to Bigu as the Drugpa Rimpoche's funeral was, according to the Meme Lama, six months later. After his cremation, a *chörten* was built in his memory in Tashi Gomba's courtyard. It is interesting that they took the effort to bring his befriended Rimpoche from Kyirong to Bigu, and did not transfer his body to Kyirong to be buried there. Perhaps the reason was just a pragmatic one; perhaps he made an explicit choice for Bigu, when he asked his head to be turned in its direction, to become his "central pillar gomba", rooted in the soil of Milarepa, despite Kyirong Gomba's earlier founding. Bigu seemed to have been very precious to him.

His spiritual powers remained in Bigu. The salt that had absorbed the Drugpa Rimpoche's bodily fluids - and his spiritual power transferred through these fluids - were put into two wooden boxes in the gomba kitchen next to the fireplace. They were still there during my fieldwork, and according to the kitchen nun was used as a medicine in case of an unidentifiable disease. When I asked her "unidentifiable by whom?", she answered

> well, by the shaman, of course. But nowadays, people go to Kathmandu to see doctors, and they know all diseases, so we are using the salt seldom anymore. That's why so much is still left. You can see, the boxes are all dirty, because we never open them. I will have to clean them one of these days.

His bodily fluids, having flowed out of his corpse, then can be interpreted as a last attempt - after the *chörten* with the Medicine-Buddha on the footprint - to conquer his adversaries in Bigu, the shamans in their stronghold: curing. Not only his Tantric Buddhist practice, which Samuel also calls a Shamanic Buddhist orientation, enabled him "to relate directly to the sources of power and authority, by contracting the Tantric `deities' and other central `culture heroes'", but as a *tulku* he was such a source himself (Samuel 1993:34). In a sense, thus, the Drugpa Rimpoche was a shaman himself, but, in his social role of a *rin po che*, a shaman who could extend his power in the religious sphere, and in the political sphere. Breaking the solidarity among the shamans which seemed to cross-cut ethnic boundaries with his spiritual power and religious authority could have been one political act in the support of Nim Pasang's strive for a Sherpa dominancy in the Bigu valley. However, as I already indicated, he neither manage to "tame the minds" of the larger part of the Bigu Sherpa laity and their shamans, nor did his power evolve into the political realm.

*Reflection*

In Chapter II, I have described how the Nepali state, by way of the Rana politics, had entered the remote agricultural valley of Bigu. Its religious soil, as interpreted in the present chapter, however, suggests how fresh - although going on for at least five decades - this political development still was. The "sacredness" of its landscape, in the way the Drugpa Rimpoche would have it, still was not fully accepted which, according to Walker, is exemplary "in peoples without a centralised state" (Walker in Samuel 1993:160); a political power, that is, "imposed through buildings [...] to transcend and transform the natural landscape, rather than to accept it and live within it" (Samuel 1993:160). The first real attempt in Bigu may have been the village gomba. However, as we have seen, this village temple had been largely neglected and, even with Mangalsingh in charge, only derived a meaning as the centre for the *Narak* celebration. Tashi Gomba constituted a second attempt to impose religious and political power.

Already from the outset, however, the new monastery lacked the necessary economic resources to grow into that impressive religious centre Nim Pasang had had in mind. Moreover, its slow process of construction seemed to indicate a lack of support by the laity, in spite of the Drugpa Rimpoche's collecting campaign. These aspects only emphasise Bigu's state of a "small-scale preliterate society" that "[b]y and large had and have a dominantly shamanic orientation" (ibid.:10). From a religious perspective, its shamanic orientation should have offered a fertile soil for a Tantric Buddhist monastery, as Samuel argues

that in Tibet's history "[m]onasticism survived through support from the general population, and the general population was concerned with the use of shamanic power [...]. In this situation it was perhaps inevitable that shamanism would survive by becoming Buddhist, and Buddhist monasticism would survive by becoming shamanic" (ibid.:472). However, in Bigu this historical process was concentrated by the imposition of a monastery, shamanic Buddhist or not, into a realm that was dominated by shamanism without any practical experience with institutionalised *dharma* practice, let alone a celibate monastery.[37] Also the Tibetans of the past "seem to have felt that the celibate career of a monk, however virtuous or desirable in its own right, was not entirely compatible with shamanic power. [...] The popular ideal of a Buddhist shaman was less the monk than the hermit-yogi, of whom the prototype is the eleventh-century teacher and poet Milarepa" (ibid.:473).

The Drugpa Rimpoche clearly answered to this ideal, with his retreat in Phuma and his commemorated spiritual power, but it was exactly because of his meditational retreat, and his founding trips to Helambu and Tsum, that he failed to transform Bigu's shamanic, pragmatic orientation into the karmic and bodhi orientation of Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, it was his bad timing - besides the already mentioned obstacles during the construction period of Tashi Gomba - that endangered the monastic community's survival.

37 Holmberg's study of a Tamang community shows how shamans and village lamas have been able to develop their practices side by side, despite the paradoxes - particularly concerning sacrifices - this simultaneity created (1989). R. Paul has argued how these two practices among the Khumbu Sherpas have been subsumed in a totalising lamaism (1979; cf. Holmberg 1989:225). In Bigu, however, neither a parallel existence nor a unification could take place because of the lacking of a strong village lama tradition. The introduction of celibate monasticism into a shamanic realm created, at first instance, too big a gap.

IV

# Introducing a new Way of Life
## *The first Monks of Tashi Gomba*

*Introduction*

My choice for Tashi Gomba as the locus of my fieldwork had been based on my interest in Buddhist nuns.[1] Tashi Gomba seemed to be exactly what I had been looking for: a nunnery in its own social environment, without a community of monks in its vicinity to overrule the nuns' religious practice. During my first, four-month fieldwork in 1992 and the preparations for my extended research, the question of whether this gomba really was meant to be exclusively for women from the very beginning had never occurred to me. I took Fürer-Haimendorf's words for granted: that Tashi Gomba had been founded as "a *gompa* for nuns, where women anxious to lead a religious life, widows and deserted wives in need of a place of refuge, could find shelter and inspiration" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1984:122). Only when I started to investigate the gomba's history, the contradiction between Nim Pasang's intention to build a religious centre of learning and arts, and a religious institution for women struck me. Women in Buddhism did, and do, not enjoy as high esteem within its religious hierarchy as men. Why, then, had Nim Pasang tried to combine learning with womanhood, against all odds? The answer turned out to be very simple. It had not been Nim Pasang's slightest intention to found a nunnery; the gomba happened to turn into a community of nuns over the years.

In this chapter and the next, I will offer an interpretation of what happened at Tashi Gomba between 1933 and 1959. From interviews, a picture gradually emerged of a Tashi Gomba that was founded as a mixed monastery of monks and nuns living in separate quarters. This, in Tibet not uncommon, form of religious cohabitation must have been a contribution of the Drugpa Rimpoche. In the former chapter, I have implied that the Bigu Sherpas were not habituated to institutionalised religion, neither to non-celibate, part-time religious specialists, i.e. the village lamas, nor to celibate monasteries. Planting a celibate, but mixed sex religious community in this soil where monks and nuns had to work side by side, live side by side, and practice dharma side by side, was then bound to go wrong, unless certain conditions were fulfilled, which, as we will see, was not the case.

Here, I will focus on the first monks of Bigu, in the next chapter on the first nuns. It was clearly a matter of gender that eventually drove all monks away and let some nuns stay. Before turning to recruitment, possible motivations, the problems within the monastery and the alternatives for men, I will, however, have to pay attention to the reason why Tashi Gomba's early history had been so hard to discover.

*Monastery or nunnery*

When I asked the Tulku (i.e. Tashi Gomba's present Rimpoche, and reincarnation of the Drugpa Rimpoche) whether Tashi Gomba had been intended as an ani gomba (i.e. a nunnery) right from the start, he answered

> Yes. Sherap Dorje [the Drugpa Rimpoche] already had built a gomba in Tsum for both *thawas* [monks] and *anis*, and was already engaged with the founding of a gomba in Bakang [Yelmu] when the people

[1] See Ch.I, *My path to Tashi Gomba.*

of Bigu also came to ask for a gomba. And because Bakang was meant for *thawas*, the [Drugpa] Rimpoche decided Bigu was to become an *ani* gomba. Two gombas for *thawas* and two for *anis*, that's how it was meant to be. In Tibet, there was also an *ani* gomba, in Kyirong, a very big one. But the Chinese have destroyed it and the *anis* have fled to Kathmandu. They have a big gomba in Swayambunath now.

When comparing the founding of the gombas to my historical reconstruction,[2] the Tulku seemed to juggle with the sequence of his monasteries' founding. Not Tsum but Bigu had been the first monastery. Tsum, however, had developed into the biggest religious community of all the Drugpa Rimpoche's gombas,[3] which the Tulku preferred as a residence after his private house near Bodhnath, in Kathmandu. Bakang Gomba, which the Tulku also names before Tashi Gomba, seemed indeed to have been meant as a monks' community. Although this community's numbers have dwindled from about thirty-five monks during the first decade of its existence to not more than a dozen in recent years, the Tulku seems to perceive Bakang Gomba as being more important than Tashi Gomba with its sixty nuns. The reason is obviously the gender specificity of each. Interestingly, he also mentions Kyirong, but renders it as a (substantial) nunnery. Kyirong Gomba's main building, however, had been a monastery with the nunnery only as its annex. At another occasion, he told me that many of Kyirong's monks had fled to his monastery in Tsum, while many others just had disappeared. Why the Tulku initially only referred to Kyirong's nunnery who's anis sought refuge in a nunnery in Swayambhunath, remained unanswered. This question is particularly intriguing as this Swayambhu nunnery does not belong to his own lineage, Kargyudpa though - but Karma Kargyudpa, not Drugpa Kargyudpa -, and, consequently, does not fall under his authority. In any case, the Tulku's account clearly serves to deny the past of the gombas now under his supervision, by sticking to their present hierarchy of size and importance. Consequently, I also doubted the accuracy of his statement on Tashi Gomba's start as a nunnery, as more or less an annex to Bakang Gomba.

The Meme Lama's accounts on Tashi Gomba's early community were ambiguous. When asked straight forward whether Tashi Gomba was meant for monks or for nuns, he answered "for anis, because many women wanted to become an ani. They even came from Lapchi to become an ani in Bigu. They needed a place to stay and so they built houses here." During his long monologues, however, he seemed to shift back and forth between Tashi Gomba having been a monastery, and its having been always a nunnery. At one point, he recalled

> I wanted to learn to read *pecha*, so I went to Tibet. But I didn't like to stay there and came back. This gomba [in Bigu] had been a nunnery, so I went to Yelmu [Bakang Gomba] where the lama stayed.

However, when expounding on his relationship with the Drugpa Rimpoche, he states that

> in the beginning, there were many *thawas* here [i.e. in Bigu]. Some stayed, some became lay people. They didn't obey the discipline, and that's why the lama trusted me.

It was only when I asked the *mizar*, Nim Pasang's grandson, that I started to understand that the two alternatives were not a matter of either/or, but of succession in time.

> Now, *anis* have here the chance to be *anis* and in former times also *thawa* came here.

[2] See Ch.III, *The establishment of a lineage*.

[3] In 1994, Tsum Gomba compiled nearly 120 monks and nuns in two separate buildings: the monastery with the main temple hall, and the living quarters of the nuns at about half an hour walking distance from the male centre.

Why is it an *ani* gomba now?, I asked.

> Originally, it was built as a *thawa* gomba. But afterwards, when he [i.e. his grandfather] had been to Tibet [on a trading trip], he saw that women were less educated, less civilised. They understood so little, and had sharp, abusive tongues. Then he came back, and he thought it may be might be better to have an *ani* gomba, so that women would have more chance of education and learn how to behave properly. So he sent back the *thawas* to Yelmu Bakang. They could learn *pecha* there.

When did your grandfather initiate this change?

> After some years, may be three or so.

The shift from a monastery of mere monks into a nunnery as the present *mizar* implied, however, puzzled me. Where did the anis suddenly come from during Nim Pasang's absence? The final answer came from Phulba, a layman.

> It hasn't been an *ani* gomba from the beginning. It was a gomba with *thawas* **and** *anis* at the time the [Drugpa] Rimpoche was still alive. He died in a cave at the Lapchi side, when he was doing *tsam*. But at that time, many *thawas* and *anis* ran away with each other. Then many *thawas* moved also to Bakang, I think. In any case, they left, and the *anis* stayed behind. That's when it became an *ani* gomba. As a matter of course, so to say.

I did not know of the existence of celibate but gender-mixed monasteries in Tibetan Buddhism; the reason why I had not thought of this possibility in the case of Tashi Gomba. However, these kind of monastic centres were not an uncommon phenomenon in Tibet. "The arrangement seems to have been that monks and nuns performed communal rituals together and received religious teachings from the same lama, while their housing remained separate" (Havnevik 1989:42). In the light of the Drugpa Rimpoche's large retinue of monks **and** nuns into account, and Tashi Gomba's becoming the first monastery in the region, the choice for a mixed community was pragmatic. Both men and women who had come to follow the Drugpa Rimpoche needed a place to settle, but also the gomba as such needed all the hands it could get, and all the ties with the lay community it could establish, in order to secure its genesis. Nim Pasang's dream, then, may have been a gomba solely for monks, but under the Drugpa Rimpoche's religious authority monastics of both sexes were welcomed.

Tashi Gomba's mixed community may have been a choice based on practical considerations, but it nearly developed into a curse. Even before the construction of (separate) housing quarters could start, the monks had already sought their salvation elsewhere, leaving the gomba to the nuns. Before exploring this development, however, two other issues, based on the above, deserve some attention.

The first issue is Nim Pasang's holding on to his idea of Tashi Gomba as an educational, and civilising, enterprise. Finding "his" gomba primarily inhabited by women (except for the lama-in-charge), after his umpteenth journey to Tibet, he seemed to have adjusted his goal of a centre of religious learning and arts to its changed, female, community; a place where women opting for a religious life could receive basic education and learn "proper behaviour", presumably to become examples for laywomen.[4] This statement of Nim Pasang's grandson is more or less corresponding to Fürer-Haimendorf's rendering of Nim Pasang's own answer on why he founded Tashi Gomba - as a nunnery.

Nim Pasang obviously had resigned himself to Tashi Gomba's changed situation after many years, although the discovery must have been a hard experience. The political value of the monastic centre had

[4] On the assumed need to civilise women, see Ch.V, *Women and the Dharma*.

definitely dropped in both his eyes and in those of his Hindu adversaries, the Kharkas,[5] as it had turned into a place for only women. His grandson's account still betrays the loss of face that had to be restored; namely, that Nim Pasang had wanted a gomba for monks at first, but then decided to change it into a nunnery himself, by sending the monks away. Nim Pasang never had the religious authority to make such a decision, but this act of covering up led to the disregard of Tashi Gomba's primal existence as mixed religious community - which brings me to the second issue.

If we take a look at the positions of those who offered the different narratives of Tashi Gomba's initial composition, as rendered above, their relation with, and position to, the gomba is striking. At the extremes are the Tulku, the monastic insider *par excellence*, and Phulba the layman, the outsider. The former renders only a *status quo*, and denies, with it, a sense of development, while the latter renders what we can assume as closest to what actually happened, because he acknowledges the course of time. The Meme Lama and Nim Pasang are both half insider, half outsider; one leg in the monastic realm and one in the social, lay realm. I already noted how Nim Pasang's narrative could be interpreted from his personal, sociopolitical perspective towards the gomba he had founded to his own advantage. His account is close to that of Phulba, for it does not deny change. The Meme Lama's ambiguity seems to reflect more the Tulku's perspective. When asked directly, the old lama - who was one of the first, and runaway, monks of Tashi Gomba - gives a repetition of the Tulku's statement, but when he surrenders to the impulse to boast about his role in Bigu's religious development and his local authority, he can not leave out some facts that enfeeble the "official" statement.

The Tulku and the Meme Lama proved only to be exemplary for the overall tendency among Bigu's monastics to deny time and change. It goes without saying that this attitude caused quite some trouble as I was depending to a large amount on these insiders, in my project to chart the history of the gomba. Eventually, however, it not only restricted, but also produced insights. It revealed an ideology which they tried to put into practice, and which had to shape their image to the outside world. Time, however, does not allow denials, certainly not when shared. So, in the course of time it turned out that what they most rigidly tried to forget, only highlighted the most significant events of their shared past.

*Harmonious and disharmonious time*

In the context of the violent upheavals between Muslims and Hindus in India, Van der Veer writes: "Religious discourse tends either to deny historical change or else to prove its ultimate irrelevance" (Van der Veer 1994:xii). In Bigu, the same attitude can be observed, although its political implications are not so dramatic. It had consequences for my research, though, and is worth noting in the light of knowledge production and my role as an anthropologist in this process.

In order to influence one's *karma* for the better (karma orientation), and to progress on the path towards Enlightenment (bodhi orientation), Buddhist teachings propagate a withdrawal from the social world, preferably for life. As such, the accumulation of sins which social life inevitably generates can be minimalised, and the best circumstance for a practitioner to concentrate on the Dharma created. Practitioners, however, cannot accomplish this renouncement of social life only by reducing their interaction with the outside lay world to a minimum[6] ; they also have to learn to forget their own, secular past, because in Buddhism

[5] See Ch.II, *The Kharka family*.

[6] A complete separation between the renouncing realm and the renounced realm is, of course, not possible. Particularly when retreat takes an institutional, communal form, the ideal of total renouncement can never be achieved in this-worlds practice, of which this historical ethnography on Tashi Gomba is exemplary. See also Spiro (1982), Thapar (1982), Tambiah (1982), Goldstein and Tsarong (1985), Ortner (1989), Gellner (1992), Van Spengen (1992) and Lopez (1996), among others, who have already shown the paradox of monastic life, of renouncing but simultaneously depending on the laity, especially in the context of economic support. Lay contributions and donations in return for rituals and religious merit are essential for a monastery's existence.

> memories of particular things are widely perceived to be distractions from soteriologically beneficial praxis; this is seen as early as the scriptural references to "remembance and intention rooted in ordinary life" that need be abandoned in order to practice mindfulness. (Gyatso 1992:12).

Both memory and the above quoted term "mindfulness", however, are derivatives from the same Sanskrit word, *smrti* (ibid.:4). It denotes "mindfulness" also as a kind of memory, a recognition; however, not the mundane kind of remembering of past events, but in

> the sense of "recognising" the ultimate truth of what is realised, and of gaining personal mastery and an internalised, thorough-going identification with it (ibid.:6).

Through the remembrance of the Buddha and his exemplary followers, and the identification with those teachers (*tsawé lama*)[7] during meditational practice, the practitioner proceeds on his spiritual path. Ordinary memory of the past only disturbs the meditator's concentration, but may also lead to "deleterious self-absorption", especially when concerning one's personal past (ibid.:9; see also Griffiths 1992).

Mindfulness, then, is a meditation device to train the mind in concentrating on the impermanence of all perceptions and objects, on lack of self, etc. Ideally, this awareness has to pervade the practitioner's life outside the meditational context as well, but its accomplishment is only reserved to religious virtuosi - which the Bigu nuns I encountered were not. They practised mindfulness during their meditational retreats, and so understood the restrictions the Tulku, the Meme Lama, and the other lamas, put on their thinking and talking about the past. The banning of personal recollections, especially those originating from the time preceding their taking up the monastic vows, gave a woman journalist - who stayed three whole days at the gomba to collect life histories - a hard time to extract from the nuns even such innocent information as the kind of games they played in their youth (see Kipp 1995).[8] Also expressed shared memories about the gomba's past were purged. Neither frustrations and hardships that had come with the building of the temple complex, nor disappointments of their expectancies about monastic life, neither the lamas who had failed to live up their tasks, nor the monastics who left and got married, were to be topics of conversation. Instead, the Drugpa Rimpoche's mythical powers, and the peacefulness and harmony of Tashi Gomba had to be stressed. One nun pleaded anxiously, after I found out that her sister had been a former nun at Tashi Gomba,

> Please, don't write only about the bad things, but also about the good things. Many anis left the gomba at that time [sic!], together with my sister. Write also about the first Rimpoche and his power and about that time when the paintings and the pillars started to cry, when he conducted *ramne puja* [consecration ritual] for the gomba, and why this gomba is called Tashi, and about that time when the prayer wheel started to turn all by itself, in that time when the first Rimpoche was still here and also the Guru Lama. Ani Dorje and others, they heard the bell tingle. You can ask them to tell about it.

The nuns were clearly not that advanced on the path of the Dharma to be able to control their dissatisfactions and discords every minute of the day, nor to exclude the "mundane recognition, which involves the identification of something perceived in the present with something perceived in the past" once and for all (Gyatso 1992:13; see also Wayman 1992). In my interest, it was merely a matter of time to get some clue of events that took place in the past, usually based on remarks of comparison between past and present. This means that my reconstruction of the history of Tashi Gomba is not only based on re-

7 See Ch.III, *The guru and the path of tantra*.

8 I introduced her to the anis of Bigu, after she had contacted me on one of my fieldwork breaks in Kathmandu with a plan to publish a compilation of life stories of women of Nepal with different ethnic backgrounds and different professions.

creations of the past by willing recallers (see also Lopez 1992), but that, foremost, I had to rely on disharmonies taking place during our shared time that triggered off memories. In other words, my historical reconstruction depended on "timing" (Fabian 1983:53).[9]

My dependence on disharmony among the nuns in order to gain the historical insights I sought made me often feel like a vulture, picking on the moments the philosophy they were taught failed, and, moreover, creating disharmony myself by uprooting memories through disturbing questions. The impact of my mere presence, and the prudence that was called for, were brought home to me demandingly, when an ex-nun volunteered about the effect Fürer-Haimendorf's three-months stay at Tashi Gomba in 1974 and the paper he published two years later had triggered off. Her disclosure was a response to my plea to tell me her life story.

> I will tell you anything I can, but [I can talk] only about the time after I have been an ani. After that, there is no problem, but before that, I feel ashamed to do so. I am also not allowed to. Especially not, because I ran away. But even as an ani we are not allowed to talk about what is going on in the gomba. About twenty years ago, a foreign couple came to Bigu [Fürer-Haimendorf and his wife Betty] and they started to ask many questions, and some anis just told them anything they wanted to know. And then the Rimpoche [i.e. the Tulku] came and he rang the alarm bell - you saw the bell in the porch? That one. And all the anis had to gather in the *duang* [temple hall]. And I remember it was silent for a very long time and then he started to abuse us. That we were not allowed to gossip and to tell bad things about what happened in the gomba. And then we all had to make a vow in front of Mahakala [the protection god] and had to offer a butterlamp and a *khata* [ceremonial scarf] before *srung ma* [Mahakala], that whatever happened within the walls of the gomba should stay there. And when I left the gomba and stopped being an ani, the Rimpoche [the Tulku] told me that I could take my body with me, but that I should leave my mind [i.e. memories] behind.[10]

For obvious reasons, there was no way to check this story with other nuns. The younger ones said they had never heard of such a vow, the ones who were already nuns in 1976 either avoided pursuing the question or denied it bluntly. The ex-ani, however, had volunteered this memory, so there must have been some kind of upheaval due to the anthropologist's publication, whether the event in the temple hall had really taken place or not. Moreover, with my questioning about it I saw anxiety flushing over the faces of the elder nuns; as if they only then realised that I had already stayed too long among them to accept the image of Tashi Gomba of an harmonious and peaceful community, "just like a big family" (Kipp 1995:105), and that I was going to tell the outside world by writing about it. The modest confidentiality we had built up together was gone. I was confronted with evasion and silence by the older nuns, which only changed for the better when the Tulku came for a two months' visit to Tashi Gomba, two months later; but after I also experienced his mistrust and fear.

In 1991, I had called in the help of a Nepali anthropologist and a manager of a Dutch trekking agency, to find me a nunnery where I could conduct my M.A. fieldwork. They went to the Tulku for a suggestion, and he proposed Sailung Gomba[11] - not Tashi Gomba. When I arrived at Kathmandu in January 1992, however, the Dutch trekking manager (a trained cultural psychologist) told me he had made inquiries on this gomba. It did not turn out to be the nunnery I had requested and had written my research

[9] See Ch.I, *Genesis and Historiography*.

[10] The essay was published in the Indian journal *Kailash*. I do not know how the Tulku got hold of a copy, and whether he had known about the anthropologist's stay at Tashi Gomba and the nature of his work. He himself seemed to have been in Bhutan (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:126), but the abbot of the gomba at that time, the Guru Lama, must have met the anthropologist since he appears on the photographs that accompany Fürer-Haimendorf's essay.

[11] I will discuss this gomba in Ch.VII, *The rise and fall of Sailung Gomba*.

proposal upon, but, moreover, it was only a very small community of only two old monks, two old nuns, and two young ones from Tashi Gomba to take care of the elderly monastics. In his view, Sailung Gomba was not an interesting fieldwork site to write an M.A. thesis upon, and (at that time) I agreed. He advised me to go to Tashi Gomba, which was of the same Tulku, and assumed the latter's permission to stay at one of his gombas was not related to a specific site. So I left with Dawa, my assistant, for Bigu.

On my return in 1994, I had not managed to contact the Tulku, until he came to Bigu himself in December of that year. We went to his room to pay our respect, and he asked Dawa who I was, how long I planned to stay, and why. I had forgotten all about his advice for Sailung, but instead reminded him of my first visit at Bigu, apologised for not having called on him before, and asked his permission to finish my research at this nunnery. Despite his peaceful and calm appearance I sensed some distress, but he remained silent for a long time. Then he said he remembered the Nepali scientist and the foreign man asking permission for a student to stay at "one of his gombas". After this remark, he started to question Dawa, my assistant, about her family and her place of origin. He looked relieved to find out that the young woman, with whom this foreigner was working and living with, was Tibetan, and that he knew her grandfather - a Tibetan lama from Walongchung (near the Sikkim border). He did not return to my request, though, but dismissed us with a "we will talk later". Only after a week, he called us, and interrogated me on the content of my work. I replied I was trying to combine *dharma* and science, by trying to describe and explain cultural differences between people, so that my readers might gain some understanding of and compassion with people from different parts of the world. The Tulku listened, seemed to contemplate my answer for some minutes, and finally remarked: "Yes, in Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama does that as well: combining *dharma* and science. I heard about it." Then he was silent again for long minutes. Suddenly, he started a monologue on the inconveniences of living at Bigu, on the absence of tasty food, of toilets and bathrooms, of a comfortable guesthouse. He would love to improve the gomba's facilities, but was very much depending on donations. The nuns, however, were not able to communicate with tourists and other foreign guests, and to keep up those contacts, because they could not speak English. If I was willing to teach the anis English during my stay, and Dawa would teach them Nepali, he continued, he would be very happy. He was not interested in my promise of a large donation: "knowledge of languages lasts longer", he remarked.[12] Naturally we were willing to comply with his request. In fact, the nuns had asked us the same favour some weeks before, so we already had organised school books, paper and pencils.[13] I was allowed then to go on with my work?, I asked the Tulku. "As long as you write *dharma*, it is good. Don't lie, but write the truth." It sounded so simple.

Now, in retrospect, I believe the Tulku had had his reasons for sending me to Sailung, and not to Bigu. He did not want another foreigner mingling with this nunnery, and probably thought the older monastics of Sailung would manage to control the information on their lives and past better. When confronted with the fact that I already had stayed at Tashi Gomba for ten months, however, he had no other choice than to accept that these kind of visits by foreigners have become inevitable, as much as the growing dependence of his gomba on these same foreigners for financial support. He called the nun responsible for the gomba's financial affairs and the kitchen nun, and ordered them to take good care of Dawa and me and give us anything we needed. With this order, he publicly approved our presence, and the older nuns seemed to be more relaxed in our company.

[12] See also Appendix I, the flyer on Tashi Gomba written by the Tulku's brother. The request for teachers of English, Nepali, and Tibetan, implicitly stated in that text, was now explicitly formulated by the Tulku. See also Lopez (1996) for the anthropologist's assigned role as a sponsor, and Ch.VIII, *The Tulku and his dream*.

[13] With the help of Jim Schellenger, and the financial aid of the American Peace Corps in Nepal, for which Dawa and I are most grateful.

*Recruiting monks and nuns*

Who had been the first novices, male and female, of Tashi Gomba, where did they come from and how were they recruited? The only two (ex-)monastics of Tashi Gomba, who were still alive during my fieldwork and willing to answer those questions, were the Meme Lama and the Meme Khepa. Both, however, did not make a distinction between the monastics who eventually were going to inhabit the newly founded gomba, and the total amount of followers the Drugpa Rimpoche had assembled all along his pilgrimage starting from Bhutan. The Meme Khepa had estimated the high lama's retinue at eighty monks and nuns, the Meme Lama at sixty, a number he probably also had given to Fürer-Haimendorf (1976:125). As the author also mentions the return of "those nuns who had come from Yelmu, Lapche and Lapthang [...] to the places of their origin" after the Drugpa Rimpoche's death (ibid.:125), we may assume that most monastics from his retinue did not settle at Bigu. While some nuns and monks must have returned to their home regions, others may have spread over the three gombas the lama had co-founded during his lifetime, i.e. Bakang Gomba and Tsum Gomba as well.

Inquiries among Bigu Sherpa families on (their and each others) grandparents, great-aunts and uncles yielded only a figure of twelve ex-monks and ex-nuns of the gomba's early years: the Meme Lama and his wife, the Meme Khepa and his wife Tashi Ongdi, Nim Dolma and Kusho Pema's widow Dolma, Kushi Lama (Nim Pasang's uncle), two of Nim Pasang's three sons who both were said to have run away with a nun too,[14] and, finally, the son of Nim Pasang's last partner in trade (who we will meet below). The recollection, however, left out sons and daughters of less outstanding families who left both monastic life and Bigu (monks and/or nuns), those who moved to, for instance, Bakang Gomba (monks), and those who originated from outside the Bigu valley and returned to their native villages. The home villages of all the nuns I have been able to trace show that their recruitment area coincided to a large extent with the Bigu Sherpas' network of family ties created by clan-exogamous marriages and virilocality. This field covered practically the whole district of Dolakha, reaching from Charikot and Jiri in the east up to the valleys before Barabise in the west, to Khasa in the north (see map 3). Based on the vastness of this area, the number of about twelve nuns that seemed to have consisted Tashi Gomba's community in 1952 (ibid.:146; see Ch.V), and the recalled ex-anis and ex-monks, I estimate the total amount of monks and nuns recruited to populate Tashi Gomba at about forty.

Like the Tulku and the present abbot of Tashi Gomba I witnessed querying their Sherpa or Tamang visitors for sons and daughters willing to take up religious life, I also imagine the Drugpa Rimpoche to have recruited novices. The news of this high Bhutanese lama's presence in Bigu had spread wide, and many had come to pay him their respects. "People came from Tibet, and Bhutan, from India and the Kathmandu valley to meet the Rimpoche. Bigu couldn't offer housing for all of them, so they camped on the meadow", the Meme Khepa recalled. The Drugpa Rimpoche, then, had not only enough opportunity to make his requests for donations for the newly founded gomba, but also to enthuse the unmarried for a religious life. Particularly in the light of Bigu's unfamiliarity with celibate religious life, one wonders how he had promoted monastic life. Why would the conceptions of monastic life he offered in speech, action, and person, appeal to young Sherpas? What social factors may have supported the motivations of the first monks and nuns? As most of the actors of this period have passed away, while others were unable or unwilling to share their memories with me, or were simply forgotten, the answers to these questions can only be based on "circumstantial evidence", to speak with Ginzburg: "When causes cannot be reproduced, there is nothing to do but to deduce them from their effects" (Ginzburg 1989:117). As the most significant "effect" in the development of Tashi Gomba had been the leaving of all the monks and some of the nuns, we have to turn our attention to the problems which the newly founded community encountered, and other distractions that must have had a demotivating effect.

[14] One of them left with his wife for Darjeeling, never to return, the other couple settled at *pari*, the other side of the valley.

*The problem of authority*

As I have explained in Chapter III, the role of a high lama is important in being an example of the Buddha-nature, a teacher of the Dharma, and a guide to the Buddhist community (*Sangha*), that is, an embodiment of the "Three Precious Jewels": Buddha, Dharma, Sangha (Tib. *Kon Chug-sum*). I also described the people of Bigu as unaccustomed to monasticism. It is obvious that, exactly because of this unfamiliarity, Tashi Gomba was in need of a strong, authoritative figure able to teach, guide, and discipline the newly established religious community into a monastic *habitus*. The Drugpa Rimpoche himself would have been the selected person. However, already one year after Tashi Gomba's founding in 1933, he left for Tsum and Bakang to found monasteries there, to return only in 1938 for Tashi Gomba's consecration. A year later, he went into retreat in a cave at Phuma until his death in 1941. He did not leave the new gomba unattended, but put other lamas in charge. These lamas, however, failed to live up to the roles of teacher and guide for several reasons.

Fürer-Haimendorf wrote

> Three years after the arrival of Ngawang Paldzen [i.e. the Drugpa Rimpoche] and the foundation of Tashi *gompa*, he was joined by three youths who were the sons of his elder brother [...]. All three youths were *thawa*, and their names were Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Pema, and Kusho Tsetsu. Ngawang Paldzen did not take on the day-to-day direction of the new *gompa*, but installed a lama from Kyirong as head of the community. It would seem that he intended to put his nephew Kusho Pema in charge of Tashi *gompa*, just as he later appointed Kusho Tendzen as Head of Mu *gompa* at Tsum and Kusho Tsetsu as head of the monastery at Bagan [Bakang]. But at that time Kusho Pema was still too young for such a post and hence the lama from Kyirong was invited to take charge of Tashi *gompa*. The latter left after a few years and Ngawang Paldzen who retained the overall control over the four *gompa* he had founded, selected one of the numerous Drukpa lamas who had come with him from Bhutan to be the new head of Tashi *gompa*. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:125)

Following the ethnographer's account, Tashi Gomba was still under construction, when the Kyirong lama was put in charge, in 1936. He obviously was to oversee the final touch of the temple hall for its consecration, as he seems to have left after this *ramne* was done. The Bhutanese lama, who the Drugpa Rimpoche appointed as head of Tashi Gomba thereafter, had already reached old age, as Fürer-Haimendorf notes he was not known by his name but simply as the Drugpa Meme ("Bhutanese grandfather"; ibid.:125). His task was probably only to last as long as the Drugpa Rimpoche's nephew Kusho Pema was not able to run the monastery himself due to his young age. After eleven years, the Drugpa Meme left (which must have been around 1948) because he "received an invitation from a monastery in Bhutan" (ibid.:127). However, there could have been other reasons for his leaving as well. The Drugpa Meme had, according to Fürer-Haimendorf's information, not been very popular among the anis and the villagers, because he had been addicted to liquor "and used to beat the nuns if they talked during rites in the *gompa*" (ibid.:126). His leaving seems to have been a relief to the anis, and I suppose much to his own relief as well. During his stay, Kusho Pema had taken over more and more responsibility of the accounts and business affairs of the gomba, "and held a position of considerable influence and power" (ibid.:126). It is not inconceivable that conflicts arose between the young lama and the old Drugpa Meme, a battle the latter would always lose against a nephew of, and the appointed abbot of the gomba by, its Rimpoche.

After the Drugpa Meme's departure, Kusho Pema (now twelve years older since his arrival at Bigu) took up his position as the abbot of Tashi Gomba; but not for long. It turned out that the young abbot "had no vocation for a celibate life and got involved with a nun" (ibid.:126). After four years, in 1952, Kusho Pema's first of three children was born (ibid.:142). By then, he (and his wife) already had laid off the robe and had moved out of the gomba. They had settled at short distance from the gomba, until Kusho Pema died (around 1960), and his wife moved to Kathmandu with their children.

During my investigations in 1994-5, however, Kusho Pema's term as abbot was omitted from Tashi Gomba's oral tradition, as was the Drugpa Meme's, for obvious reasons. The first had broken his vow of celibacy and the latter seemed to have been an *arak*-addicted and violent man, both not really fine examples of monastic discipline. Especially not in the light of a successor who did earn a reputation as a pious lama, a devoted teacher and head of Bigu's religious community. This lama, not surprisingly remembered as the Guru Lama, was Tashi Gomba's abbot until his death in 1986. The nuns set the date of his arrival, as well as the Meme Khepa (the old painter), during the Drugpa Rimpoche's retreat, thus before his death in 1941. The Meme Khepa narrated

> Before the [Drugpa] Rimpoche died, he had spoken of the Guru Lama. One day, the Rimpoche said, "today, a *paune* [student] will arrive, a *thawa*. And you, you show respect for this *thawa*." That was even before he actually came. Before that, he stayed at Mentok [a hermitage above the village of Bulugpa]. He [the Rimpoche] was doing *Nyungne*, seven thousand pair [of days: every other day is one of fasting and silence]. And all the anis were full of expectation: "Who could that be?" And then a *gelung* came and with him also a friend, a *Denjongpa* [someone from Sikkim?]. And after two weeks the Rimpoche asked: "Did our guest arrive?" and the anis said: "Yes, a *gelung* has come." And the Rimpoche sent him a note to come to the cave. And he [the Guru Lama] went - it was not permitted for anyone to go there to meet the Rimpoche, even his helper was only allowed to come at the window, and also the *gelung* was only allowed at the window. And then the Rimpoche gave him fifty rupees. At that time fifty rupees was a lot of money. "And with this money", the Rimpoche said, "you stay in the *mani* house and there you do *tsakbum* [100,000 prostrations]. That was before the Rimpoche died.

The head nun during my extended fieldwork, who had entered Bigu's religious community in 1964, was told that

> the Guru Lama had stayed in Zenzumbaru Gomba near Beding for one year [another gomba close to Metok]. Afterwards he came here in Tashi Gomba and lived in the *mani* house for some time. He asked: "Where is the *kempu* [abbot]?" And the anis joked: "At Sanghba *jatra* [yearly market]!" But after a while they told him the truth, and they told him that the Rimpoche was in retreat and that there was no *kempu* at the time. And the Guru Lama went to see the Rimpoche. And he went with cucumbers, because he wanted to give the Rimpoche something different to eat [instead of his usual diet of white food, dairy products, due to his *Nyungne* practice]. But on their way, the anis ate half of the cucumber, so the Guru Lama decided to return the next day. The next day, they arrived very late in the afternoon. And it turned out that the Rimpoche had been waiting for him already. The Rimpoche told the Guru Lama: "You have to become *kempu*. You are Tibetan, and here are only Nepalis. You have a good education and you have done a lot of practice [meditation]. I will die soon and then you take over." The Rimpoche could forecast the future and he gave the Guru Lama much advice too. "Take care of the anis", the Rimpoche had said. The Guru Lama could not refuse, so he came back and started to live in the Rimpoche's house. But it was very small, so he tore it down. Three days after I arrived [at the gomba to become an ani], they started to build this big house.

However, Fürer-Haimendorf's account on the Guru Lama - not based on an interview with the lama himself, it seems - offers another interesting date of the abbot's installation.

> The abbot in charge of Tashi *gompa* at the time of my visit in 1974 had then held the position for 18 years [sic!]. He was referred to only as Guru Lama and no one revealed his name. But it was said that he had been born in Kham, and that for some years he had been a monk in the Sera monastery in

> Tibet. When he came on a pilgrimage to Nepal, he heard of Ngawang Paldzen, and he was looking for a spiritual guide, he sought him out at Tashi *gompa*. Impressed by his personality he then settled at no great distance at Changdze Mendok [Jangchup Metok], a hermitage above the village of Bulugpa. When some years later the Drukpa lama [...] [left], the villagers of Bigu suggested that the lama from Sera might be offered the headship of Tashi *gompa*. They had been impressed by his piety and seriousness of purpose, and approaching him with gifts of *kata*, ceremonial scarves, invited him to take charge of the *gompa*. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1984:127-8)

As all accounts suggest that the Guru Lama had met the Drugpa Rimpoche, we may assume that he had been one of those who had sought this charismatic lama while being on a pilgrimage tour himself. Several informants explained that he had been sent into retreat by the Rimpoche, but whether this had been in Jangchup Metok could not be verified. However, if the Drugpa Rimpoche had been forecasting his becoming the abbot of Tashi Gomba, why did the Guru Lama not appear already around 1951, when Kusho Pema withdrew? If the villagers - among whom Kusho Pema - had known where he was, why did they not call for him earlier? The year of his return to Tashi Gomba, eighteen years before Fürer-Haimendorf's visit in 1974, is intriguing in this matter. 1959 was the year the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet into exile in India. The Guru Lama was said to have been a monk of Sera monastery, a very famous and large Gelugpa monastery in Tibet. This information has led me to think that the Guru Lama might have been back in Tibet from where he also fled for the Chinese domination.[15] He probably decided to return to his former spiritual guide, only to find him already passed away and to find himself a new task at a Tashi Gomba without an abbot, and a new home.

It was again the Meme Lama's narrative about his religious career that offered the missing link between Kusho Pema's term and the Guru Lama's arrival.

> When the Drugpa Rimpoche died, there was no lama any more. Then there was Kusho Tsetsu and he ordered me that I could stay here, because I knew how to manage things. Because Kusho Tsetsu had to go to Tsum sometimes. And I took care of Bigu. And later on one lama came. He came from Tibet and had good knowledge, but he could speak neither Nepali nor Sherpa.

Although the Meme Lama also prefers to disregard Kusho Pema's short term, he brings Kusho Tsetsu on stage. From the moment the Drugpa Rimpoche left Bakang for Bigu, and eventually Phuma, Kusho Tsetsu had taken up his position as the abbot (*kempu*) of Bakang Gomba. After his uncle's death, it had been this "youngest and most gifted of the three brothers" who took over the overall supervision of the four Drugpa Kargyudpa gombas (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:126). When, after some seven years, the Drugpa Rimpoche's reincarnation was recognised in a four year old boy, born in Tibet not far from Kyirong, Kusho Tsetsu became his guardian. Until the age of fifteen, the young *tulku* stayed at Tsum Gomba, to study under Geshi Rimpoche at a Kargyudpa gomba in Bakang, who had studied with the same *guru lama* as the Drugpa Rimpoche, thereafter. Fürer-Haimendorf writes: "In 1974 he [i.e. the Tulku] was invited to Bhutan, and spent there a number of months [meaning that they did not meet]. It is expected that ultimately he will take over the position now held by Kusho Tsetsu" (ibid.:126).

With responsibility over the four gombas, Kusho Tsetsu must have been in Bigu very seldom.[16] The gomba's financial affairs were still in the hands of Kusho Pema, assisted by the Meme Lama, but his religious participation was reduced to "the performance of the major rituals" (ibid.:126). Between 1953

[15] See Lopez, for the large amounts of Sera monks who had followed their religious and political leader into exile. They rebuilt their monastery, not at Dharamsala, but further to the south of India, in Mysore (1996:264).

[16] The distances between the gombas discouraged frequent visits. It takes at least three days on foot from Bigu to Bakang, sixteen from Bigu to Tsum, and some eight more to Kyirong.

and 1959, Tashi Gomba's monastics were left without a *guru lama*. No wonder that the well-educated and decisive Tibetan lama, named Lobsang Zigme, who filled up the teaching and guiding vacuum, was to get a title after the task he took on the "Guru Lama", and caused his two predecessors to be "forgotten".

During the first twenty-six years of its existence, Tashi Gomba looked like a dovecote, with lamas coming and going. The two lamas, who had the charisma and religious authority to direct this young monastic community, were the Drugpa Rimpoche and Kusho Tsetsu. The first, however, was too occupied with the founding of his lineage through the four gombas, to finally withdraw from all of them for the good of his own spiritual development. His most gifted nephew, Kusho Tsetsu, had been appointed to Bakang, which remained his home base even when he gained the supervision of all four gombas after 1941. Both left Tashi Gomba in the hands of men who either did not intend to stay for a long time, or who, for one reason or another, were not able to live up to their role of teacher and guide. None of these lamas-in-charge managed to create a solid base for a monastic *habitus* of study, practice, and discipline. There were, however, other factors which also hampered the development of the community's religious practice.

*The problems of language, teaching and practice*

All lamas who have had a leading and teaching position at Tashi Gomba since its very founding had to contend with a same difficulty, namely that they all had been "foreigners", as the Meme Lama once said using the Nepali word *videshi*: the Kyirong lama, who supervised the construction of the temple hall, as well as the later Guru Lama, came from Tibet; the Drugpa Rimpoche and his nephews, Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Pema and Kusho Tsetsu, as well as the Drugpa Meme originated from Bhutan. The point he wanted to make, however, did not concern their nationality and possible political problems, but was related to what the Meme Khepa referred to as not being *kha kad nangba*, not belonging to "those who share the same speech" (cf.Ekvall 1964:93). Despite their differing vernacular languages, the educated lamas from Tibet and Bhutan were able to communicate among themselves in the religious language of their *pechas* (*CHos aKad*; ibid.:93), and in the spoken language that came closest to this classical Tibetan, Lhasa Tibetan. The Bigu Sherpas, however, did not speak nor understand the lamas' languages. Their Sherpa dialect, although a Tibetan language too, had been developing since the late fifteenth, early sixteenth Century from the Tibetan of the region they supposedly originated from, Kham. Some Sherpa and Tamang men, like Nim Pasang, must have been able to make themselves understood in colloquial Tibetan dialects due to their encounters with Tibetan communities on the pastures and on trade expeditions. Most Bigu Sherpas, however, were neither familiar with Lhasa Tibetan, nor with the language of the religious texts. Only a few had studied with a village lama, among whom Mangalsingh (I presume)[17] and his uncle Kushi Lama, and the Meme Lama.

Particularly during the first years of each of these religious leaders' stay at Bigu, communication between them and the monastics (who were still to be educated in the language of the *pechas*), as well as between them and the laity, had to be conducted through interpreters and intermediaries. According to his own account, the Meme Lama had been the only right person to take up that position, and thanked most of his religious influence to his language capacities.

> At that time [when he returned from Bakang in 1938], there was only a *mani* house and the gomba [the temple hall], and they stayed here quite some time, the thawas and anis. Although there were many thawas, I was the one from Bigu who got on friendly terms with the [Drugpa] Rimpoche. They [the lamas] had to know Nepali language, Sherpa and Tibetan, and had to know the village, but the Bhutanese, they didn't. Those from Tibet, they couldn't [speak the languages], and also not from Tsum. Though there were many thawas, some stayed, some became lay people. They didn't obey the

[17] See Ch.III, *The village lamas and the village gomba.*

discipline, and so the [Drugpa] Rimpoche started to trust me. I had many relatives in Laptang, in Sailung also, in Dhara, everywhere. I had become a thawa, and a thawa is also called a *gelung* [student of religion]. And, afterwards, the [Drugpa] Rimpoche - he was my *guru lama* - trusted me and said: "Now you do *thödam*." Which means like porters have a sardar [trekking leader], a *thödam* can order and manage things. He has to buy rice and other grains, and sometimes they have to ask for *sonyum* [yeast]. And he had to speak Nepali and know the paths [the way through the valley] and know the village people. And he had to speak Sherpa language with Sherpas, Chetri language [i.e. Nepali. Sic!] with the Chetri. That's why. I also know Tibetan language, lama language, so the lama has made me *thödam*. At that time, I learned [reading] *pecha*. At that time, there was no school, also no lama school, and I learned *pecha* language, but after seven years, I got a family and went to live with them.

And then the [Drugpa] Rimpoche died [...]. There was no lama anymore. Kusho Tsetsu came, and he told me that I could stay in Bigu [N.B. the *meme* had left monkhood a year after the Drugpa Rimpoche's death], because I knew how to manage things. Because Kusho Tsetsu had to go to Tsum sometimes, I took care of Bigu [N.B. Kusho Pema is ignored here]. And later on, one lama came [the Guru Lama]. He came from Tibet and he had good knowledge, but he couldn't speak Nepali, and no Sherpa. He was only there, and afterwards I had to tell him which money was given by which people: "This one is donation, this one is *guthi* [return of a loan with interest]." I took care of that. And then I made this house [up the gomba's mountain slope where he was still living]. I went to the gomba very often, although I lived here, to help this lama because he could speak no Nepali. And this kind of helping I did quite a long time.

Although the Meme Lama only mentions his intermediary activities explicitly in relation to the Drugpa Rimpoche (until his death in 1941), Kusho Tsetsu, and the Guru Lama (after 1959), it is clear from his references to "the Bhutanese" and "those from Tibet" that he also worked for the Drugpa Meme. In addition, the Meme Lama only refers to his role in economic and financial affairs with the laity, not in situations of religious practice. I am sure he would have expounded on those issues too if they had occurred, for it would have enlarged his reputation he liked to cultivate, as a man of the Dharma. He may have assisted the Drugpa Rimpoche, the Kyirong lama and the Drugpa Meme, whenever lay people sought their advice and blessing. He may have taught other monastics to learn to read the *pechas*, just as the knowledgable nuns teach their novices nowadays. However, he does not mention lectures on the Dharma in general, or exegeses of specific texts (the path of *sutra*), of introductions to meditation retreats or individual guidance (the path of *tantra*), I am inclined to think that these kind of more elaborate instructions occurred very seldom, if ever; the lamas may have either tried to manage themselves in their restricted knowledge of the Sherpa colloquial, or bluntly lectured in classical Tibetan as the present abbot does nowadays.[18] In any case the Bigu's monastics only received minimal religious instructions.

Only Kusho Pema may have been an exception, as we may assume that, after having been in Bigu for already twelve years by the time he became Tashi Gomba's abbot, he had learned to speak Sherpa and perhaps some Nepali too.[19] His term as a *guru lama*, however, probably came too late, as we will see below, and too short to make a long-lasting impact on Tashi Gomba's religious practice. His own breaking of celibacy brought the teaching and guiding of the young community to a temporary end.

There was yet another reason why thorough religious practice did not get off the ground. Although

[18] Lama Kelsang is usually present at Tashi Gomba in May, to give teachings at the first, sponsored Nyungne retreats. He lectures in Tibetan, "in the language of *dharma*, of course. In Nepali is not possible". The consequence was, however, that the anis admitted to understand only about half of what he was talking about.

[19] Although even the Meme Khepa is still difficult to communicate with, because he speaks in a mixture of Tibetan, Bhutanese and Sherpa. Kusho Tsetsu never took the effort to learn Sherpa and talks with Bigu Sherpas in Nepali, as does Tashi Gomba's present abbot, Lama Kelsang.

the nuns had complained to Fürer-Haimendorf about the "little leisure to read books and meditate" during periods of building activity (ibid.:125), lack of time could hardly have been an obstacle for the young monastics to enhance their study and meditational practices, during the early years of Tashi Gomba's development. Besides the long evenings at this latitude, there were months of winter's snow and summer rains that made construction work impossible but offered plenty of time to practice retreats (in summer), and to study (in winter). What did hinder them were material conditions, mirrored in the slow process of construction itself and its cause, namely insufficient economic support.

Firstly, the monastics of Tashi Gomba must have suffered from a scarcity of religious texts. According to the Meme Lama, the Drugpa Rimpoche had sent monks to Tibet, soon after he had given his consent to Nim Pasang to help him with the founding of the gomba, to purchase a building plan and statues, but also wooden printing blocks for religious texts too. Books, i.e. packages of hand-printed, oblong sheets tied up in cloth (*pecha*), such as the *Bum* books of 11,111 prayers, the Tibetan canon (*Kangyur*) and its commentary (*Tengyur*), which are objects of veneration in themselves as they consist the "Words of the Buddha" (*Dharma*), were too heavy and too expensive to bring along. The Drugpa Rimpoche's couriers brought only the printing blocks of the Tibetan alphabet (generally called *Ka-Kha*, after its first two syllables) with them, the *Digpa* ("sin"; an exposition of the Eight Noble Truths and the monastic precepts), and two blocks with *mantras* to print prayer flags. A full-time study of the *Ka-Kha* and the *Digpa* would take about six months to learn to read them, to memorise them, and to understand the meaning of the words. After two or three winters, these textual sources of study must have been exhausted. New *pechas* were only recalled to have been purchased, and distributed, in the 1970s on initiative of the Guru Lama. Note that the expression "to learn to read the *pechas*", as mentioned already several times, is used by Bigu Sherpa as a synonym for "practising the Dharma". Not being able to enhance their study of texts can thus be interpreted as a feeling of not being engaged in the practice of the Dharma.

A lack of texts, however, could have created an emphasis on meditation, following the Drugpa Rimpoche's example, but the oral setting - in which the teacher had to instruct his pupil in the specific *mantras*, gestures (*mudra*), ritual acts, and particularly the visualisations - was severely hampered by the language problem mentioned above. In addition, meditation and retreat also demand silence and isolation, and it is not hard to imagine that both had been rare at the site of Tashi Gomba. The construction works went on for years, also after Tashi Gomba's consecration in 1938. One year later, a modest dwelling for the lamas, a *simsung*, had been erected, but there were still housing quarters for the monastics to be built, and a kitchen building (see map 4). Winter frost and monsoon rains, the rocky and uneven building lot, but particularly the gomba's lack of funds to hire local craftsmen and porters on a regular basis, to feed volunteers, and to immediately replace broken tools, slowed down the building process. Only in 1954 - twenty-one years after the founding - the basics of a monastic complex were completed with a two-storey house, of which the ground floor served as a kitchen, the first floor as sleeping quarters, and the second, the attic, as a store-room. By that time, the one building met all the needs, as the community's number had dwindled to twelve ... nuns.

Until the early 1950s, some of the young monastics had lived in pasture huts, set up around the temple building, while others returned to their family home or the house of a near-by living relative to spend the night. It could have been possible to create separate meditation huts, up the slope for instance, but this would have asked for much determination, and self-control too. As we will see below, these kind of solitary practices did not foster monastic discipline in this young, mixed sex monastery either, and raises doubts whether the lamas ever encouraged these kind of retreats at this phase of the religious community.

Without efficient teachers, nor the necessary material conditions for either study or meditation, Tashi Gomba did not even approach Nim Pasang's dream of a religious centre of learning and art, nor the Drugpa Rimpoche's intention of a "garden of *dharma* ". The following events show that also its young monastics were not content with the situation.

*The monks' withdrawal*

The two lamas, who had been gifted with the personal charisma and religious authority to lead and instruct a young religious community, were the founding lama himself and his *locum tenens*, Kusho Tsetsu. Both, however, had left Tashi Gomba in the hands of others with lesser talents, and in temporary appointments. A year after Tashi Gomba's founding, the Drugpa Rimpoche left for Bakang and Tsum. Kusho Tsetsu probably accompanied him on his founding trip to eventually take up his post of *kempu*, abbot, at Bakang Gomba. It is not surprising, then, that many of those who felt discontent with Tashi Gomba, with its lamas and its opportunities, followed the two *guru lamas*, to seek salvation with them, particularly to Bakang Gomba.

However, Bakang Gomba also did not appear to have been a convenient alternative either, nor would Tsum Gomba have been. Their subsequent return to Tashi Gomba made them even more vulnerable to the peril inherent to a mixed sex, young community, hitherto unfamiliar with celibate monasticism and without proper supervision, and the lapses of lamas who should have, could have played an exemplary role in monastic discipline: love.

Even the Drugpa Meme, who had been around for eleven years, seemed to have resorted to beatings in such a simple matter as the maintenance of order during the *pujas*, sermons. To restrain the young monks and nuns from emotional involvements and improper contacts, then, surely went beyond his capabilities. Kusho Pema, while Tashi Gomba's *kempu*, was neither the first nor the only monk to break his vow of celibacy.

In 1941, Kusho Tendzen, the eldest of the three nephews, had come from his appointed place at Tsum Gomba to Bigu, for the Drugpa Rimpoche's funeral. He did not seem to have been much in a hurry to return to Tsum. In 1943, a Sherpa girl bore him a daughter.[20] Kusho Tendzen, however, did not choose to leave monkhood and marry the mother of his child, as his brother would do some ten years later. He returned to Tsum, and is said to have gone into retreat for the rest of his life.

Kusho Tendzen's position as a family member of highly esteemed lamas and the abbot-to-be of Tsum Gomba, had turned him into a role model of monkhood. His lapse from celibacy, then, must have initiated a release of feelings of disappointment with monastic life, and of slumbering affections between monks and nuns in Bigu. Particularly after the Drugpa Rimpoche's passing away, one can imagine that the loss of the founding father's coordinating force, even when physically absent during the last years of his life, made the weaknesses of his monasteries still in process come to the fore. For the Meme Lama - then called by his name Chiwong Temba - also fell in love around the same time as Kusho Tendzen, but with an ani.

The Meme Lama had decided to become a monk in 1935, at the age of twenty, and went to Bakang to take his vows with the Drugpa Rimpoche whom he in the lengthy quotation given above explicitly calls his *guru lama*. He only came back with the high lama for Tashi Gomba's consecration in 1938. In 1939, when the Drugpa Rimpoche went into retreat, the young monk became his retreat-assistant, his food supplier, until the lama died in 1941 (see also Kunwar 1986:64-5). It was during these years, that he fell for the charms of a Bigu nun. Both the Meme Lama and the ani left the monastery, and started a life together in a house up the mountain slope of the gomba. In 1944, their first of five children was born.

The return from Bakang to Bigu's undisciplined, mixed community seem to have been a culprit, not only for the Meme Lama, but for many other as well, as Phulba, starting off with the case of Nim Pasang's younger brother Kushi Lama, claimed.

> Kushi Lama was also *thawa* and also went to Bakang, but he didn't like it there very much because it was too far away from home. Many *thawa* came back. But after their return, many married here and left the gomba. The Meme Lama was one of them. He also went first to Bakang, but then came back and married. Many left monkhood.

[20] Kusho Tendzen's daughter was to become one of Tashi Gomba's most impressive nuns, Sherap Omu (see Ch.VI).

When asked when these monks had come back to Bigu - together with the Drugpa Rimpoche, or later, for his funeral? - Phulba replied,

> Both. Some had come back with the Drugpa lama, others had stayed some years at Bakang with Kusho Tsetsu. But they didn't like it. It was too difficult.

Thus by the time the Meme Khepa, the old painter, returned to Bigu in the early 1950s, after years of painting jobs at several gombas, he was warned by Kusho Tsetsu.

> I already had done a lot of work, and I felt I was getting old. So I wanted to do *tsam* [meditation practice]. I told Kusho Tsetsu, "now I want to do *tsam*". Kusho Tsetsu wanted me to move to Bakang, or to Tsum, or some other place, to do it there. He told me that, unless I would move to another place, it would become difficult. But I knew already many *pechas* by heart. In Bhutan, they teach *pecha* at school as well, that's why I knew so many. And I didn't know any one there, in Bakang. Here, this was an ani gomba, and at that time, there was an *ani* who is now my wife. I needed help and she knew many people. I needed a helper to see for my supplies [during his retreat]. She was very clever, so they made her my helper. And then it happened [they fell in love]. It was *sodé* [luck], *sonam* [good *karma*]. It had to be like that, just happened like that.

In 1954, he and the ex-ani Tashi Ongdi had their only child, a daughter.[21]

Kusho Tsetsu would never have tried to lure away monks from Tashi Gomba to his monastery at Bakang, as long as his brother was its *kempu*. However, Kusho Pema's own liaison with an ani and his subsequent moving out, must have urged Kusho Tsetsu to turn Tashi Gomba into a nunnery, as an annex to his monastery in Bakang. The Meme Khepa as probably one of the last monks in Bigu, however, refused. He seemed to have overestimated his religious determination, but he also mentioned that he knew already "many texts by heart", thus implying that he had no need for instructions fellow monks had sought in Bakang. In addition, he gives one more reason why he thought that Bakang would not make his religious life easier, a reason he may have realised from the same fellow monks that had come back: he needed support in his life sustenance.

The young monastics of Bigu were, certainly in those years, completely depending on their family. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is not customary for monastics to go from door to door with their begging bowl to receive their daily meal from the laity, as Theravada Buddhist monks in, for instance, Thailand and Sri Lanka do. Tibetan Buddhist monastics have to rely on payments for their individual religious services requested by lay people, and the sponsoring of communal rituals, voluntary gifts, and other resources (such as the produce of a monastery's lands and herds) that enable a gomba to support its monastics with food, clothing, basic utensils, religious texts and housing. If these are insufficient, each monk or nun has to rely on their close relatives, preferably a father or brother. Their support of a monastic relative is seen both as a social duty, and as a religious act because the upkeep of a monk or nun equals the upkeep of the Dharma rendering an accumulation of religious merit.

It is very unlikely that the Bigu monastics at this stage had the knowledge and expertise to perform rituals at lay people's homes. They may have done communal, sponsored *pujas*, but these did not occur on a regular base yet. The gomba may have received donations, but these were negligible. As we have seen in Chapter II, the lacking of sufficient economic support had already brought its lay founder, Nim Pasang, to "bankruptcy", and donations remained too trivial to enhance a steady building in subsequent years. The monastery, thus, was not able to maintain its members, who were as a consequence completely depending on their families. And this dependence created the main difficulty for those who had left for Bakang.

[21] See also Ch.V, *Two former anis and their silence.*

When the Bigu monks - as only the male monastics were mentioned - went to Bakang, they left their economic support, their families, behind. Bakang Gomba itself was still under construction, and, although the people in this area were not as unfamiliar with monasteries as they were in Bigu (cf. Havnevik 1998), the new monastery by the Drugpa Rimpoche must have also required a lot of donations in kind and in labour. The Bakang people had to support their own monastic relatives as well. The monks from Bigu, who had moved to Bakang, had to rely on their generosity, if not also to overcome their own uneasiness with depending on strangers for food. That would explain why the Meme Khepa refused to go to Bakang, or Tsum, on advice of Kusho Tsetsu: he, a "foreigner" in the first place, did not know anyone there who could support him, while in Bigu his later wife was willing to share her resources with him. This explains too why Kushi Lama did not like it at Bakang, as Phulba narrated, because Bakang was "too far away from home" to get food supplies on a regular basis; although prestige may have played a role as well, considering Kushi Lama's religious battle with his nephew Mangalsingh (see Ch.II). Bakang was too far away from home for him to get his religious reputation acknowledged by the Bigu Sherpas vis-à-vis his nephew, the village lama (cf.Ortner 1989).

Prestige was also an issue for the other Bigu monks, although not necessarily in the same way as for Kushi Lama. The older nuns hade told Fürer-Haimendorf about

> the arduous work they had to do during the early [...] development of the *gompa*. They point out that nuns had then little leisure to read books and to meditate, but had to carry heavy loads and give a hand to the workmen constructing the various buildings. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:125)

It would make no point to read a gender distinction into this account between hard-working nuns and studying monks already at the stage of Tashi Gomba's construction[22], as the ethnographer also renders that the "news of the proposed foundation of a *gompa* had also attracted a large number of monks and nuns, and they all helped in the collection of building materials" (ibid.:123). After years of construction work, both monks and nuns must have longed for the "real thing", like the Meme Khepa who after many years of carpenting and painting wanted to dedicate himself to religious practice. To illustrate this, I will tell the story of a young Bigu Sherpa who, a generation later, became a monk at Sailung Gomba founded by Tashi Gomba's later abbot, the Guru Lama.

Dawa Tsering decided to become a monk in 1984, at the age of thirteen and after having finished class seven (the highest level at Bigu's local school). He took his vows with the Guru Lama, but because Tashi Gomba was a nunnery, he went with the lama to Sailung, where the latter had helped founding a monastery in 1970. Already after two years, however, the young monk left not only Sailung, but monastic life altogether. Sailung Gomba's community at that time consisted of only five monks (two Tamang, three Sherpa) and one old nun, and the only activity he had been employed with, together with the other five monastics, during his two-years stay was construction. It had been hard work, with barely any time left to study *pechas*. He was very disappointed. He thought monastic life would enable him to pursue his education, but instead he felt merely like a workman in a red robe. When he got the message that his sister was going to marry and live in Kathmandu, he reckoned that someone had to look after the family herds, and went back home. To continue some religious activity, he started to learn thanka painting with the Meme Khepa, and nowadays he earns his living as a painter in Bodhnath, Kathmandu.

The image this young Sherpa had of a monk's life clearly did not correspond with reality; at least, not with the reality of monasteries still in the making. He expected a continuation of his scholarly education, he expected a life of dignity and respect, but, except for his red habit, he was to lead a life comparable to

[22] Such a gender distinction of tasks between Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns is obvious in the Ladhaki monastery with an annex nunnery, Grimshaw writes about in her "Servants of the Buddha" (1992).

that of a poor layman.[23] So he left as soon as he found a good excuse, that is, by implying that his parents needed his labour after his sister's marriage.[24] It was an excuse, for he could have gone to another monastery, to Bakang Gomba for instance,[25] like the monks of Tashi Gomba some forty years earlier. These monks, however, also found Bakang Gomba still in the middle of its construction process, with probably the same poor living conditions as at Tashi Gomba, the same restricted opportunities for study and meditation, and the additional problem of life sustenance. What their final solution was, we know from Phulba: "Many *thawa* came back ... married ... and left the gomba".

During the first twenty years of its existence, Tashi Gomba must have resembled a dovecote of lamas and monks coming and going, and its community life more something of a soap opera, with its love affairs between monks and lay women, and monks and nuns, than of a devoted "garden of *dharma*". One cannot help but wonder whether the gomba attracted any new monastics at all after the Drugpa Rimpoche's recruiting. It seems that, after his initial attempts to populate the newly founded monastery, the community was already in decline, until it consisted of only twelve nuns by 1952. So far, I have paid no attention as to why it had been particularly male monastics who had left for Bakang - no anis had been reported of having done the same - and why eventually all of the monks had left Tashi Gomba while only those nuns who got involved with a monk had abandoned religious life. Some answers will be suggested in the next two sections of this chapter, others will become clear in the next chapter devoted to the first nuns of Tashi Gomba.

*Pushing and pulling Sherpa monks*

Tashi Gomba's "pull" factors to keep its monks, and to attract male novices, were weak, but the picture would remain incomplete if we were not also to consider social "push" factors that would have counterbalanced the gomba's weak pulling force. Ortner's study of the monastic developments in Khumbu offers a good entry to social factors, by comparing her analyses with my information on Bigu (Ortner 1989).

Sherry Ortner counted a significant majority of middle sons of wealthier Sherpa families among the monks in Khumbu, and Solu. The motivation of either parents to send their sons to a monastery, or for the sons themselves to opt for a monastic life, she argues, derived from two developments that took place more or less synchronically: a growing social differentiation among Sherpas, based on land property and wealth, creating a distinction between "small" and "big" people; and the founding of monasteries in the region (from 1902 onwards). Traditionally, the Sherpas favoured the equal inheritance rule among their sons. The big families, who had come up during the late nineteenth and early twentieth Century, however, wanted to ensure their wealth, and the social status and prestige derived from it, by avoiding a splitting up of the family's estate as much as possible. In due time, they created two strategies. The first was to take refuge in polyandrous marriages. This marriage system seems to have been introduced with the development of "big" people, as Ortner argues that there was but one case of polyandry in early Sherpa genealogies, whereas "Fürer-Haimendorf reported that 8 percent of Khumbu marriages were polyandrous in the 1950s, and these were largely among the bigger families" (Ortner 1989:175; Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:68-70). A second strategy arose from the founding of monasteries. By sending middle sons to the monasteries to become a monk, these would lose their rights to inherit their share of the family's land, thus reducing the parcelling up of the estate.[26]

[23] It can hardly have been a coincidence that only two boys from Bigu were recruited for Sailung Gomba, despite the Guru Lama's popularity also among the laity, while eighteen others since Sailung Gomba's founding in 1970 were sent by their parents to monasteries in Bakang, Kathmandu, or - with the Tulku to - Bhutan.

[24] I will return to the importance to the children's labour force in Sherpa families, as well as the way it could be used, particularly by monastic sons, as a glossing-over of the breaking of their monastic vows, in a next section.

[25] Bakang Gomba's complex was finished in 1959.

[26] Cf. Aziz (1978), Goldstein (1971a), and Goldstein & Tsarong (1985), for similar developments in Tibet and Ladakh.

However, as I have tried to show in Chapter II, the first Bigu Sherpas very likely belonged to those poor Khumbu families, who had been victimised by the economic developments in Khumbu in its early stage in the middle of the last century, because of which they outmigrated. Ever since, they had been preoccupied foremost with creating a place of their own among the other ethnic people already inhabiting the Bigu valley, and vis-à-vis the later arriving Kharka family. Particularly because of their competition with this latter Hindu high-caste family, no Sherpa family had been recorded for having managed to transcend their smallness. That is not to say that none had aspired to become "big" people - of whom Sukusing and his son, Nim Pasang, were exemplary.[27] But none of them had ever acquired enough cultivated land, and the social status and prestige that goes with it, that would have urged them to take precautions against their estate becoming parcelled up. In addition, no instances had been recalled, nor presently exist, of polyandrous marriages.[28] In comparison with Ortner's findings, then, it is not surprising that there was no tendency, among the thirty-seven Bigu (ex-)monks, I was able to trace, of being merely middle sons.[29]

Rather, the situation the Bigu Sherpas found themselves in, at the time of Tashi Gomba's founding, shows more resemblance with the early history of the Sherpas who had migrated from Tibet to Khumbu.

> In the early years of settlement of the region, land was in plentiful supply, and this possibility was presumably widely available. It is also the case, however, that opening virgin land is a lot of work, and that people would rather have an already tilled field if they can get it (Ortner 1989:36).

From this passage, we not only come to understand why there were no social "push" factors towards a monastic life, but, when monastic "pull" factors appeared to have been failing, these actually worked as social "pull" factors out of the monastery again.

In Chapter II, I have tried to show how the competition between Bigu Sherpa families and the Kharkas had come into being exactly because the Bigu valley still had enough land to be made arable, and the Kharkas preferred tilled fields when they could get it. The countering of their declining familial land property, due to the right of each son on an equal and sufficient enough share to support a family of his own, was simply by clearing virgin land, like the early Sherpas of Khumbu (ibid.:36). Trade, as a means to "augment land-based wealth with income derived from other economic activities" (ibid.:36), which in Solu Khumbu grew in importance with the diminishing of virgin lands, was in Bigu not yet the issue. Here, the trading activities of the Sherpas primarily existed of exchange of goods for own usage, with Tibetans they shared their pastures with on Tibetan territory. The role of regional middlemen moving between Tibet and Nepal, Khumbu Sherpas were to take, was in the Bigu area already occupied by the Newaris of Dolakha, when the Sherpas settled in this region. It seems from accounts that Nim Pasang and his father Sukusing had been the first Sherpas from Bigu to entertain trading expeditions widely into Tibet (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:151).

From the above, we have to conclude that Tashi Gomba was founded at a time in which Sherpa families felt barely a need to "reduce the number of cuts in an existing estate by not having all sons inherit", by either polyandry or monasticism (ibid.:36). A next conclusion would then be, that the first recruitment of monks had been largely based on the charisma and religious esteem of the Drugpa Rimpoche and the aspiration of Nim Pasang to found a prestigious monastery. When these promises were not fulfilled, and the establishment of a solid monastic discipline failed, the life of a monk showed little, if any, advantages above the life of a layman. On the contrary, life within the gomba walls created one

[27] See Ch.II, and below.

[28] There had been, however, four cases of polygyny, in which a Sherpa man married a second wife when the first did not become pregnant.

[29] Fourteen were the oldest son, eight the second, five the third, and ten the youngest son.

serious obstacle, namely a complete dependence on the economic support of their natal families, while on the other hand life outside the gomba walls started to show some interesting, and promising, developments.

As I already indicated in the context of the Bakang movement, the Bigu monastics had to rely entirely on their natal family for their life sustenance. However, it does not seem to be far-fetched to assume that the Sherpas of Bigu, unfamiliar as they were with monasticism, felt uneasy with this dependence. A lay people's expression that "monks don't work; they only eat and read" was often heard in Bigu, which reflects the ambiguity towards monastics in Khumbu where an experience with monasticism is much older (Ortner 1978:135-7). The relatively low standard of livelihood, as well as their main strategy to augment land property by opening virgin land, required all the hands available to a family to secure both the family's own economic resources, as their sons' future. And as the "Sherpa social structure", also in Bigu, emphasises "the ideal [of] autonomy and self-sufficiency of the nuclear family unit" (Ortner 1978:39), a nuclear family is foremost thrown onto the labour force of its children. The more children a family has from the age of about eight years onwards, the more land it is able to cultivate, and the more cattle it is able to keep. In effect, then, the children themselves have been most important in producing their own inheritance. To refrain from participating in the nuclear family's production process while "eating from the same pot" (as the storyteller once put it), only for the enhancement of a personal aim, is by many a lay person conceived as a very selfish act. In name of the Dharma, this judgement would not be uttered easily, unless the family is truly in need of its children's help.

Dorje Sangmo, for instance - although again an example of recent years - had been very serious about becoming a monk. His father was one of the two Sherpa shamans in the valley, but he wanted to learn to read *pecha*. In 1977, at the age of eleven, he moved in with an elderly nun at Tashi Gomba, to study with the Meme Lama who lived close by. Four years later, however, his mother died. With three young sons of four, ten and twelve years old, and no daughters, his father needed his eldest son. Dorje Sangmo was called away from his religious studies, to take care of the cattle on the pastures. He felt his brothers' futures were depending upon him, so he did not resist his father's wish. After one year, his father arranged his marriage to a Sherpa girl from Alampu, "to get a woman in the house". These twists in his life still made him feel sad, although he always was quick to add that he loved his children. When I suggested he could always pick up his studies with the Meme Lama again, he said: "No, I have no time. I have to take care of my family. Besides, the mice have already eaten my *pechas*!" His youngest brother though was supported by his father and brothers to learn with the Meme Lama (I met the boy in 1992) and to become a monk in Kathmandu in 1993.

The other side of the coin is that the same argument of parents wanting their monastic sons' return to family life could be used as an excuse to quit with a disappointing monastic choice; which had been the case with Dawa Tsering. Understandably, lay people did not make ex-monks (and ex-nuns) feel guilty about their defection, but rather tended to praise their home-coming as an act of family loyalty, and an act of compassion (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:148). The monastery's only constraint consisted of the payment of a fine, an offering of tea to all the monastics, and butterlamps to the deities, and 108 prostrations "because they had left the Dharma".

Outside the gomba walls, the world during the 1940s was stirring. The establishment of the Bigu *panchayat*, thanks to a *panchayat*'s change in definition from its population quota into one based on the amount of cultivated land within a certain area,[30] was to bring along a growing interest into political affairs. It created an opportunity for Sherpas to become a *panchayat* member, as its composition - at least officially - had to reflect the local ethnic groups and castes, although still appointed by the Rana government. Nevertheless, this political change must have been preceded by years of discussion and speculation, before the *panchayat* was actually settled in 1948, with one Magar, one Thami, three Sherpas, and

[30] See Ch.II, *Constructing a Sherpa identity.*

three Kharkas on its board, under the chairmanship of, not a Sherpa, but of Hem Jagadhar Kharka (Kharka 1987:20).

This change of Nepal's political structure had been one of the Rana government's last attempts to remain in power, however, without success. Rumours of King Tribhuvan, who had gone into exile in India in November 1930, coming back to overthrow the Rana regime, became reality in November 1951. After nearly a century, the Rana oligarchy had to make way for a autocratic monarchy with democratic aspirations. The king's first political acts constituted of the opening up of Nepal to the rest of world, and the declaration of modernisation programmes.

> Since the 1950 revolution Nepal has changed from an almost completely authoritarian, tyrannical political system to one seeking greater popular participation; from a provincial population involved in only family, village, and tribal affairs to a growing awareness of national problems and a developing nationalism; from an economy of nearly 100 percent agriculture to one aspiring to some degree of industrialisation and modernisation; from a feudal land system to the aim of greater control of land by the workers (Reed & Reed 1968:1-2).

One of the new governments main projects was the creation of an education system to fight illiteracy, and the *pradhan pachayat* seemed to have made it a personal matter to found a primary school at Bigu as soon as possible. Already in 1955 (Nep.2012), Hem Jagadhar Kharka (who was to become a member of the High Court in Kathmandu; Kharka 1987:20), managed to draw government funds for the Gauri Shankar school with five classes.[31] For the Kharkas of Bigu, the newly introduced state education system in Nepal meant a relief of their own tradition to send their sons to Sanskrit schools in India, which explains their urge. Through these contacts, the first school teachers of Bigu were recruited in Darjeeling, among them the first headmaster Amar Singh who was to stay for nearly twenty-five years. For the Bigu Sherpas, the school meant their final defeat in the battle of Bigu's Sherpa identity, and the beginning of their community's absorption into the Nepali nation. The education the school was given by Nepali and Indian teachers who were all Hindu, and based on the Nepali language. For at least fifteen years, Sherpa parents were very reluctant to send their children to school, mistrusting its curriculum, the teachers' influence on their children, its usefulness for their children's future, as well as its time-consuming schedule that kept them away from working on the fields and pastures (cf. Reed and Reed 1964; Bista 1991). Nevertheless, for Tashi Gomba, the school constituted its final blow as a centre of learning that had to consolidate Sherpa cultural dominance over the area. As we will see below, however, part of this role was taken over by the village gomba.

One other option that had come in vogue among "small" people from Khumbu around the turn of the century (Ortner 1989:177-8), also started to appear in Bigu: temporal labour migration to India. The first Sherpas recalled of taking this road towards a better life was a couple who had left Bigu already in 1933. They sought their luck in Darjeeling, where both man and wife worked in a bakery. In 1940, they decided to return to Bigu, to farm the land they owned (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:140). In that year, they met an ex-monk and his young wife from Bakang, and inspired the young couple to follow their example. The ex-monk, who was later known as "Calcuttako" (the man from Calcutta), had been the son of the one Bigu Sherpa who had gone into partnership with Nim Pasang at his last trade expedition to Tibet.[32] Calcuttako had taken up the vows with the Drugpa Rimpoche, and had left Tashi Gomba for Bakang too, where after six years he fell in love with a Sherpa girl. The couple first came to Bigu, and then

[31] For comparison, a neighbouring *panchayat* was not so fortunate as their successive Sherpa chairmen only accomplished a school in 1984. In Khumbu, the establishment of schools had to wait for "The Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition" in 1964, initiated by Sir Edmund Hillary and James Fisher (Fisher 1990).

[32] See Ch.II, *Nim Pasang for mizar*.

went to India, to Calcutta, where he joined a Gurkha regiment of the British army. "Subsequently he went to Darjeeling where he ran a vegetable business. This commercial interlude was followed by a period of service in the Indian police, and after this he worked as contractor in the Punjab" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:152). Calcuttako returned to Bigu in 1966 with his wife and five sons. He became one of Bigu's wealthiest men, and famous for his adventurous life.

Again at the instigation of the first Sherpa couple, the Meme Lama travelled to India, to Darjeeling and the Punjab, but he did not feel like staying there for too long. In 1944, he worked for six months on British farms and brought back a bag full of improved potato seeds. With these seeds and his earnings, he made a small fortune in Bigu, which he used for establishing the position he is most renown for at present, Bigu's village lama.

Although only five other young Sherpa men were recalled as taking the opportunity of going abroad during the late 1940s and early 1950s, but never returned to their natal village, these eight men, together with the coming political chances that already filled the air, show that the Bigu Sherpas' world view had began to trespass the boundaries of their home valley. Although these developments cannot be appointed as a major impulse for the monks' withdrawal from monastic life, they hardly can be seen as nourishing the monks' determination, discontent with monasticism as they already were, to turn their back on social life.

And then again, "leaving the Dharma" in its monastic form did not have to imply a total renouncement of religious practice any more. The Meme Lama's swap from celibacy to marriage marked a new era, for the village gomba.

*The religious alternative for men*

If one asks the present village lama and the *konier*, the caretaker of the village temple of Bigu, this small gomba is hundreds and hundreds of years old, perhaps even ten thousand years old.

> This gomba is so old, that nobody remembers its founding. That's why it is so much more important than *mati gomba* [the *gomba* up the mountain, i.e. the nunnery]. But they say that the lama who could fly made a footprint on that spot, and so they built a gomba there.

Of course, both men loved to stress the village gomba's antiquity in comparison to Tashi Gomba which they preferred to call *mati* (up there) instead of *thulo* (big one).[33] The village temple was and is important to the position they hold in relation to it, but, moreover, they considered their small gomba as the true centre of *dharma* practice in comparison to the nunnery uphill. The man who had given this importance to the older temple, had been - who else? - the Meme Lama. With the small fortune he had brought from India, and the potato seeds he sold to the local Sherpas, he restored the village temple and imposed himself as the new village lama after the death of Pem Tarke.[34]

> From the old gomba, I am the one who is like a village lama. I am taking care of it. Before, the village gomba was very small. I have broken it off two times, and put it into stone, when I was younger [when he just had started his family]. During Dasain [Narak], many people were coming there, but there was not enough space, when they have to give *wong* [sermon]. Again I broke it off and made it bigger, and it was also very low, so I made it higher. [...] In former time, there was a lama, but they all died. No one was there at the time, so then I am the only village lama.

[33] Interestingly, in Gutschow's case study in Zangskar the monks' gomba is called the "big monastery" (*dgon pa chen mo*) and the nunnery is the "little monastery" (*dgon pa chung tse*) (Gutschow 1997:46-7).

[34] See also Ch.III, *The village lamas and the village gomba.*

He established himself as the village lama of Bigu, and earned much of the people's respect as such. It was said that he had constantly a group of fifteen students around him, who read the *pechas* with him. Although I never managed to check this figure, I do know that most of the Bigu Sherpa boys that became monks at Bakang, Sailung, and in monasteries in Kathmandu, have started their religious training with the ex-monk annex village lama. This development suggests that the Meme Lama had truly created an alternative to Tashi Gomba's failure for monks. In these years, he also established a monthly *puja* for the laity on the last day of each Tibetan month, devoted to the Guru Rimpoche (Skt. Padmasambhava), and a *guthi* (money lending) system to ensure the small gomba's upkeep. Religious practice around the village gomba and its lama seemed to flourish, until the early 1980s, when the Meme Lama's wife had passed away and he decided to pick up celibate life again. He went on a pilgrimage to Rumtek, Sikkim, and met the Karmapa Rimpoche.[35] In 1986, the Karmapa visited Kathmandu and he took full ordination, *rabz-hung*. He appointed one of his students, Ong Chuk, as his successor. Lay people, however, call the latter's religious knowledge and power feeble as compared to that of his teacher and ex-monk. Besides, Ong Chuk is not taken very seriously because of his tendency to get drunk on the *raksi* offerings during the monthly Guru Rimpoche *puja*. On larger religious occasions, like *Narak* or funerary rites, Ong Chuk has always been assisted by the Meme Lama. Since 1993, however, the Meme Lama is retiring more and more from public ceremonies. His legs are failing him in his climb up and down the mountain slope, and as he feels his death is nearing, he prefers to practice retreats in his little house overlooking Tashi Gomba, the village gomba and the valley.

The laity is not very satisfied with the situation and has asked the Meme Lama to appoint his eldest son as the village lama in Bigu. This son, Losang Sherap, however, is not at all interested. He is a monk adhering to a Kargyupa lineage which emphasises long retreats and meditation. In 1994, he returned to Bigu to visit his father after the completion of his three years', three months', and three days' retreat. This commanded everyone's respect, as he has been the only one of Bigu who ever completed the long *tsam*, except for the Drugpa Rimpoche. It seems, then, that after the Meme Lama created a profile of a village lama as a religious leader and teacher, with whom neither of his former students could match.

*Reflection*

The introduction in Bigu of a new way of life, monasticism, did not go very smoothly. During the first twenty years of its existence, the lamas of Tashi Gomba failed to establish a solid monastic *habitus*, due to their constant shifting, their language problems that hampered teaching and guidance, and the lack of economic resources the monastery suffered from. Its building process went slowly, and reprobated its monastics to living conditions, and labour activities, equal or worse to those of the laity. For the same reasons, the monastery failed to offer the basic needs for study and meditation, thus failing to come up to both Nim Pasang's aim as a centre of religious learning, and the Drugpa Rimpoche's intention to exploit its relatively isolated site for the path of *tantra*.

The response of the monks was to vote with their feet, by turning their hopes to Bakang Gomba and its lamas. Again, however, lacking economic resources caused them to be unable to stay. Most of them had to go home to Bigu again, where they, one after the other, dropped out of monastic life. The difficulty to live up to their vow of celibacy in a mixed sex religious community without a strong disciplining force was one important reason. Another, as I suggested, was the political developments at a national level that entered their valley and their world, and distracted young men's attention away from monastic life. The founding of a monastery in a remote and poor region, based on agriculture and herding, and without a familiarity with monasticism among its people, turned out to be a haphazard enterprise. If it had not been for the twelve nuns that made up its community in 1952, turning Tashi Gomba presumably into some kind of "re-education camp for women", it would have died a silent death. The next chapter will describe these first years of the gomba from the nuns' perspective.

[35] I.e. the leading Rimpoche of the Karma Kargyudpa sect, one of the Kargyudpa suborders and the dominant lineage in Sikkim.

V

# Of long Braids and shaven Heads

## *The first Nuns of Tashi Gomba*

*Introduction*

In the late summer of 1994, a man clad in rags and with a strange smile on his face walked into the court yard of Tashi Gomba. The anis had just finished a collective *puja*. Coming out of the temple hall, they stepped down the stairs to the courtyard. The man stood as if pinned to the ground and his face showed total bewilderment. Suddenly he bursted out in hysterical laughter, and pointed wildly around at the human figures that came down to him and passed him by while he was rubbing with his other hand over his head, as if he wanted to say: "Your hair! What have you all done to your hair? I see women without hair!" He clearly had never seen anis before. The anis felt embarrassed and moved out of his sight. Only the kitchen nun, who recognized him as a mentally retarded begging wanderer - "his mind is shaken" - approached him and asked him whether he was hungry by rubbing her belly and making an eating gesture. He nodded and a minute later he was sitting at the kitchen doorstep with a bowl of rice porridge on his lap, still giggling, gazing spellbound at the kitchen nun who resumed her work.

During that event, I remembered my own first encounter with women with shaven heads and dressed in white robes, in Bangkok. I soon found out they were called *maecchis*, women who devoted their life to the Dharma (path) of Theravada Buddhism. I had never realized that next to the orange-robed Buddhist monks I knew from pictures and documentaries, Buddhist "nuns" also existed. The memory of my own ignorant surprise, and the observation of this Nepali man's amazement, made me wonder whether the Sherpas of Bigu had been familiar with the phenomenon "ani" before the advent of the Drugpa Rimpoche and his retinue of monks and nuns. They may have heard of mythical and legendary religious women, like Gelungma Palmo or Machig Laprön, but had they actually encountered, ever realized to have encountered, an ani, may be in Kathmandu or on their trade expeditions to Tibet? And what about the non-Buddhist people of Bigu, the Kharkas, the Thamis, the Magars? For Tibetan Buddhist nuns are practically indistinguishable from their male counterparts, as their same short cropped hair and their same red robes blurres every gender distinction at first sight.[1] Only a close, and conscious, look reveals the female features in the nuns' faces, the roundings of their female body which also the many layers of blouse, smock, thick often woollen patched skirts, and big shawls, cannot fully hide their smoother movements and when talking, their usually higher pitched voices. How did the Kharkas react to these genderless women? How did the Sherpas react? They may have felt reverence for the nuns in the Drugpa Rimpoche's retinue, but how did they feel about their own daughters and sisters becoming an ani? The Meme Lama's reply to a question I posed him on why he thought nunhood had become popular in Bigu since the 1980s suggests that both the Sherpas and members of the other *jats* in Bigu had needed time to get accustomed to nuns and their genderless appearance. He said

> In the past, Nepalis didn't allow women to become ani. Today, others' daughters become ani and again are an example to other daughters. But before, they were not allowed to cut their hair. People

[1] Many a tourist, even some westerners converted to Tibetan Buddhism, whom I told about my research, were surprised to hear of the existence of Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Doubtless, they had passed by many an ani in the streets of Kathmandu, but in their ignorance, and because of the nuns' and monks' similar outlooks, had assumed all red robes and shaven heads had been monks. In Theravada, monks and nuns are at least distinguishable by the colour of their robes, respectively orange and white.

didn't know, and were gossiping and caused shame and inconvenience. In this world, there are many people, but not all know about *dharma*.

Obviously, there had been a time when in Bigu anis with their short cropped hair had been a focus of ridicule in much the same way as the anis we saw laughed at by the retarded visitor. Hindu people of Bigu must have found it difficult to appreciate and respect women who, with their shaven heads and celibate but communal life style - although outside their familial sphere - contradicted everything they thought a woman had to be. Especially the Kharkas, who had been trying to thwart the project of the monastery already from the onset, very likely did seize every chance to make bad jokes about these unwomanly women. They may have threatened to make laws against what they probably conceived as a threat to their own women, as it might give them ideas; but, contrary to the Meme Lama's suggestion, the Kharkas were not to allow or dismiss this new religious phenomenon. Their only weapon was gossip. However, Phillimore has shown how strong this kind of social control can be in his essay on a Buddhist group that had migrated from the hills to the plains of Himachal Pradesh, India. The women of these Buddhist people saw themselves forced to invent a religious identity in order to legitimate the option of spinsterhood, which was a common feature among them, but a nuissance to the Hindu people they had to come to share their habitat with (Phillimore 1991). In Bigu, spinsterhood did not lead to a religious identity, but - rather the other way around - the option of a religious life for women lead to "spinsterhood", that is the leading of an unmarried, celibate life, separate from their family. The Meme Lama's attempt to blame particularly the "Nepalis" for embarrassing anis and not allowing them to cut their hair may have been rooted in the influence their gossip had on those whose daughters became nuns and examples to others, that is the Sherpas. To show reverence to the female monastics of the Drugpa Rimpoche's retinue is one thing, but to see one's own daughter cutting off what should be her pride, her long black braid, often thickened and lengthened with black yak tail hair, is quite another thing. A Sherpa woman's braid was the symbol of her femininity, and the cutting of her hair meant a break with the socially and culturally accepted roles of Sherpa women as wives and mothers.

With the founding of Tashi Gomba, then, nunhood became an alternative way of life mainly theoretically, for in practice - as will become also clear from the chapters to follow - the Meme Lama had reason to belief that it took the Sherpas until the 1980s to find their daughters' choice for monastic life acceptable. Here, I will approach the Bigu Sherpas' uneasiness with female monasticism, not by merely anticipating its much later booming number, but by offering an explanation as to why Tashi Gomba's community consisted of only a dozen anis in 1952. Why did these nuns remain at Tashi Gomba, despite the gomba's internal problems I have outlined in Chapter IV? Did the anis simply outnumber the monks available to start a relationship with? Were they, for some reason, more prone to a religious vocation than the monks and nuns who had left? Why had they not followed their lama to Bakang or Tsum, like so many monks, to leave a desolated Tashi Gomba in ruins?

The answer, I will argue, lies in the particular family circumstances from which these nuns had opted for a monastic life. Although these family situations were not exclusive to women, they did affect these women's chance to live up to the socially accepted image of womanhood as wives and mothers in a way that left men, in their pursuit of starting their own family, untouched. Before exploring what we know about these remaining nuns, however, I have to say something on oral history and women.

*Two former anis and their silence*

Two women, now in their sixties and seventies, could have been my major informants about Tashi Gomba's entire history, for they had belonged to its first cohort of anis, had however also disrobed together with the monks they got involved with to marry them and start a family. Both settled within a stone's throw of the gomba, and had become witnesses to the religious community's development over the years. During my stays, they could be found at least twice a week in the gomba kitchen having a chat

and a cup of buttertea, and I anxiously waited for the right opportunity to lure their life histories and their memories concerning Tashi Gomba's past from them. However, as the accounts of my attempts below will make clear, their unwillingness to talk about the past showed a fortress hard to capture. Let me first describe my encounters with Tashi Ongdi, then offering some suggestions to explain their silence.

*Tashi Ongdi* has been the wife of the Meme Khepa, the old painter, since they had had an affair in the early 1950s when she was his caretaker during his *tsam*.[2] They settled in a small house with a shed and four poor plots, at a fifteen minutes walking distance from the gomba. They only had one child, a daughter who lives with them, together with her sixteen year old son. The daughter, in 1994 forty-two years old, had been married to a man of poor family who eventually was to inherit his parents-in-law's property.[3] Within a year, however, the man left his pregnant wife and disappeared.

In June 1994, Dawa and I went uninvited to see Tashi Ongdi at her house in the hope that she might tell us about her years as an ani, and the developments at Tashi Gomba thereafter. Tashi Ongdi and her daughter assumed we wanted to talk to the Meme Khepa, as strangers always came for him, so we were taken upstairs to his room. While we chatted with the old painter, his wife only appeared to serve us tea. After a while, we went down to the cooking place in the shed next door, to seek her out. She thought we were leaving already, and begged us to stay. We sat down on the low wall boundering their courtyard, together with her daughter, whom we asked prudently how she thought her mother would react to questions about the past. The daughter said she would ask her in Sherpa first. When the old woman came outside, she offered us the most precious food she had, boiled eggs, and seemed delighted with our presence. But when her daughter asked her to tell something about those years in the gomba, she reacted as if snake-bitten: "I don't remember anything, I don't know anything, I have forgotten everything." She ran into the store room, the ground floor of their house, and slammed the door. We all sat struck dumb watching the closed door. The old lady had made her point alright. When we stood up to leave, her daughter apologized for her mother's reaction, the fierceness of which she did not understand herself. She promised to try to talk to her and to call us if her mother changed her mind. I said only I was to blame, and so we left, convinced that the door would be closed forever.

I had assumed that the cups of buttertea and plates of popcorn we had shared in the gomba kitchen had created enough familiarity between us to jump into an interview with her, but I miscalculated the importance of the location of our meetings on her perception of me. The gomba kitchen was a place to socialize, and the small talk we had there belonged to its relaxed atmosphere. Once Dawa and I came to her house, uninvited by **her**, however, she assumed I had come to see the Meme Khepa, and most probably in my propensity of "an *ingee* woman who had come to write a book about Tashi Gomba" - as the anis had explained to her. Her role as the Meme Khepa's wife was merely to be a good hostess, but when we came down, to her territory, and made clear I wanted to know something from her, something clearly related to my "work", she panicked. I thought I had acted cautious by asking her daughter to mediate, but this preparation only seems to have stressed the "official-ness", the public quality of my visit. Like many women, in Bigu or elsewhere whose traditional roles kept them outside the public sphere,[4] she was not used to be asked any questions and shied away.

[2] See Ch.IV on his life history.

[3] When a father has no sons, he may leave his property to his younger brother or his younger brother's sons, in order to keep the land within his clan. In case a father has also no brothers or nephews, or has other reasons for not leaving them his property - like the Meme Khepa, whose family is back in Bhutan - the father may appoint his son-in-law as his heir, provided the latter comes to live at his wife's parents' home (Oppitz 1969:91; Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:88; Ortner 1978a:21). The inheriting son-in-law is called a *maksu*.

[4] See for women and oral history for instance E. Ardener (1975); Gilligan (1982); Moore (1988); and Anderson and Jack (1991). See also Chapter I.

Also the personal entry I had chosen to learn something about Tashi Gomba's history from Tashi Ongdi - a strategy that worked quite well with laywomen who would have referred me to their husbands or grown-up sons, had not worked with Tashi Ongdi whenever I bothered them with questions that transcended their personal experiences - had not informalized the situation. For that question was not as personal as I had realized it to be, and besides it raised obstacles to speak out.

In Chapter IV, I have tried to explain the monastic perception of memories of the past as disturbing the personal and communal equilibrium necessary to concentrate on the path of *dharma*. In that context, I also referred to an ani who left religious life in 1976, and who was told by the abbot to leave her memories behind at the gomba in order to protect the harmony of its religious community from external disturbing meddling. Like this younger former ani, also Tashi Ongdi and Nim Dolma (who I will introduce below) must have been aware of this principle of silence. They may not have been told explicitly at the time of their leaving the community - considering the absence of an authoritative lama during the 1940s - but they too may have gotten the message when the Tulku rebuked the anis for having given Fürer-Haimendorf too much of the community's "dirty laundry" for his 1976 essay.[5] The Tulku may not have exposed the two former nuns to the Mahakala vow, as he allegedly had done with the anis of 1976, but he may have addressed the issue in a private interview. For also they had talked quite frankly with the ethnographer; especially Nim Dolma, whose monastic past was not merely a personal affair since she had been the nun Kusho Pema, the Drugpa Rimpoche's nephew and Tashi Gomba's appointed abbot, had left his robe and his position for. Her reaction, when I confronted her with Fürer-Haimendorf's writing about her after her initial attempts to avoid my questions, only confirms that the ethnographer's publication had made a difference. And a very unfortunate one for me too.

Also *Nim Dolma* we had already met several times in the gomba kitchen, before we got to talk with her in private. Having learned my lesson with Tashi Ongdi, I waited until she invited us to her home. I was not sure she ever would, taking into account that Tashi Ongdi may have warned her for my nosiness. But she did, some weeks after our visit to her friend, to have a look at some coral beads she offered for sale. Her little house was next to the retreat house under construction (in 1994), and after this initial visit we were called in for a cup of buttertea every time we went up to have a look at the construction site. With every visit, I tried to shift our subject of conversation to her past, carefully, but her replies remained curt. At first she even denied she had ever been an ani, until I confronted her with Fürer-Haimendorf and what he had written about her. She remembered the man had visited her with his wife and a Nepali interpreter, but had forgotten what she had told him. Reluctantly she admitted she had been an ani but later married "a monk". When I asked her whether this monk's name was by any chance Kusho Pema, the Drugpa Rimpoche's nephew and appointed abbot of Tashi Gomba, she left us with our tea at her doorstep and disappeared. When she was still not back after half an hour, we had to assume we were not welcome anymore. We went down to the gomba, and found her sitting in the gomba kitchen, sipping buttertea with the *niermu*, the ani in charge of the kitchen.

Both Nim Dolma's and Tashi Ongdi's past in Tashi Gomba, then, were intermittently linked with their monk-husbands of high esteem, respectively Kusho Pema and the Meme Khepa. As such, they had to be careful what they were to reveal, because any reference to their (late) husbands would undermine Tashi Gomba's "official" history, favoured by the Tulku; that is, Tashi Gomba having been a nunnery right from its founding.[6] Kusho Pema already past away in the early 1960s, so Nim Dolma could easily deny their relationship. The Meme Khepa, however, was still alive. And as he always had done all the talking - with ethnographers like Fürer-Haimendorf and me, for instance - Tashi Ongdi could also leave the

[5] See Ch.IV and VII.

[6] See Ch.IV, *Monastery or nunnery*.

responsibility of any revelations that would anger the Tulku up to her husband. The moment I approached her personally, however, she panicked. She probably did not know what, and how much, her husband had exposed, and I wanted to share his information with her in the hope it would make her feel less responsible and more communicative. I would have loved to have her counter-narrative, her comments, her views.

Months past since our first visit. Tashi Ongdi, her daughter, Dawa and I met in the gomba kitchen regularly and talked about the weather as if nothing ever happened. Once, I tried to provoke a conversation about "the time when there were also monks living in Tashi Gomba, as the Meme Khepa had told me". The young anis present immediately took it as an opportunity to talk about the Tulku's last years' visit (in 1993), and how many monks had come with him, and how beautiful and impressive the procession all the way from Tingsang La had been. I was glad it triggered off these memories, but also hoped Tashi Ongdi understood that the Meme Khepa had already confided me in their shared past. Perhaps this tactic did help. At the end of January 1995, Tashi Ongdi's daughter came to invite us for a meal the next day. We were invited at eight o'clock in the morning, but when we arrived mother and daughter were distilling *raksi*. The pot stood on a log fire in the shed, and had two chalk lines, meaning that they still had to change the boiling water another three times. While the mother kept a silent eye on the *raksi*, her daughter made us buttertea. We started to ask her to tell us about the distilling techniques, and she gladly explained us the whole process. She obviously also enjoyed the opportunity to talk about herself and her own life as well. If she were an *ani*, she pondered, she would have had a much better life than she had now. Perhaps if she would have had any sisters, she could have gone to the gomba, but now she was the only one to take care of her parents. Both her parents drink a lot, so her main occupation is to make them their liquor. Tashi Ongdi sat next to her daughter, checking the water temperature now and again, but did not react in any way to her daughter's indirect accusations, as if she had not heard a word of what was spoken. The daughter went on talking. Her father has been drinking all his life. They could have had a house in Bodnath (Kathmandu) where her father spent some years working as a thanka painter. But he had finished all his money in "hotels" on drinking. Her mother started drinking after her marriage, after her time in the gomba. "How old was your mother when she became an ani?", I asked, taking my chance while watching the old woman at the fire. The daughter answered. Her mother must have been about twenty or twenty-two. She had come to Bigu with her family to visit the first Rimpoche. She is from Charikot. When they were back home again, she decided to join Bigu's religious community. She and her sister hired a porter and left in secret. When the porter returned to Charikot, her parents threatened him with calling the police if he would not bring back their daughters. The porter came to fetch them, but only her mother's sister went back home with him. Her mother stayed and remained a nun for about eight years, until she was thirty-two and her only child was born.

While Tashi Ongdi's daughter talked about her mother, the old woman did not give a slightest reaction; as if she had not understood a single word of what had been said. It felt ackward, but I decided she wanted our communication to be this way herself. "Does she feel ashamed for having left the nunnery? Why doesn't she want to talk about it?" The daughter looked at her mother and said: "No, I don't think she feels ashamed because of her leaving. I think she feels ashamed because of her drinking". The arrival of one of the Meme Khepa's students who joined us in the cooking shed - something he never would have done if Dawa and I had not been sitting there - brought an end to our conversation. We never managed to return to the subject again.

Tashi Ongdi had used her daughter as a mouthpiece; obviously for safety's sake. Nobody could blame her for what her daughter, who did not have to feel hampered by the lamas' rules and regulations, told about her. And I am sure that if it would not have been for that unexpected, curious, male visitor, we could have gone into a lot more details. This strategy, by the way, of using another person as a mouthpiece to

circumvent their own "mutedness"[7] was also applied by the ex-ani who explained why she could not tell me about her life as an ani by referring to the Mahakala vow.[8] One week after our first visit to her in her Kathmandu appartment, she invited us for dinner. It turned out she also had invited her elder brother under the pretext that he could practice his English with me. He did, by talking about the Dharamsala event which caused his sister to leave Tashi Gomba and eventually her robe as well.[9]

A last word has to be said about Tashi Ongdi's and Nim Dolma's silence as it also appeared in my conversation with Tashi Ongdi's daughter. Did they feel ashamed to talk about their past as an ani because they had disrobed? The answer must be "no". Ideologically, the breaking of one's monastic vows is considered to be *digpa* or *pap*, a sinful act which "inevitably results in a painful fate in one's next reincarnation" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:148), but since the Sherpas believe that the effects of one's deeds lie in the hands of the gods, they refrain from social or legal action against of people having committed a sin or crime.[10] Neither Fürer-Haimendorf nor I saw the two ex-nuns suffer from any resentment by the present anis, with whom both have been "on excellent terms with" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:148), their monastic past was simply "forgotten". Nor did the laity. On the contrary, former monastics, anis and monks alike, were never blamed for having left religious life, but many parents did use it as a motivation to refuse their sons and daughters becoming a monk or nun. "They run away anyway". Tashi Gomba's early history, as well as the Dharamsala event and the founding of Sailung monastery in the 1970s,[11] had left their marks, and certainly did not promote monasticism as an alternative way of life in a world unfamiliar with it in the first place.

Which takes us finally away from what we have **not** learned from Tashi Ongdi and Nim Dolma to what they **did** tell, and that is the way they were recruited.

According to her daughter, Tashi Ongdi was inspired by the Drugpa Rimpoche on a visit by her and her family, which must have taken place around 1938 at, or shortly after, Tashi Gomba's consecration; for after 1938 the Drugpa Rimpoche went into retreat in Phuma and died in 1942. We thus may conclude that he either did not succeed in persuading Tashi Ongdi's parents to give (one of) their daughters to the new community, or that Tashi Ongdi and her family did not visit the first Rimpoche but Kusho Pema,[12] for it took Tashi Ongdi about eight years, till 1946, to finally enter Tashi Gomba. In any case, Tashi Ongdi and her sister had to run away from home to become an ani. Her parents objected that fiercely against their daughters' choice that they even threatened their attendant with the police if he did not bring their daughters back; and they were not "Nepalis" as the Meme Lama wanted to have it,[13] but Sherpas. Whether they opposed monastic life for their daughters as a matter of principle or not, they certainly did not think of Tashi Gomba, in the mid 1940s when many monks and nuns were leaving and the site was still under construction, as an attractive and safe place for their daughters.

Tashi Ongdi's enforcing her choice for a monastic life by running away from home will prove to be a recurrent strategy of young anis in the years to come, until the 1980s. In the following chapters, it will become clear that parents generally withhold their permission both because of Tashi Gomba has been lacking a convincing "pulling" force, and because the parents' claim that they cannot miss their daughters' labour at home. Determined young women then take their chance when her parents start with their

7 To refer to E. Ardener's "women" as a "muted group ... [who] are silenced by the structures of dominance, and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies" (1975:1).

8 See Ch.IV, *Harmonious and disharmonious time.*

9 See Ch.VII for the Dharamsala event.

10 Sherpa culture is a typical "shame culture". See R.Paul (1977) and Tieman (1994) on the emphasis on shame in Sherpa culture; and Creighton (1990) on shame and guilt cultures.

11 Which will be explored in Chapter VII.

12 Remember Kusho Pema was also a Rimpoche.

13 See this chapter, *Introduction.*

marriage arrangements, and the parents' motivation of their help at their parental home would lose any ground. They would run off to the gomba to take the initiary vows with the lama and to shave her hair, leaving their parents no other option than to accept their choice. In that context, we also understand why Tashi Ongdi's daughter never became a nun, for she was the only child who, also after her marriage and together with her husband, was to help and support her parents till their death.

Nim Dolma and her children exemplify yet two other categories of novices who have made up the religious community for years, namely those who are either not bothered by unwilling parents because they were orphaned, divorced or widowed, and those who were children of parents with a religious past of their own.

Nim Dolma was born in Bigu. When she was but a baby and her only sister still a little child, their parents died. At the age of ten she, as well as her little sister, became an ani - which must have been around 1942. Eight years later, she left the gomba again, in the company of Kusho Pema. They built a two-storied house a few hundred metres up the gomba complex and had three children. Their son became a high lama at the court of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, and never returned to Bigu to see his parents. Their eldest daughter had been a nun in Tashi Gomba as well, but left in 1976 for Dharamsala never to be heard of again.[14] Their youngest daughter married and lives in Kathmandu. Kusho Pema died in the early 1960s. Nim Dolma sold the house and most of their land, and had herself a smaller house built next to the Meme Lama's.

In 1968, Nim Dolma remarried with a man from "up there" (Lapthang) who did not possess anything, no land, no house, no cattle. Shortly after the birth of their daughter, he left for Kathmandu. She did not feel like joining him, because she dislikes the city, its largeness and its crowds, and preferred to stay in the peacefulness of her little house next to the gomba. Besides, the man had turned out to be a drunk and Nim Dolma was gladly relieved of his presence. She never saw him again. Their only daughter she sent to the "*Khamko lama*" - the Guru Lama who came fom Kham, eastern Tibet, Tashi Gomba's abbot after 1960 - to make her an ani at the age of eleven, in 1982. Although living at the gomba, her daughter came to see her everyday and helped her with the work on the fields, but now that the young ani is in line for offices at the gomba,[15] she will not be able to help her mother on a daily basis anymore. Nim Dolma has decided to sell her land and the few valuables she posesses, like the coral beads she offered to us on the risk of having to counter uncomforting questions.

Nim Dolma's life story not only exemplifies that orphans are favorites for monastic life and the willingness of former religious parents to give their children to a life of dharma (all Nim Dolma's children but one daughter (sic!) became monastics). It also serves as an introduction to the problems single Sherpa women have to cope with, which have urged several to take their refuge at the gomba. Indeed, the divorced and widowed made up the largest group of anis in 1952, when Tashi Gomba was decisively to be called a nunnery.

*The anis of 1952*

In 1952, an ani from Yelmu joined Tashi Gomba's community who reported to Fürer-Haimendorf that it consisted of twelve religious women at that time (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:146). This number was more or less confirmed by one of the two anis who had entered nunhood at Bigu in that same year, but after Fürer-Haimendorf's informant, by mentioning fifteen nuns to me. Eight of these nuns were still alive and an ani of Tashi Gomba during Fürer-Haimendorf's visit in 1974, and appear among the twenty-nine anis he offers individual information about (ibid.:137-146). Only two of those were still alive during my

[14] See Ch.VII, on *The Dharamsala conflict*.

[15] See Chapter VI on the posts that make up the organisational structure of the religious community.

stay in 1994-5. As such, my reconstruction of these women's motivations, to enter nunhood and to continue their religious life at Tashi Gomba despite its unfavourable conditions and its failing monastic *habitus*[16], is largely based on the little information my predecessor made available on about half of the nuns who had made up the community in 1952. Nevertheless, what we do know about these nine anis[17] is insightful enough to gain some understanding of the change in the composition of Tashi Gomba's community from the feminine point of view. Let me summarize the information on each ani first.

*Pema Chuck*[18] was still - or rather, again - at Tashi Gomba n 1994, fifty-five years old then, a very silent, solitary woman. She had no friends or relatives among the other anis. We only managed to arrange one interview with her on a ritual she had recently been initiated to. During this occasion, she told us that her father, who had been a village lama near Jiri, had brought her to Bigu when she was eight years old (in 1947), implying that she had been an ani ever since. Her plans to join Dorje Dolma and two other senior anis in a one-year retreat (1995-6) seemed to confirm this. In Fürer-Haimendorf's listing, however, she appears as a widow, who entered Tashi Gomba after the death of her husband in 1972 (ibid.:143-4). Her two children had also both died. Inquiries among other nuns confirmed his information. Pema Chucki left Tashi Gomba around 1956, at the age of seventeen, and married shortly after. Nobody, however, knew for sure whether she had met her husband while she was still at Tashi Gomba, or whether her marriage had been arranged after she returned to her parental home.

Note that her father, who was a village lama, had brought her to Tashi Gomba. It seems that he had also sent some of his sons to a monastery in Solu. This village lama from Jiri, to the south of Solu, was more familiar to monasticism than many another parent of Bigu's nuns. Pema Chucki took up her vow again when she became a widow and had lost her children too. One nun suggested that Pema Chucki felt these tragedies in her life had been her punishment for having given up monastic life when she was young, but I was not able to have a conversation about this possible motivation with Pema Chucki herself.

*Ngawang Chutin* came to Tashi Gomba in 1944, at the age of about thirty. She was not Sherpa but Tamang[19] from the Charikot area, who had worked many years at the royal palace in Kathmandu as a maid. When she heard about Tashi Gomba, then still under construction, she became interested in becoming a nun. The king granted her request to leave the royal service and two month later she moved permanently to Tashi Gomba (ibid.:139).[20]

It is a pity that we cannot trace how she became a maid at the royal court, and why she had remained unmarried at the age of thirty.

*Sangesomu* had joined Tashi Gomba right from its foundation, when she was 23 years old. She had been married in Chautara, a village some two days from Bigu. Two of the four children she had given birth to had died, and so had her husband, on a trip to India. When she became a nun, she brought her daughter with her, but left her then five year old son and her land, for him to inherit at marriage, with her parents-in-law. When they died, however, and her son left for India too, kinsmen took over the land, unwilling to support her in her life sustenance. She had to beg for alms for the rest of her life. Her daughter left the nunnery and disappeared to India as well (ibid.:140-1; no date indicated).

16 See Ch. IV.

17 Including Nim Dolma's sister, who remained an ani at Tashi Gomba until her death around 1970. She is mentioned in the life history of Chembal Chindu, the daughter of Kusho Pema and Nim Dolma in Fürer-Haimendorf's essay (1976:142).

18 The information on the next seven anis rendered here are abstracts from Fürer-Haimendorf's essay on Tashi Gomba (1976). Only on the two nuns still alive in 1994, Pema Chucki and Dorje Dolma, I could collect some additional information.

19 Tamangs are, like the Sherpas, a Tibeto-Burmese speaking ethnic group (see March 1979; Holmberg 1989).

20 See also Ch.VII, *The rise and fall of Sailung Gomba*.

*Tuchi Dolma* had been married and widowed as well, in a village some three days from Bigu. She became an ani in 1943 at the age of twenty-one. Fürer-Haimendorf tells us that she had a daughter, but does not mention what happened to the child (ibid.:141).

*Tsangdzum Sangmo* had become, like Sangesomu, an ani at Tashi Gomba's onset. She was fifteen years old when she shaved her hair, but returned to her parental home in Jiri where she lived as a nun for several years before she came to join Bigu's religious community permanently (ibid.:144).

We only can guess why she returned home for several years. Being from Jiri, like Pema Chucki, she probably had no relatives to stay with in Bigu during the gomba's years of construction. She must have lived as, what March called, a "village nun", a woman in monastic robes and short-cropped hair who leads a celibate life at her natal home (March 1979:134; see also Goldstein 1980:53).[21]

*Hishi Dolma* was a Sherpa woman from Yelmu, who became a nun when the Drugpa Rimpoche visited the site for the later Bakang monastery.[22] She had been so impressed by this high lama that she took the vows without asking her parents' permission. Only when she went back home her parents gave their consent, some provisions and clothes. She went on pilgrimage to several gomba in Tibet, and on her return, in 1952, Kusho Tsetsu[23] advised her to join the twelve nuns of Tashi Gomba. She was twenty-five years old at that time (which makes her about eleven years old when she took the robes: quite young to do so without her parents' permission, and to travel to Tibet) (ibid.:146).

*Sange Gyelmu* was about sixteen years old, when she came with her two sisters from Jiri to Tashi Gomba in 1952. Her sisters had no desire to stay, while she sought admission to the community. Fürer-Haimendorf renders that her decision "was not influenced by her parents, who are alive and give her material support" (ibid.: 1976:145).

*Dorje Dolma*, who was sixty years old in 1994, became a nun in 1952 at the age of eightteen. She was born in Darjeeling where her father worked in a bakery. In 1947, the family returned to Bigu and five years later both her parents died within fifteen days (the year of the great famine, 1952), leaving her, her nine year old sister and her five year old brother as orphans behind. Dorje Dolma then let out their land, and took care of her younger sister and brother together with a Thami servant (ibid.:140). When her younger sister was old enough to take care of herself and their little brother, she built herself a little house on the gomba grounds and became an ani.

Looking then at the familial circumstances of the first anis of Tashi Gomba we have met so far, we see that two had been a widow of whom one had brought her daughter too (Sangesomu and Tuchi Dolma); three had been orphans (Nim Dolma and her sister, and Dorje Dolma); one a spinster (Ngawang Chutin); one had been a child nun (Pema Chucki), who left the community in her teens to return as a widow; two others had presumably the consent of their parents (Tsangdzum Sangmu and Sange Gyelmu), while two had to run away from home to become an ani (Hishi Dolma and Tashi Ongdi). When considering the dates of their joining Tashi Gomba, four nuns seem to have met the Drugpa Rimpoche (Tashi Ongdi is a dubious case). A widow (Sangesomu) and her little daughter were already at Tashi Gomba from 1934,

[21] In Chapter VI, I will return to these kind of religious women, in comparing the anis of Tashi Gomba during the 1950s with them.

[22] See Ch.III and IV.

[23] Fürer-Haimendorf writes here "Lama Ngawang Paldzen", i.e. the Drugpa Rimpoche (1976:146), but in 1952 the founding father was already dead for ten years. I thus assume it must have been Kusho Tsetsu,
Bakang Gomba's *kempu*, and supervising Rimpoche of the Drugpa Kargyugpa gombas, who sent her to Bekung.

as it seems, while two young recruits first went to live elsewhere (Hishi Dolma and Tsangdzum Sangmu) before they joined the community. Three took their vows after the Drugpa Rimpoche's death, during the 1940s: the child nun (Pema Chucki), one widow (Tuchi Dolma), and Tashi Ongdi. They joined by one who already had been taking the vows with the Drugpa Rimpoche (Tsangdzum Sangmu). The other recruit by the Drugpa Rimpoche (Hishi Dolma) only came in 1952. She was followed by the adult orphan and the one who claimed to have had her parents' consent.

At first glance, it seems as if no general statements can be made from this listing. Anis of all backgrounds and ages seem to have been welcomed. When focussing on the date 1952, however, two aspects are striking and might be telling about changes in Tashi Gomba's community during the 1940s. The first is the age of the remaining anis in 1952, the second their dates of taking on the robe.

Hishi Dolma had remarked to Fürer-Haimendorf that all the anis who made up Tashi Gomba's community at the time of her entering were much older than herself, that is twenty-five years of age (ibid.:146). Four of the above listed anis must, indeed, have been in their thirties and early forties in 1952, while three others had been younger than sixteen[24] at the time. The twenty-five year old ani obviously did not consider these child-anis fully-fledged nuns yet. If we assume these eight cases to represent the age sets of the Tashi Gomba's remaining anis in 1952,[25] a lapse in age between sixteen and twenty-five years becomes apparent. When now also taking the social backgrounds into consideration, particularly of the older anis who were either widowed (Sangesomu and Tuchi Dolma) or dedicated to remaining unmarried (Ngawang Chutin and the village ani Tsangdzum Sangmu), and recalling that Tashi Ongdi and Nim Dolma were around their twenties, I cannot but conclude that the problems surrounding Tashi Gomba's development and their youth had driven most, if not all, marriagable women into love affairs (mostly with monks) and back to secular life.

Another revealing observation concerns the 1952 nuns' places of origin. The given list tells us that only one ani (Nim Dolma's sister) originated from the Bigu valley, before she was joined by Dorje Dolma. All the others had their natal places at least two-days walking distance away. Were there perhaps more Bigu anis among the three to six who made up the community in 1952 on whom we have no information? As none of them was still alive and an ani at Tashi Gomba in 1974 when Fürer-Haimendorf appeared, we may assume that they either had already been of age in 1952, or had discarded the robe between 1952 and 1974. In addition, the dates of enrollment of the anis of 1952 we know of reveal only one ani who took the robes between Tuchi Dolma (1943) and Hishi Dolma who was sent to swell the ranks in 1952; namely the child nun Pema Chucki who was brought by her religiously devoted father - and who left to marry when she was about seventeen! The conclusion speaks for itself: after the Drugpa Rimpoche's death, Tashi Gomba's community was not only drained of much of its young monastics, but failed to substitute them by fresh blood too.

By 1952, then, Tashi Gomba was made up merely by widows and orphans, many of whom did not even originate from the Bigu valley. It now becomes understandable why Nim Pasang declared to Fürer-Haimendorf he had wanted "to establish a *gompa* for nuns, where women anxious to lead a religious life, and widows and deserted wives in need of a place of refuge, could find shelter and inspiration" (ibid.:123). Tashi Gomba had shifted not only from a monastery into a nunnery, but also into a nunnery that was merely constituted of women who seemed to have been "in need of a place of refuge".

In the next section, I will try to set out why widows and orphans must have felt attracted to the communal life, Tashi Gomba offered. I will also try to explain why I believe the Bigu Sherpas were not very eager to send their daughters to Tashi Gomba.

*Marriage, nuclear families and Bigu Sherpa wives*

In Chapter IV, I already made some references to the Sherpa family structure in the context of the

[24] Pema Chuckey, Sangesomu's daughter, and Nim Dolma's sister (who must have been fifteen in 1952).

[25] Sange Gyelmu (16) and Dorje Dolma (18) came after Hishi Dolma.

position of sons within the family, and its responsibility in supporting their monastic sons. Here, we need more detailed information on the nuclear family in order to understand the social circumstances widows and orphans had to cope with, as deviances of women's roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law.

Sherpa social structure, in Solu Khumbu as well as in Bigu, is organised around the ideal of nuclear families, parents and their children making up separate, economically independent households - to use Ortner's words:

> The private-property owning, highly independent nuclear family is the "atom" of Sherpa social structure (...) a whole range of cultural and structural factors emphasize the ideal autonomy and self-sufficiency of the nuclear family unit. Ensconsed in its own house and operating as a self-sufficient enterprise, the nuclear family is both the normally valued institution and the statistically prevalent form. (Ortner 1978:39)

This self-sufficiency makes a nuclear family rely heavily on the labour of the family members themselves, that is, the children.[26] As such, a family is most productive, and prosperous, when it has several children in their teens who can be given the responsibility of looking after the herds on the pastures (where they have to stay overnight as well), of taking care of the younger children and helping with other household activities, as well as agricultural work, the fetching of fodder and firewood, and so on. This period in a family's life cycle, however, is of short duration. From the moment the oldest children start to marry off, the parental family's productivity is in decline. There is, however, a difference between sons and daughters.

When a son reaches the age of sixteen, his parents will start negotiations for his marriage. When the parents of a suitable girl agree, male relatives of the boy offer the bride (*nama*) on an auspicious day, pointed out by the village lama (the Meme Lama), a pair of golden earrings and two heavy silver bangles,[27] and take her home with them. This gift can be interpreted as a kind of payment for the bride's labour - paid to the bride and not to her parents - for she will live with, and work for, her parents-in-law until the final wedding takes place. This last marriage ritual (*larra tongup*), however, occurs only years after the "engagement",[28] during which the groom's family builds a separate house for the young couple. It is at these final rituals, when the couple moves out and the son receives his share of land and cattle to start his own independent household, that the economic decline of the parental households sets in.[29]

[26] Nuclear families do cooperate in mutual aid groups, but only in larger projects such as the building of a house or harvests. In Solu Kuhumbu, these fixed relationships between families are called *tsenga tsali* (Ortner 1979:22-3), but in Bigu this expression was unknown. Bigu Sherpas use the Nepali *parna tirne*, probably as a result of the fact that they also have been cooperating with non-Sherpa families, like Thamis and Magars.

[27] In Bigu, each golden earring ranged from a half to one *thola* (11 grams of pure gold = 1 *thola*). The "wedding" earrings of Sherpa women from Solu Khumbu I met weighed at least two *thola* and were much more elaborated too, which signals the relative poorness of the Sherpas of Bekung as compared to those of Solu Khumbu. The earrings nowadays are still the main dowry jewelry; the silver bangles, however, are replaced by big wrist watches with as many pointers as possible. Since the 1980s, the heavy but simple silver bangles are seen as extremely old-fashioned and typical for rural, poor Sherpas.

[28] This "engagement" period in Bigu can take, like in Solu (March 1979:186), five to nine years; in Khumbu even ten to twelve years (Ortner 1978:46).

[29] Goldstein criticises Ortner, as well as Fürer-Haimendorf, in taking the Sherpa nuclear family as "the "atom" of Sherpa social structure" for a fact, instead of an ideal, because brides move in with her in-laws for several years, and parents will live with their youngest son, who inherits their house and last plots and cattle, until their death (Goldstein 1980:47-8; Ortner 1978:39-47; Fürer-Haimendorf 1979:86). In practice, then, Sherpa households consist for most of its time of extended families of two or three generations.

Sherpa families are not only economically tied units, but also social strongholds. My experiences in and of Bigu are reflected in what March wrote about her fieldsite in Solu.

> There is [...] little or no easy inter-household visiting, chatting, or commensality. [...] Sherpas limit interpersonal interactions outside the nuclear household largely to the obligatory formal occasions. Adults do not congregate freely or informally within the village. This is reinforced by typical village layouts and architecture. There are no easy gathering places such as water taps, washing places, shade trees with resting stations, or clustered housing with or without shared courtyards. With few exceptions, every house stands in the approximate center of its landholding, which is to say at maximal distance of from all neighbours. (March 1979:78-9)

The economic and social reliance within the nuclear family evidently also creates strong emotional ties between parents and children. This is most clearly expressed in a song I heard Sherpas singing on the second night of the *Narak* festival.[30] The song consisted of seven stanzas, of which four were sung by men and women together, and three only by women. I will first present three of the four that were sung by all, as they lament exactly the breaking of these ties between parents and children, and the children's new responsibility for their own household.[31]

1 In summer, flowers are blossoming, but one never knows
whether they will bloom next summer again.
This year we are together with our parents,
but we will never be sure,
whether we will be together next year as well.

2 The mountain can be high
but still snow reaches the valley.
Our parents can be rich,
but still we have to solve our troubles ourselves.

5 When we go to the forest
we can see the incense tree blooming.
When we meet with our parents
inside us our heart is flowering.

The stanzas (1) and (5) in particular, however, have for women a slightly different meaning than for men. The difference lies in the virilocal[32] nature of Sherpa marriages. The Bigu valley may be a multi-clan settlement,[33] but not necessarily locally endogamous. The area of intermarriage of the Bigu Sherpas ranges from Jiri, in the south of Solu, to the valleys between Tingsang La and Barabise, and from Lapthang on the Tibetan border to Kalinchok on the mountain range to the south of Bigu (see map 3). Sons inheriting

30 See Ch.II for the *Narak* festival. The melody of the song is also known to Sherpas from Khumbu region, but those I asked to listen to my recording insisted that the lyrics differed. I would like to thank Dorje Sherpa from Bigu for his translation.

31 The numbers refer to the sequence in which they were sung during that particular night.

32 Virilocal is used here as a bride moving to her husbands' village. Strictly speaking, virilocality means a couple's taking residence in the husband's parents' household, which is the case among the Bigu Sherpas during the marriage process, the "engagement" period. After the final wedding ceremony, however, they become neolocal, starting their own household (except for the youngest son who takes over his parents' house), as is the case among the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu.

33 In Khumbu, most villages are multi-clan as well, while in Solu most villages are constituted by one clan, or even one lineage.

a part of their parents' former land property will generally set up their household in their natal village, and have a regular contact with their parents. Their uncertainty whether they will be able to see them next year too (1) has to be interpreted as a matter of life and death. As Sherpa marriages are virilocal, however, daughters often have to move to another village, to another valley, at the time of their betrothal. These married daughters actually will meet their parents about once a year. The fifty-nine year old Ongmu Sherap, for instance, had not seen her aged parents for five years, although they live just across the pass, only a one-day trip away. Her responsibility for her own household and family, and the festivities in Bigu she was supposed to attend, never gave her the opportunity to leave for a couple of days, she said.[34]

The sorrow of the bride for having left her parents, and often her natal village too, got two stanzas of its own, only sung by women. In additions, these lyrics emphasise simultaneously the tensions the young bride is bound to experience in her new home, particularly in relation with her mother-in-law.

3 When we were living in our parents' home,
we were like a statue of gold.
When we moved in with our parents-in-law,
we became a statue of mud.

7 *Janma*[35] should grow in bunches together, but it does not;
it squatters around into lonely entities.
We want to stay happily with our parents, but cannot;
*karma* brings us to places far away from them.

It has to be noted that the moment of the bride's residential shift differs between Solu Khumbu and Bigu. As said above, a Bigu bride will already be brought to her parents-in-laws' home at the first wedding ceremony (*sodane*), in a sober parade of only family. In Solu Kumbu, on the other hand, a bride remains living with her parents until the couple's house is ready (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:57-8; Oppitz 1969; Ortner 1978:20-1; March 1979:186). Here, her moving to her new home is the highlight of the final wedding ceremony, a huge musical procession made up by family and friends from both bride and groom of both villages, dressed up in traditional clothing. Assuming that the Solu Khumbu practice reflects the Sherpas' traditional moment of the bride's parade,[36] one may ask why in Bigu it was moved up to the time of the betrothal. As also in Bigu the bride's parents do not receive a brideswealth to compensate for their daughter's labour, but collect a dowry of movable goods - household utensils, jewellery, cattle - to bring her at the final marriage rite, the bride's early move to her parents-in-law does not seem to be based on economic grounds. This change in wedding practices, however, may be explained from a sociocultural perspective. One important factor distinguishing Bigu from Solu Khumbu is that the Bigu Sherpas had to share their valley with several other ethnic groups. Confrontations between them may have led to cultural adaptations, conformations, particularly when dealing with a sensitive issue like women's sexuality (cf. Phillimore 1991). In Solu Khumbu, as a matter of fact, a Sherpa groom may visit and sleep with his bride, in her parents' home, from the first wedding ceremony (*demchang*) onwards. As several years may pass between the first and the final marriage ceremony when (in Solu Khumbu) the bride moves into her new home, the young women usually has given birth to one or more children. These children are considered to be legitimate. As March notes, however, this final wedding ritual

[34] Cf. Ortner, "once married, daughters are no longer of importance to their natal family, although parents and married daughters visit each other from time to time" (1978:21).

[35] *Janma* is a kind of grass, an important fodder for cows kept at the homesteads which is usually cut and collected in baskets, *doko*, by the daughters.

[36] See Ch.II on the migration of Sherpa families from Khumbu to the Bigu valley.

is frequently mistaken for the wedding itself, leading people to believe that there is a great deal of "pre"marital sexual liberty and/or little stigma attached to "pre"marital pregnancy–both of which are false impressions (March 1979:189n.12).

It is not made clear who March means by "people", whether she refers to foreign researchers or local non-Sherpa individuals.[37] Bigu, however, certainly had a people who pre-eminently would have misunderstood the Sherpa marriage structure: the high-caste Hindu family of the Kharkas.[38] With their own marriage practice of dowry and virilocality into extended families, they must at best have frowned upon young Sherpa women getting pregnant while still living with their parents. In the light of their other attempts to accuse Sherpas of immoral behaviour,[39] it is not unlikely that, in course of time, the immigrated Sherpas of Bigu have changed the timing of their bride move to criticism of their politically powerful Hindu adversaries. If so, it shows once more how the Sherpas were influenced by Hindu culture in this valley.

One consequence of Bigu's early bride's move was the intensified relationship between the bride and the mother-in-law. While in Solu Khumbu, a bride moves directly from her parental home to her own new home, in Bigu she must live and work under the supervision of her mother-in-law as long as it takes her groom's family to build a house for the young couple. That this relationship between the *mater familias* and the young woman is generally not a harmonious one, is expressed by the feeling women expressed in the *Narak* song of being turned from gold into mud (3). The Cindarella syndrome of having to do the hardest and dirtiest jobs, being scolded and even beaten by the mother-in-law, while the daughters of the family show little respect for the elder brother's wife (*ajyi*), was a complaint often heard from living-in brides in Bigu.

One of them visited Dawa and me regularly, often with a basket of potatoes or some vegetables in return for a chat, a cup of sugar tea and a cigarette. One day she had bruises on her face. When we asked her what happened she started crying and told us her mother-in-law had beaten her because she had refused to fetch fodder from uphill. "That is a children's job. Why doesn't she tell Kanchi [younger daughter] to do it? If people see me carrying a *doko* with fodder, they ridicule me." Dawa told her future mother-in-law about it, who in turn went to the young woman's mother-in-law for an explanation. The woman reacted, "so what are you going to do with your future daughter-in-law? Make prostrations before her? She has to work, and the harder she works, the sooner their house is finished, the sooner she is out again!"

A groom will seldom interfere in the disputes between his bride and his mother, since he is not only to respect his mother as a parent, but also as the mistress of her household. As most Bigu Sherpa families rely on both agriculture and animal husbandry, the labour division between man and wife are divided along these lines. The care of the cattle on the pastures, as well as the sale and purchase of lifestock and the sale of dairy products - butter and *churpi* (hard cheese candy) - are mainly the responsibility of the husband. These activities are, however, mainly seen as surplus to the household's economic base, agriculture. And the organisation of the farm work and the processing of its products lie largely in the hands of wife. With her husband being regularly absent from the farm, it is the wife who makes the decisions in day-to-day matters, which rendered Fürer-Haimendorf the impression of Sherpa women being a rather

37 Fürer-Haimendorf states that "young [Sherpa] people of both sexes are practically unrestricted in the pursuit of casual as well as prolonged love-affairs" (1964:82), and that "sleeping arrangements in a Sherpa house are such that there is no privacy for the daughters receiving their male friends and lovers" (1964:85). Neither March nor I, however, have encountered this kind of sexual freedom among Sherpas, unless one misinterpretes their marriage system.

38 See Ch.II and III.

39 In order to prohibit the Bigu Sherpas to gain political domination over the valley on the basis of land property, and to prevent Sherpa cultural domination by the founding of Bekung Gomba, the Kharkas were said to have accused them of murder, theft, and alcohol abuse and other "impure" practices.

independent and equal partner in marriage, "radically different from the marriage of all Hindu populations of Nepal" with its "traditional docility and meekness of a Hindu wife" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:80-1). The Sherpa woman's position within the household, as the productive and reproductive base of her nuclear family is symbolised in a ritual that proceeds the celebration of Sherpa New Year, *Bulako Losar*.[40]

On the waxing moon before the three days of *Losar* celebration in early December, the Sherpa shaman makes a tour along all Sherpa households, joined by four or five elder village men. On this occasion, they sing a song wishing the household wealth and health, while the mistress of the house offers them a jar of her home-made *raksi* (liquor) and a plate of her best foodstuff along with a small plate of butter. When the song has come to an end, the shaman uses the butter to bless both the house and the woman with butter marks. The specific spots where the shaman attached his butter blessings are revealing: inside the house on the main supporting pillar and outside above the main entrance, and on the parting of the woman's hair and in her neck on her first vertebra. Pillar and spine, door and forehead, display here an analogy between the family house - the one pole still a reference to the tents of nomadic Tibetans (Stein 1972:120) - and the woman on whose strength, health, and fertility the existence and survival of the household relies.

Women enjoy high esteem in their role as wife and mother. However, a fortress can have the feeling of being a prison too. While women's responsibility for the fields, the processing of foodstuffs, the household and care for the children keep them at home day-in day-out, they often complain about their men "just strolling around, while they had to remain like chickens under a *doko* (basket)", expressing their envy towards men's freedom of movement. If men return from the pastures with the herds or from small trade expeditions, they seldom stay at home to help their wife and children in household activities, but gather with other men in local teashops to drink and gamble. According to Kunwar, Solu women are able to manipulate a kind of female spirit (*hamba*) which can turn men "cold", with which they can exert control on their husbands (Kunwar 1989:185). This notion, however, is totally unknown in Bigu. "The women of Bigu cannot say anything to their husbands even if they lose much money in gambling. A lot of male members were seen engaged in gambling in Bigu" (ibid.:185). Men come and go, and with their main preoccupation with the household's surplus - for their sons' houses and daughters' dowries - are also the first to seek for paid jobs in and outside the valley, while women secured their home base. Since the 1930s, men were reported to have gone to India for labour,[41] although the numbers from Bigu remained modest compared to Sherpas from Solu Khumbu who went already for temporal migration to Darjeeling since the 1860s or 70s (Ortner 1989:160).

"[T]here is no tradition of leaving home by the daughters of Bigu" (Kunwar 1989:186). It now becomes understandable why there were no anis mentioned in Tashi Gomba's early years of moving to Bakang. They were not used to travel and not supposed to travel, but to stay at their new home, and to take care of it as proper wives and daughters would do. The nuns may have been as dissatisfied and disappointed by monastic life as the monks, but tradition prohibited them from seeking their salvation elsewhere. Unless they exchanged their monastic home for a home they had been destined to before the monastic alternative came up anyway, the parental home of their lovers.

*Single women*

According to Oppitz' survey in Khumbu, 30% of the Sherpas in 1961-2 had been divorced (Oppitz 1969:124-8; cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:44). Also Ortner signalled a rather high rate of Sherpas "having gone through three or four spouses" (Ortner 1978:21). The reason behind the dissolvings of marriages, she offers (Ortner 1978:46), is an economic one, namely the unwillingness of parents to let go their son

[40] See Ch.III, *The shamans*.

[41] We have met, for instance, Calcuttako (Ch.II), Dorje Dolma's parents above, and the Meme Lama (Ch.IV and VI). Kunwar reports of 10 Bigu Sherpa families who migrated to India between 1960 and 1980 (Kunwar 1989:88). Since then, however, labour migration has taken a spurt, mainly to Kathmandu (see Ch.VIII).

(and his inheritance share) or their daughter (and her labour and dowry). Parents try to drag out the marriage process as long as possible, with the excuse that they are not yet able to afford the final wedding. Divorcees, both men and women, do not seem to be blamed, since the responsibility for a dissolved marriage is generally sought with the parents. This may be so in Solu Khumbu, in Bigu, on the other hand, the situation is quite different, particularly for women.

The bride's years of living with the groom under his parents' roof can be seen as a trial. During this stage, the two young people may simply find out that they do not get along with each other. Or, the bride does not become pregnant. As it is taken to be most natural for her to have one or more children while living with her groom and in-laws, she might be accussed of being barren, and on that ground be send back to her parents.[42] Often, however, it seems to be a chicken-and-egg problem; the match does not work, so no sexual relationship between the married couple is established, or the bride does not become pregnant, so the marriage has failed. One young woman, for instance, was still not pregnant after five years of residing with her in-laws. Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law started to beat her and made her life so miserable that she ran off, back home. When her father went to her parents-in-laws to mediate, they refused to take her back stating that she was obviously infertile, and thus an unsuitable wife for their son. The young woman herself, however, confided to me that she had found the young man so disgusting that she refused to let him touch her. Another women, now in her late sixties, offers another example.

> My parents married me off when I was only sixteen. I had not even my menses yet - they only came when I was twenty-five -. My husband was only a child. Twelve years old he was. They had no daughters so they needed a cheap housekeeper. Yes, that's what they needed. After four years, I realised when I ran off, back home. My parents were not angry, but they were afraid I would never marry again.

The fact is, that in Bigu young women divorced during this early stage of their marriage are stigmatised for being barren and thus are outcasts of the matrimonial market. Their only socially acknowledged chance for a family is marrying a widower who merely needs a mother for the children he already has. Other divorcees may choose, or be destined to, a life as a spinster, remaining with their parents with the promise of a plot and a small house at their death; or to stay permanently on the pastures to take care of their youngest brother's herds. Their solitary life, however, exchanges the one stigma for another by making these single women regular subjects of gossip, of being of easy virtue. It may not be surprising, then, that some preferred a life of a nun. In 1994, three anis had been married but divorced because they had remained childless during their years of betrothal.

Presumingly barren brides, however, are not always forced to return to their parental home. In 1994, Bigu counted two polygynous households, where the groom had taken a second wife with the consent of his first *nama* (bride) and her parents (cf.Ortner 1978:21).[43] When in both cases the second wife also did not become pregnant, it was clear the husbands were to blame. However, neither of the two polygynous households were dissolved. Probable infertility of women is a socially accepted ground for divorce, while male infertility - even when proven - is not.

Divorce when the couple already set up their own household is usually initiated by the husband, leaving his wife and children for another woman. The elderly woman mentioned above was twenty years old when she was divorced. Five years later, she fell in love with a married man during a *Narak* festival. They ran away together, only to return to Bigu fifteen years later, with five children. The man's first wife stayed behind in their house with three children, until a widowed neighbour asked her to move in with him and his two sons. She left the house in the care of her eighteen year old son and sixteen year old daughter, and took only her youngest daughter with her.

[42] See also March (1979:187): "women without children are more likely to divorce or to be divorced".

[43] Kunwar noted five cases of polygyny in Bigu in 1981 (1989:177).

Usually, the family of a deserted wife will try to force a payment from the run-away husband or his family to substantiate the divorce. Many deserted women, as in the example above, however, can never be divorced simply because their husbands disappeared. Often, these men went to India for wage labour, and probably started new relationships and families there.[44] As long as they do not return and publicly renounce their marriage, their Bigu wives keep their married status, thus obstructing them to start a new relationship. Their "married" status also precludes them from admission to the gomba, for they are not free, their husbands might come back any day; which is why Tashi Ongdi's daughter could not become an ani after her husband abandoned her. Sangesomu, the deserted wife who became a nun, on the other hand, presumably got message from India that her husband had passed away. Her, socially acknowledged, widowhood had made her permissable to the religious community.

If a young woman becomes a widow when still living with her in-laws, she will be expected to marry her husband's younger brother. When the husband, however, was an only son, or when his younger brothers are already married, or when the age difference between the widow and a younger brother is unacceptable, she will be allowed to leave her first husband's family. Her parents, or brothers, will look for another groom, whose family will have to make a token payment to her late husband's kin. The widow will have to return the earrings and bangles she received as brideswealth, and will have to leave her sons with their grandparents. Her daughters, however, will have to move with her to her new in-laws.

If a women loses her husband while already running her own household, she becomes the head of her family until her sons reach adulthood. However, she will be completely alone in her task, self-sufficient and autonomous as a household is supposed to be, to cultivate their fields, to take care of their cattle, to process the dairy and field products, to look after her children. It will be easier for her if the children are old enough to help her, but if they are still very young, the young widow will have a hard time.[45] Provided she makes good arrangements concerning the usufruct of her land until her son or sons are to inherit and can support their monastic mother thereafter, a life at the gomba may be much easier - and more religiously rewarding - for her than that of a single mother. In the case of Sangesomu, however, we have seen that her arrangements were not respected by her family-in-law. They bereft her son of his land, which made him leave to seek his fortune in India, and made his mother depending on the begging bowl.

Monastic life, with whatever it promised to be or to become at Tashi Gomba, seemed to offer exactly what Nim Pasang told Fürer-Haimendorf it to be, "a place of refuge" in both its religious and its social sense: a place to renounce a social world where single women were to face social solitude, childlessness, and a bad reputation; a place, where they could devote their lives to the Dharma, where solitude and celibacy was exactly expected from them, however without a loss of self-esteem.

*Orphans*

A song which cherishes the ties between parents and children could hardly do without a stanza on children without parents. As it shows, they were in need of refuge as much as single women.

6 Like a river is always flowing downwards
and will never return to its source,
so will an orphan go into the world
and never return to his home.

[44] Cf.Fürer-Haimendorf on polygyny and tourism (1984:44-6; cf.Kunwar 1989:177). Few Bigu Sherpas however are involved in trekking activities. Young men prefer to move to Kathmandu unmarried and find a spouse there.

[45] Much more can be said about the problems single women have to cope with in relation to *karma* - their fate being a consequence of their actions in a former life; in other words, only they themselves can be blamed for their present situation -, and witchcraft (see Tieman 1994). As I have, however, no information on Bigu's early nuns to substantiate interpretations from these religious and psychocultural perspectives, I have to neglect them here.

In Bigu, parentless children are considered to constitute a social problem. Like the lyrics say, they are turned into homelessness with the loss of their parents. With the Sherpas' emphasis on the nuclear family, brothers and sisters are very reluctant in taking the orphans of their siblings under their wing. It turned out that it were mostly the grandparents who were willing to take care of these children. They either moved into their deceased sons' home and left their own house and plots to their youngest son - as he inherits his parents' last property at his father's death anyway -; or they took the orphans with them into their home, to leave the house of the deceased son empty for the eldest grandson to inherit at marriage. When the old people, however, already had passed away, generally a brother would have to take care of the children. As might be expected in a society where every family had to work hard to survive, they favoured their own children in the distribution of food, clothing, and the work that has to be done, as well as, in recent times, giving leave (and money) for attending school. Frequently, disputes would arise between the orphaned boys and the care-taking uncle about the share of land which was legitimately theirs to inherit, as it had been their father's property, but of which the uncle had the right of usufruct until his nephews' marriage. It may not be surprising, then, that all male orphans I came to know about had left the Bigu valley to build up a life in Kathmandu or India.[46]

Orphaned daughters saw themselves confronted with marriage arrangements at a very young age, that is between ten and thirteen years. The husbands chosen for them tend to belong to families with no, or still very few, daughters[47]; in other words, families who would accept a poor dowry in exchange for more years of domestic help. Needless to say that their relatives did not welcome them back home if they felt unhappy with their groom and in-laws, or "proved" to be infertile. With the founding of Tashi Gomba, an alternative was created by way of nunhood. The intentions of the orphaned girls' relatives were, however, seldom inspired by religious motivations, but by the same economic grounds as the marriage negotiations. Instead of a small dowry, her relatives could restrict themselves now to supply the tea ceremony accompanying the girl's enrollment and her first robe. Whereas other anis were supported by their parents or brothers, all orphaned nuns I came to know of received no economic support whatsoever by their relatives. In former times, these nuns may have made begging rounds, like Sangesomu; nowadays, they tend to become the servant of another ani with enough economic back-up.[48] Of the three orphan-nuns mentioned, Nim Dolma and her little sister were already made an ani at the age of ten and six. According to Nim Dolma's own account, the Drugpa Rimpoche himself (and, no doubt, also his nephew Kusho Pema) had seen to it personally that she was fed and dressed during her time at the gomba. Also Dorje Dolma's relatives stayed completely out of the picture. She became an ani only when her younger sister was old enough to take over the responsibility of the household and their younger brother, assisted by a loyal Thami servant. After some years, Ani Dorje Dolma arranged the marriage of both her sister and brother. Her sister went to live at the *pari* side of the valley, her brother remained in their natal home and supported his nun-sister until his death in 1989.

For orphans, then, "going into homelessness" - the Pali expression of renouncing social life - was less a leaving home which they had lost already, than finding a home. This counted as much for children who lost only one of their parents. March noted down that

> women whose mothers have died call themselves orphans, even if their fathers are living; and men whose fathers have died call themselves orphans, even if their mothers are still living (March 1979:156n.2).

This expression denotes the strong emotional tie between a parent and child of the same sex, as well as the social consequences of death. Sons losing their father seemed indeed to run the risk of becoming the

46 See again Sangesomu's case.

47 See also March who states that "certain sex-specific expectations about the division of labor would mean that a lone daughter in a large household would have to work somewhat harder, at least until her brothers brought in wives" (1979:156n.2).

48 See Ch.VI, *Economic bases*.

victims of losing their land inheritance, and thus their future life sustenance and home, too (see Sangesomu's son). Also daughters who lose their mothers often find a hard time with a stepmother as the new mistress of the household. I only have examples of motherless daughters, but I can imagine also fatherless sons opting for monastic life as a way out of their social situation. However, whereas motherless sons have little to fear of a stepmother unless they are still babies, fatherless daughters still have to cope with the same hardships their single mothers have to face. When these take refuge at the gomba because they feel unable to sustain their household and family all alone, they have to take their daughters with them. Leaving them behind with her in-laws would destined them to practically the same fate as when they would have lost both their parents.

Still one stanza of the Narak song is left to be quoted, sung only by women. I have saved it until now for it bears reference to gender and religious practice, and as such brings us back to the first anis of Tashi Gomba.

*Women and the Dharma*

4 Instead of learning *dharma*,
we learn this meaningless song.
Instead of giving birth to a son,
we give birth to a daughter.

Also in this stanza the traditional role of Sherpa women as wife and mother is celebrated. The higher appreciation a mother faces when having male offspring is hardly surprising in patrilineal society. What is particular interest here, however, is the way sons and daughters are put in a Lévi-Straussian opposition with *dharma* and a "meaningless song".

In my interviews with Sherpa men one of my standard questions was what they thought a perfect Sherpa woman was like. I quote an exemplary answer.

> A perfect Sherpani speaks Sherpa fluently and knows to sing the Sherpa songs. But, of course, when she has Nepali guests, she should be able to speak proper Nepali too. But the main thing is that she raises her children properly, according to Sherpa culture and teaches them our Sherpa language, teaches them that this is our culture, that they should not forget that, and should wear our ["traditional"] clothing. And she should make the house look beautiful and clean. That sort of thing. Others may emphasise her looks, her jewelry, her clothing, find it more important that she radiates wealth. But I think that tells more about her husband. I think her knowledge of the Sherpa language and the songs are more important. And, of course, her behaviour towards other people, young and old; with love towards children, with respect towards the elderly.

All Sherpa men mentioned the ideal woman's main roles as a "guardian of tradition" and that of a good lady of the house, although they differed in emphasis. These roles can hardly be unique to Bigu Sherpa culture, but the specific cultural aspects that should be guarded may differ from one context to another, as well as against what or whom. Here, language, songs[49] and, to a certain extent, clothing were clearly endangered most, but we have to consider also the contemporanity of the men's responses. Sherpa language definitely suffered from the Nepali language children learned at school (founded in 1954). The

[49] Only songs, not oral tradition in general, since story-telling is confined to men, preferably shamans. Music-making (the last kind of Sherpa lute in Bigu was sold some ten years ago to a French ethnomusicologist, and is ever since completely replaced by the mouth organ) is not gender specific, but in its accompanying role to song and dance also not considered to be important enough to be mentioned.

older generation complained that most of nowaday's children were hardly able to understand Sherpa language, let alone to speak it. Songs, as I stated earlier, were hardly to be heard anymore except for the celebration of *Narak*. Instead of Fürer-Haimendorf's experience of young women singing happily while working in the fields, I only heard the silence of hoes hitting the earth and corn and potatoes falling in large baskets. Like marriage songs, the working songs were hardly known anymore[50] because seldom performed. The reason given was that the teams of women which are formed during harvest time are more and more joined by women from other ethnic groups, such as Thamis, Magars and Tamangs. In support of this argument could be brought forward that the Sherpa term by which these mutual aid teams are known in Solu Khumbu, *tsenga tsali*, was virtually unknown in Bigu but presumably replaced by the Nepali *parna tirne*, "extracting help".

That the safe-guarding of Sherpa language and its songs, however, was not a particular recent phenomenon - although its necessity may have been intensified by, for instance, the Nepali school system competing with the mothers' role as educator - but probably was at stake long before. This is suggested by the third feature of Sherpa culture mentioned, clothing. Sherpa women's traditional dress consists of a blouse often with Chinese patters (*hangdzu*), the Tibetan dark-coloured wrapover dress (*chhuwa*), and an multi-coloured apron (*matril*).

> But till before 1981, most of the [Sherpa] women at Bigu were seen in *cholo* (full sleeve blouse) and *kenam* (a kind of short *dhoti* looked like petticoat). They have now started to wear traditional Sherpa dress

writes Kunwar (1989:144). Sherpa women, then, seemed to have brought their way of clothing in accordance with the dress in which most women of the other ethnic groups, Hindu and Thami, are still to be seen. Only with the growing encounter with Tibetans and Sherpas, in Kathmandu, Sherpa women of Bigu started to wear what has become their culture - which, by the way, has over the last couple of years been under attack again by Sherpa girls who prefer the much disapproved urban dressing of *kurta* (Indian dress and trouser) and jeans. The initial abandoning of the *chhuwa* may have had a very practical reason, such as a shortage of the Tibetan woolen material which like women's traditional jewelry (earrings and necklaces) must have been too expensive. "The price of ornaments worn by the women of Bigu is very cheap in comparison with the Tibetan type of ornaments worn by the women of Solu-khumbu [sic!]", Kunwar concluded, and I agree (Kunwar 1989:105-6). In their daily outfit Sherpa women thus seemed to have been hardly distinguishable from women of other ethnic groups. Only their language and their songs served their ethnic identity, and in their omnipresence in the valley as the main representants of the Sherpa-ness of the valley.

Women as guardians of Sherpa culture, then, served not only a cultural but also a political purpose against an advancing hinduisation of their own culture. Their shamans joined with those of other ethnic groups in offering rites to Shiva, Parbati, Devi, and other Hindu deities at the Deodunga mountain and the village shrines of Devithan and Maisingthan. Their bridal move was advanced to avoid accusations of immoral, sexual behaviour, which created a subordination - to the mother-in-law - women in other Sherpa communities did not experience. Their dress had changed into one similar to Thami, Magar and Chetri women. Why, then, did (and do) Sherpa women consider singing Sherpa songs, in the only song that survived, to be "meaningless"? Did Nim Pasang's project of founding a gomba, generating *dharma* practice in the valley, not support to the same goal, namely of imposing Sherpa cultural domination on the valley? And did women as anis, as *dharma* practitioners, not also participate in that same purpose? Why, then, was *dharma* practice considered, in its connection to sons, to be male and seemingly more significant?

[50] Which urged Dorje, Dawa's later husband, to collect the lyrics with elderly women like his mother, to offer them to the Sherpa Association in Kathmandu, an institution dedicated to the preservation of Sherpa culture.

Until the founding of Tashi Gomba and the reanimation of village temple life - particularly during the 1940s[51] - the Bigu Sherpas were not familiar with monasticism with its lamas and Rimpoches, nor had they a strong village lama tradition. Male dominance of *dharma* practice was hardly an issue, or it must have been for the shamans, since they had always been men.[52] The main rituals they performed, however, centred around women. I already described *Bulako Losar*, which celebrates the mistress of the house as the backbone of a household's wealth and prosperity, but also during agricultural rites like *Bumi Puja* women have been main actors in offering eggs and chickens to the goddess of the soil. Also the offerings to Deodunga were directed towards women and, their own, fertility. Women may not have been taking the lead in shamanic rituals like these, but their prominence was acknowledged, as wives and mothers.

With the introduction of nunhood by the Drugpa Rimpoche, women hardly gained any religious prestige. On the contrary, I would say they lost more. Monasticism, promoting the separation of religion - as a withdrawal - from the social realm, with celibacy as one of its features, was to supersede shamanic practices as good, meaningful religious practice. Consequently, it also moved women out of the central position they took in shamanic rituals that celebrated their productivity and reproductivity. In the monastic institutionalisation of religious practice, then, women only gained a religious position next to the monks to be subordinated to them, to form the lowest ranks in its clerical hierarchy. In other words, instead of being central to religious practice, the Buddhist *dharma* made of religious practice mainly a men's affair in which women were but permitted (cf. Paul 1979; Gross 1993). It taught them in words and deeds that they were inferior to men, both in the social and in the religious realm.

Also the reinforcement of the position of village lamas in Bigu only supported the maleness of *dharma*, for a female counterpart of this non-celibate position was non-existent. "In some Sherpa communities, there are women who had adopted many religious traits, becoming a kind of "village nun", analogous to the village lama" (March 1976:134).

> The[se] women are usually older widows [sic!] who have chosen a more contemplative life within the village. Their knowledge, discipline and dress are not perfectly orthodox, but they are nevertheless recognized as individuals with legitimate religious purpose and called upon to assist at household rituals, especially weddings and mortuary observances (ibid.:274).

The ritual activities these "village anis" were engaged in may have lent them their analogy with village lamas, but their short-cropped hair, their red monastic dress - although not always "perfectly orthodox" - and their "monastic traits" such as a vow of celibacy - which village lamas are not inclined to - suggest an individual female practice rather inspired by monkhood than by the village lamas, probably in regions with monasteries but no nunneries (Goldstein 1980:53). Bigu's lacking relationship with monasteries until the founding of Tashi Gomba, then, could hardly have triggered off the option of an individual, ani-like life among its women, and made unnecessary with Tashi Gomba's community of nuns.[53]

With Tashi Gomba's failing lamas, however, *dharma* teachings could only have had an impact on Bigu monastics and laity with the advent of a dedicated teacher and monk - the Guru Lama in 1959. Also the village lama's position as a religious leader only became substantialised when it was taken by a man who managed lay people respect, the Meme Lama, a former monk at that. These two men not only assailed the shamans' monopoly successfully by promoting the Dharma on which they based their authority, but

[51] See Ch.III, *The village lamas and the village gomba.*

[52] Also among the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, contrary to other ethnic groups in Nepal, like Gurungs and Rai, who did have female shamans. See, for instance, in "Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas" (Hitchcock and Jones 1976) the essays by Kurz Jones on Limbu female shamans, by Fournier among the Sunawar, and Reinhard on "witches" among the Raji; and *jankhiri*, female shamans, among the Chantel (Michl in Fürer-Haimendorf 1974).

[53] Although the Bigu anis of the 1950s became in many senses comparable to these kind of "village nuns". See Ch.VI.

also showed the nuns their lower ranking to themselves as male religious specialists.[54] The internalisation of the concept of *dharma* by laywomen, leading to its usage in the song, then, makes this stanza of a recent date, not earlier than the 1960s; when they, moreover, also tended to lose the battle as "guardians" of Sherpa culture vis-à-vis the Nepali school and the growing importance of Kathmandu as an economic resource. As much as Sherpa language and its songs had become insignificant in their struggle for life, expressed precisely by "last meaningless song", women's role as educators and tenders of the household's fields as its economic base had also become meaningless. What remained to prosper as the main feature of their Sherpa identity was the Dharma, led by men, and their sons to bring cash and goods from the city.[55]

Also Tashi Gomba's first nuns must have understood the little prestige to be gained by them by leading a celibate, religious life. Like the monks, they must have been disappointed at the opportunities monastic life at their gomba offered. But unlike the monks, they had no options to improve their situation, for instance by following their lama to another gomba. Shamanism, celebrating their responsibilities as mistress of the household and as mothers, was still uncontested by *dharma* practice. Nunhood at Tashi Gomba, then, had still little to offer against the social esteem rendered by marriage and motherhood, and could hardly concur with a wife's independence in her own home. This might explain why Tashi Gomba was drained by its young marrigable women during the 1940s, leaving religious life mainly to those who either had little prospects of a favourable marriage, or who already had experienced marriage life and motherhood. It was the only time that nuns left their religious community for marriage on such a large scale.

The parents must have also felt little pride for their monastic daughters. Not only had they undoubtedly a hard time in accepting their vow of celibacy, they also were supposed to support them for the rest of their life too. They probably only encouraged them to leave the robe after the death of the Drugpa Rimpoche, although the wild love affairs with monks with whom their daughters choose to run off with could hardly have gotten their approval where, under normal circumstances, they would have arranged their child's marriage. The Tashi Gomba of the 1940s proved not to be fit for young women, and a threat to parents' control over social relations through marriages. No wonder then that very few parents volunteered to bring their daughters to Tashi Gomba during the 1940s and 50s. As such, it becomes understandable why Tashi Ongdi had to run away from home to become an ani, Hishi Dolma cut her hair without asking her parents' permission first, and perhaps also made Sange Gyelmu - whose explicit statement that her decision "was not influenced by her parents" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:145) sounds very suspicious to me - leave her home unasked. Also these two anis of 1952 were (with Dorje Dolma) the last to volunteer for a life at Tashi Gomba for the rest of the decade.

*Reflection*

Women's importance as wives and mothers, as productive and reproductive pivot of any society, makes it nearly impossible to introduce female celibacy as a socially accepted option (cf. Ortner 1981). According to the *Cullavaga* texts, exactly these female qualities had made also Gautama Buddha doubt the rightness of women "going into homelessness" (Paul 1979; Gross 1993; Ch.I). In the Bigu of some two thousand years later, it could only have succeeded with a strong rooted sense and practice of *dharma*. But the Bigu Sherpas were still involved in a process of conversion to the Dharma, of getting familiar with its institutions like the monastery and the village temple. Only the Drugpa Rimpoche, who had introduced nunhood in Bigu and managed to recruit the first anis, had the religious charisma to overcome not only Sherpa notions, but local notions in general, on womanhood. Again, he retreated and died too soon, and none of his followers was able to prevent young women returning to social life.

54 See Ch.VI, *The village lama and a pragmatic orientation.*

55 See Ch.VII and VIII.

The first Bigu anis must have been inspired by the Drugpa Rimpoche as well as by the nuns who had been in his retinue. They seemed to promise a life of learning and independence, which may have countered their prospects of years in service of a mother-in-law. Once a nun at Tashi Gomba, however, the freedom of mobility the anis in the Drugpa Rimpoche's retinue exemplified were not in store for them. In their society, women were supposed to take care of the home, and not to travel around, so their main task was to help out at the construction of the monastery. In addition, the nuns from beyond the Bigu valley, who had followed their *guru lama*, also had to return home at his death, back to Yelmu, Lapthang and Lapche (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:125). Their mobility seemed only to have been possible because their places of origin lacked a nuns' communtity of its own. In the absence of sufficient economic support, so far away from home, they had to return to their families, just like the Bigu monks who had to return from Bakang. In addition, nunhood at the gomba required an obedience and servitude to (all) the monks (think of Tashi Ongdi serving the Meme Khepa) that resembled the subordination to a mother-in-law in many ways, but lacked the temporariness it had in lay life. The missing prospect of once becoming the mistress of her own home and be respected as the mother of her children makes me agree with Fürer-Haimendorf that "It is difficult to determine what causes a young Sherpa or Tamang girl to leave her own village and renounce all prospects of marriage and motherhood and accept the many restrictions of a nun's life" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1984:152). However, only in the context of Tashi Gomba's first anis; not for those he encountered in 1974, as I will argue in Chapter VII.

Nunhood during Tashi Gomba's early years offered too little to replace the social esteem women could gain in the social realm. No wonder many young anis did not resist their feelings for monks, they had served as if they had been their wife anyway. Subsequently, their leaving the robes motivated but few parents to bring their daughters, or to give them permission to go, to the gomba. Nor did it inspire the women themselves to join the religious community. Most of those who remained, or enrolled until 1952, were in need of a place of refuge; women whose prospects on a married life were shallow or past, who had no home to return to. Whatever the hardships at, and poorness of, their new home, it gave them a social identity, socially accepted because they were widows and orphans. If it had not been for them, Tashi Gomba would have died an early death by the 1950s.

VI

# Climbing the Hill

## *From "Village Anis" to a female monastic Community*

*Introduction*

It is 1953, nearly twenty years after the founding of Tashi Gomba. About sixteen anis, of whom three were but small children, were living under the miserable conditions of an unfinished gomba, without an abbot. One wonders how life was for them, what their daily practice entailed.

In 1952, Kusho Pema disrobed and stepped down as the abbot of Tashi Gomba. Although Bigu's monastic community now also fell under the supervision of his younger brother Kusho Tsetsu, as the heading Rimpoche of the Drugpa Rimpoche's four gombas and abbot of Bakang Gomba, its daily affairs were left largely in the hands of the Meme Lama.[1] Without a presiding abbot, the remaining anis were left without religious guidance, until the Meme Lama, himself a disrobed monk, started to consolidate his self-appointed position as the village lama of Bigu. As such, he became the only male authority of the Dharma in the valley, in which capacity he started to involve the anis in the household and village temple rituals he performed, turning them in fact into his personal religious assistants.

Despite his efforts to improve the living conditions of the nuns, and to keep the financial affairs of the nunnery and of the village gomba strictly separated, the anis were drawn more and more out their monastic setting into village life. As such, they started to resemble the kind of "village anis" whom March describes as older women dedicating their lives to the Dharma and assisting the village lama in his performance of household rituals (March 1976:274).[2] As a result, only one nun seemed to have joined the community after 1952, namely the widowed Tuchi Dolma in 1953, while the child nun Pema Chucki went back to secular life. The failing influx of novices again endangered the future of the religious community.

The arrival of the Guru Lama in 1959-60 was a turning point in the history of Tashi Gomba. This monk had been one of the Drugpa Rimpoche's visiting students, who left again for Tibet until the Dalai Lama went into exile in 1959. He, however, did not follow Tibet's religious and political leader to India, but returned to his former teacher in tantric practices (*tsawé lama*). Finding Tashi Gomba untended and mainly a home to eat and sleep, he started to implement changes and innovations. New buildings, religious routines and a structured organisation of the community had to recreate a proper monastic community, a monastic *habitus* unknown during the thirty-year existence of Tashi Gomba. Through his activities as an abbot, as well as his own reputation of a devoted and learned monk, he superseded the Meme Lama as the religious authority of the valley.

Nunhood became an attractive option again, and parents, too, entrusted the Guru Lama with their daughters. Between 1960 and 1974 - the year Fürer-Haimendorf visited the gomba and recorded its anis (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976) - twenty-four anis joined Bigu's religious community. Seventeen of them were young, unmarried women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. Three were widows in their thirties and forties; four were child nuns, of which one had come with her widowed mother, two sent by their parents, and one an orphan. The community was rejuvenated and finally made an impression of viability.

[1] See Ch.IV, *The problem of authority.*

[2] See Ch.V, *Women and the Dharma.*

*The gomba complex*

Around 1950, the gomba complex must have made a rather shabby impression. Its main building, the temple hall (*duang*), was the same rectangular construction of approximately twelve by twelve metres that the Drugpa Rimpoche had inaugurated. Its front showed a wide porch of about two-and-a-half metres deep, protected from the rain by heavy brown yak-hair curtains. Some metres to the left of the *duang* the small *mani* house guarded a man-sized prayer wheel. A terrace lower, beneath the *mani* house, stood the Drugpa Rimpoche's modest accommodation, the *simsung*, which after Kusho Pema's departure only served Kusho Tsetsu during his visits to Tashi Gomba. Next to this lama house, a little *chörten* had been built for the Drugpa Rimpoche after his death. On the same level, half-way to the water place where a prayer wheel was set into motion by the brook, a meagre shelter was set up, an improvised construction of rush mats fixed on a wooden frame like those of herdsmen on the pastures. Here, and on the garret of the *mani* house, the anis slept, cooked, and lived.

The site could easily have been mistaken for a village temple, with the temple doors only open on request or on specific religious days, and its side buildings looking empty and only for occasional use. The grounds in between were weed-choked fields with paths of trampled earth that betrayed the nuns' path across the small complex, and their circambulations around the gomba and *mani* house, around the *simsung* and the *chörten*.

In 1952, two young novices joined Bigu's small community of older anis and child nuns, Dorje Dolma and Sange Gyelsum.[3] Ani Dorje Dolma was the first to build herself a little stone house on gomba ground, behind the improvised shelter of the nuns, with the help of the Thami tenants to whom she had let her younger brother's land. Her initiative was followed by Ani Sange Gyelmu, from Jiri, who came soon after her. When she had convinced her parents of her desire to renunciate, they gave her the material support to hire labourers to build a similar small stone house two terraces up behind the *duang* (see map 4). These two little houses are reminiscent of the tendency among parents in Solu Khumbu to construct a little home for themselves close to a gomba after the marriage of their youngest son (Ortner 1978:47). As he was to inherit their house, and what remained of their land and herds, his wife would come to move in with him and his parents. To avoid nearly inevitable conflicts between the old and the future lord and (particularly) mistress of the household, the parents, by then already aged, often choose to leave their home and to dedicate their remaining years to *dharma* practice (cf.Fürer-Haimendorf 1964; Goldstein 1980). In Bigu, however, this kind of retreat was not practised by the elderly. Given that the Bigu Sherpas were used to living with married sons and daughters-in-law under one roof[4], they never felt the necessity to leave their home in favour of their youngest son and his spouse.[5] Thus, Tashi Gomba's centre only comprised the *duang* with, at its periphery, a growing amount of dispersed little buildings, whereas I had imagined a gomba in Solu Khumbu to consist of a monastic centre with a temple hall, a kitchen building and the sleeping quarters of monks and nuns[6], surrounded by one-room houses with elderly people gradually merging into the nearby village settlement.

The building activities of the two novices emphasised the urgency to replace the improvised shelters of the other nuns who lacked the means and support to improve their living conditions. The construction of a double-storeyed ani house in 1954-5 must have been initiated by the anis' complaints to Kusho Pema and the Meme Lama, who both handled the financial affairs of the gomba, and the latter's ambi-

[3] See Ch.V, *The anis of 1952*.

[4] See Ch.V, *Marriage, nuclear families and Bigu Sherpa wives*.

[5] Only in the 1960s, Kusho Pema's widow and ex-ani Nim Dolma built herself a small house uphill from the gomba, to get the Meme Lama as her neighbour a decade later when he became a widower and took up the robe again. The only lay person - without a monastic past - who moved into a little house actually on gomba grounds was the widow of Tashi Gomba's lay founder Nim Pasang (around 1977).

[6] See also Aziz' "Views from the Monastery Kitchen" (1976a).

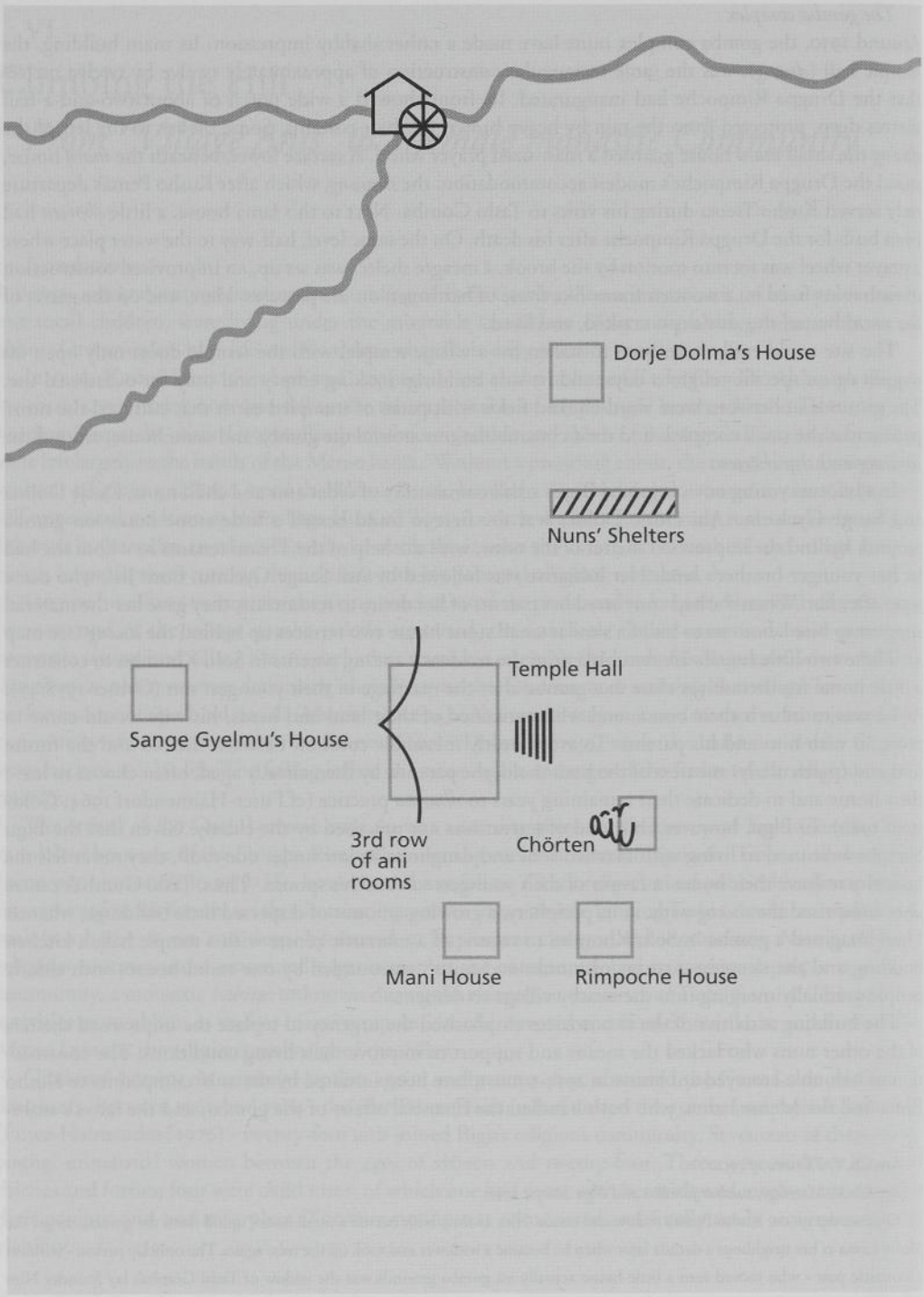



Figure 4 *Plan of Tashi Gomba in 1952*

tion to consolidate his position of village lama and religious authority of Bigu. The lower floor was to serve as a cooking place, the upper floor as sleeping quarter.

The building of the ani house was part of a larger renovation project of the gomba. The roof of the temple hall had already been leaking for years, its wooden planks were rotting and in disrepair. It was decided to replace the wood by more durable tin sheets. These tin sheets had to come all the way from Kathmandu. Because a paved road to Kathmandu did not yet existence,[7] the anis had to make the ten-day trip back-and-forth to Kathmandu on foot "each nun carrying three sheets at a time, and making two or three journeys" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:125). Ani Dorje Dolma liked to bring up the painful memory of this arduous enterprise whenever young nuns complained about their task of carrying the harvest from the gomba lands up to the nunnery.

When wondering where the cash came from to pay for the tin sheets from Kathmandu, I found indications by the Meme Lama in his report of his contributions to the development of Tashi Gomba.

> The two lower rows [of ani rooms] I made. They [i.e. the anis] only had two small houses [the houses of Dorje Dolma and Sange Gyelsum], but the roofs were of wood and I changed them into slate. I got money from Drumthola [?] when I asked, and they got it from district capital [Dolakha]. And I took risks and made that one [he points at the "guesthouse"] and later on, when they finished that one, they thought of making a guest house. That *simsum* is made by the [Guru] lama, we did it together, we joined, and that house where nowadays anis are living, the lama made, but I made the roof. The lama went to Sailung - in Sailung he also made a gomba. Here, I went on and made later the upper row of ani rooms [1986-7]. For that, the government gave Rps. 30.000. They asked in Dhrumthola and later on in the district's committee they made some fuss about it, so we only got Rps. 15.000, and also this we did not get all. Afterwards, they [the anis] started to ask for donations. Karma Sangmo is my brother's daughter and I have sent her to ask for donations. In Kathmandu, I have many relatives, I am the only one here, all my brothers and sisters, uncles, went to Kathmandu. From them I got help and got Rps. 13.000 and from another Rps. 16.000. In total I got 32.000. And I made the upper row of houses, all completely new. I took care of all the nunnery up to last year.

According to this account, then, government funds seem to have been the main financial source for the improvement of Tashi Gomba. This is interesting, because it is the first time that the government is mentioned as a benefactor of the gomba, rather than an obstacle to its development, e.g. through the meddling of the local men in power, the Kharkas. As the funds came off in 1954-5, there must have been a connection to the founding of Bigu's primary school.[8] The Kharkas had connections to all layers of the bureaucratic system, and knew how to solicit government funds for a school. Presumably, the Meme Lama - "I got money from Drumthola" - managed to promote Tashi Gomba as a school as well, which it was from his, religious, point of view. Probably with the help of Tashi Gomba's lay founder Nim Pasang and the latter's son, Tsering Ngutu, who was appointed as Bigu's *mizar* in 1951, he managed to draw some governmental funds for the gomba too. It must have felt like a victory, because for once the Meme Lama did not complain about the amount and the rake-off.

The governmental funds, however, were not sufficient but had to be supplemented by donations. In the introduction of his essay on Tashi Gomba, Fürer-Haimendorf remarks that his interest in this gomba had been evoked by an encounter, in 1953 when on his way to Khumbu,[9] with two Bigu nuns. "The nuns were collecting funds for the enlargement of their *gompa*" in the Tamang village of Risingo, some five

[7] In 1966-69, a paved road was constructed between Kathmandu and the Chinese/Tibetan frontier, suitable for motor vehicles, which reduced travelling time to the capital to two days. See Ch.VII.

[8] See also Ch. IV, *Pushing and pulling Sherpa monks.*

[9] See Fürer-Haimendorf's "The Sherpas of Nepal" (1964).

days' walk to the south-east of Bigu (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:121). Taking into account the general resentment at letting women travel, this faraway encounter with Bigu anis reveals that they must have been sent to their native area to ask their relatives for donations. Although the ethnographer does not mention the names of the two nuns, it is not unlikely that one of them had been Ani Ngawang Chutin,[10] the only Tamang nun of Tashi Gomba recorded in that year, who originated from Risingo's vicinity.

Clearly, the anis collected enough donations in addition to the governmental funds, for the gomba could purchase not only tin sheets, but also slates from the Alampu mine at the end of the Bigu valley, to cover the roofs of the ani house as well as the roofs of the houses of Ani Dorje Dolma and Ani Sange Gyelsum. The Meme Lama's remark that these were redone with slate was confirmed by Ani Dorje Dolma. "They were leftovers when the old guesthouse [i.e. the ani house] was built", she said, downplaying any importance. Nevertheless, disregarding the fact that one had needed quite some "left-overs" to replace two wooden roofs, a slate roof is a sign of wealth even in today's Bigu.

When the Guru Lama reappeared at Tashi Gomba in 1959-60, he encountered a modest but well-kept gomba with all the facilities needed to accommodate its about fifteen anis. Soon after his arrival, however, construction activities started anew. A first row of thirteen cells was built on the terrace below, and spanning the distance between, the lama house, and the kitchen building; each cell of approximately three by three metres, ideally to accommodate one nun. At the same time, a separate kitchen and store house was constructed at the place where once the improvised shelter had stood. These extensions point unmistakenly towards a growing need to accommodate more anis; in other words, towards a growing enrolment of novices.[11]

The Meme Lama remained very short on the new building projects and did not mention the resources from which they were paid as he did with those of the 1950s and 1980s. With the Guru Lama having become the new leading lama of Tashi Gomba, it may not be surprising that he initiated the changes of the 1960s and 70s. Moreover, taking the popularity of this learned, respected, new abbot among the Bigu laity into consideration,[12] it is very clear that he collected large amounts of donations from local Sherpas as well as from visitors from outside the valley - as the Drugpa Rimpoche had managed before him, and his successor Lama Kelsang would do after him. It must have been due to this stream of visitors who came to seek his advice and his blessing, that the Guru Lama needed a guest house to lodge the lay guests as well as a more prestigious lama house. The ani house was turned into a guest house, and the modest *simsung* was enlarged and provided with a shrine conform his status.[13] The head nun during my one-year fieldwork recalled that this rebuilding started three days after she entered Tashi Gomba in 1964. The first row of cells was ready by that time, for she was one of the first to get her own space there.

After the *simsung*, a second row of cells below the first was built. Obviously, the inflow of new novices did not stop. Besides, it is worthy to note that the two rows were going to form a closed compound. The doors of the upper cells were facing the valley, which could be reached by a few steps through a wicket gate. The doors of the lower row faced uphill. Both rows were connected by a wall on each side with, in between, small plots where the anis could grow turnips, potatoes, and other vegetables for their own use. While the cells offered the nuns a privacy similar to the two detached houses of Ani Dorje Dolma and Ani Sange Gyelmu, and unlike the dormitory in the former ani house, the compound, as forbidden territory to lay people, also shielded them off from direct contact with the outside world. This privacy was a necessity to the Guru Lama's introduction of meditational practices.[14]

[10] See Ch.V, *The anis of 1952.*

[11] I will return to the growing number of anis after the Guru Lama's arrival in the later section *The community's internal organisation.*

[12] See also Ch.IV, *The problem of authority.*

[13] See also later section, *The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.*

[14] See section below, *The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.*

By the end of the 1960s, Tashi Gomba started to look like a monastery after all. The whitewashed buildings were dazzling in the strong mountain sun, in which the red-painted tin roof of the *duang* looked like a red coral between the pearls of a Tibetan necklace when looking down from the top of the hill. That the gomba, in the person of the Guru Lama, furnished the anis with housing, however, did not mean that it also supported them in their livelihood.

*Economic bases*

The gomba as an institution had three modest sources of income. The first consisted of the plots the lay founder Nim Pasang had donated to the monastery, and a small herd; the second source derived from its money-lending system (Nep. *guthi*; Sh. *tenma*); and the third of donations by the laity.

To start with donations, these were seldom given in cash but in kind, usually butter which was both used for butter lamps, and buttertea to be served to the nuns on collective rituals and to visitors. In general, these contributions were made in return for religious merits, as any gift to a religious institution or religious person has been seen as an aid in the upkeep of the Dharma. The religious merit gained by supporting the Dharma are to compensate for the sins a person amasses during his lifetime. Usually, these donations on a voluntary basis remained modest (up to 1 kg of butter), but in some specific cases the butter contributions could go up to 20 kg. In my experience, the motive for generous butter gifts were always related to death and dying. Inauspicious signs during a funeral, or bad dreams of either the dying person, or of a close relative before or shortly after the passing away, were considered to be signs that the dying or deceased had to square sins committed during his or her lifetime. If these remain unsettled, the spirit of the deceased might get lost on its way through *bardö*, the forty-nine days between death and rebirth.[15] Consequently, the wandering spirit would turn into a ghost haunting its close kin in this world.

In the case of inauspicious signs, a lama makes astrological inquiries on the dying or dead person in order to interpret these signs and to advise the family what to do and when. A huge butter lamp put in a gomba to light the spirit's forty-nine days lasting path through *bardö* mostly suffices. Sometimes the family is ordered to give one of the *chörten* in the valley a fresh whitewash and to sponsor the lama for performing a "guiding" ritual in front of the *chörten*; sometimes a small restoration project on the gomba is requested.

It seems very likely that merit-making as part of memorial rites (*gyewa*) were introduced by the Meme Lama during the 1950s, when he was consolidating his position as the village lama of Bigu. Moreover, as the only remaining religious authority in the valley, he was also the lama who decided what the family had to do to counter the deceased kin's sins. Although I did not manage to extract detailed information of him on that period when he was both assisting Kusho Pema in the nunnery's financial affairs and Bigu's village lama, it seems that his village temple got most of the "memorial" assignments. His own fortune, he had brought from India in 1944, and the financial support by Calcuttako, the well-off Sherpa who had been in the Gurkha army,[16] had hardly lasted into the 1950s. Then, the sponsoring had to (mainly) come from the Sherpa laity, and taking into account their unaccustomedness with *dharma* practice,[17] the Meme Lama's introduction of such merit-making rites must have served both religious - subscribing his prestige as a religious leader and teacher - and economic ends - in the materialisation of his prestige in the village gomba. He did manage to enlarge the village gomba in length and height, to get the Meme Khepa to decorate its interior with frescoes, and to construct a guesthouse next to the temple to house sponsors of memorial rites (*gyewa*) and the *Narak* festival. The sponsoring of the nunnery by the laity, then, must have merely entailed butter gifts, and occasionally some small amount of money.

[15] Here I translate the Tibetan *sems* with spirit, despite its suggestion of similarity with the Christian "soul". See, for instance, Tucci (1980) for a meticulous description of *sems*, and Evants-Wentz (1960) and Mullin (1987) on *bardö*.

[16] See Ch.IV, *Pushing and pulling Sherpa monks*.

[17] See Ch.III, *The village lamas and the village gomba*.

The competition between the nunnery and the village temple, due to Meme Lama's religious politics, however, changed in favour of the nunnery with the arrival of the Guru Lama. This Tibetan, learned monk presumably attracted many lay people who would traditionally offer him rice, eggs, and small banknotes. Much of these donations must have been used for the new constructions, some - if not all - cash was put into the gomba fund to serve as *guthi*, a loan fund for lay people. According to the Meme Lama, the gomba's capital did not surpass the amount of Rs.1000, for villagers to borrow up to Rs.100 for buying cattle or financing a marriage, until the Guru Lama came and the gomba had about Rs.7000 at its disposal. Fürer-Haimendorf mentions the amount of Rs.8100 for 1974, for villagers to borrow between Rs.25 to Rs.1000 a person a year (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:129).[18] Interest had to be paid not in cash, but in commodities. Again butter, used for continuously burning lamps in the *duang* and at the shrine in the *simsung*, was a main item. After the Guru Lama's introduction of three extensive annual rituals, however, the larger part of interest to be transferred was used to support these rituals: again butter for the extra lamps needed, rice and flower to make effigies (*torma*), and food for all the participating nuns and lamas. The fund was thus largely divided over three rituals, and were named after them as the *Nyungne guthi*, the *Bum guthi*, and the *Diksha guthi*.[19]

Also the village gomba had its funds, started up mainly with the donation made by the already mentioned Calcuttako. One was called after *Narak*, during which repayment and the interest were due (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:130), thus like the *guthi* of the "big gomba" based on a one-year term. The smaller village gomba *guthi*, however, was a monthly affair around which the Meme Lama had established a special day of devotion, on every last day of the Tibetan month. The combination of a religious session devoted to the Guru Rimpoche (Skt. Padmasambhava) and the fund were his main tactic to promote *dharma* practice among the Bigu Sherpas. During these sessions, the village lama would tell hagiographies, teach one-line *mantras* (prayers) and make prostrations and circumambulations with those present. Although his energy seemed relentless as I saw him seizing these days, as well as any other occasion, to lecture about religious examples and practices, very few people were interested enough to leave their work on the field and pastures, and in the house, to come to the "thirtieth-day *puja*" at the village gomba. Those who came often felt obliged to because they had to repay their loan, or intended to borrow out of the fund in the near future. After the 1950s when the Meme Lama held his religious monopoly, then, the village gomba could not compete with the developments of the nunnery under the direction of the Guru Lama; not in financial resources, and not in ritual practices which seemed to promise more religious merit - in which the laity was not even allowed to participate.

As the plots of the nunnery concerned, these had been donated by Nim Pasang, and were situated at the same altitude as the gomba. They were of the same poor quality as the parcel the Sherpa headman had offered to the founding of the gomba.[20] The 3 *muri* (ca. 202.5 kg) of wheat, maize, and potatoes the nuns harvested from it, yielded hardly enough to furnish each of them with a meal during the four monthly days of devotion. During the 1960s, the gomba property was extended with land donated by

> a wealthy Thakuri, i.e. the member of a high Hindu caste, who held the rank of captain in the Nepalese army. The Thakuri's wife had remained childless and he hoped to be blessed with a son by dispensing such charity to a Buddhist temple. Though his efforts were in vain, he stayed in close touch with the nuns, and when his wife died, the inmates of the *gompa* performed a memorial rite (*gyewa*) which was attended by the deceased woman's relatives. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:127)

The Thakuri's land was dispersed over three villages in the Sunkosi valley, on the way to Barabise, a two-day walk from Bigu. In Latu and Marsekarka, maize and wheat were grown, whereas the land in Budi-

[18] In 1994, the gomba coffers contained Rs.120.000 for villagers to borrow up to Rs.5000 a person a year.

[19] See section below, *Monastic practice*.

[20] See Ch.III, *The recognition of the valley's sacredness*.

para consisted of paddy fields. The plots were let to Brahmans, Thamis, and Tamangs, according to a system that whatever the harvest had been, the owner's share was fixed (*kot*; ibid.:127). After every harvest, a group of nuns had to go to the fields to collect the gomba's share. In 1986, when the Guru Lama died and Lama Kelsang became the new abbot of Tashi Gomba, it was decided to exchange these fields in the Sunkosi river for fields closer by. Since then, the wheat had only to be carried up from Alampu, four hours away, and the rice from the paddy fields down near Sangba.

Another gift by Nim Pasang consisted of a small herd of *dzomu*, female yak-cow crossbreeds, which was taken care of by herdsmen on higher situated pastures. Their negligence of the gomba's cattle, however, reduced it by the year, and the reluctance of the herdsmen to deliver the fixed amount of butter to the gomba, brought the Guru Lama to sell the herd except for a few cows which were taken into the care of a Thami neighbour of the nunnery. Its produce was negligible.

In short, during the 1950s the donations and the funds, as well as the yield of land and herd, were not sufficient either for the improvement of the anis' living conditions or their day-to-day subsistence. The regular incomes received provided the anis with the most basic and necessary items for religious ceremony, the butter lamps, and buttertea and simple meals they were served during the four monthly *pujas*. The once-only governmental fund had at least made the replacement of their shabby hut possible. Under the Guru Lama, the donations rose, but had to finance further enlargement of the gomba. The *guthi* extended, and with it the amounts villagers could borrow and the interest they had to pay; but so did the community of Tashi Gomba, and the income of butter and food had to sustain a growing number of anis. Thus also in the 1960s the gomba could only support its nuns on days of collective rituals, and even then not all of them.

The land donation made by the Thakuri may have looked impressive, but according to Fürer-Haimendorf the harvest yield had to be "divided between the Guru Lama and those nuns who fully participate in the *gompa* activities" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:128). In other words, there were anis who did not participate in the collective rituals; which means that a division was created between those anis who were able to read the religious texts and who held, or were going to hold, an office within the nunnery, and those who were considered to be too old to learn to read and to enter the right of succession to posts.[21] In 1974, this selection excluded seven out of thirty nuns from having a share of the gomba land's yield, which only sustained the remaining twenty-three nuns for about two months besides the meal or two they were given at the four monthly *pujas* (ibid.:128).

The nuns, then, were highly depending on the support by their natal family. The anis who originated from outside the valley went to visit their family once or twice a year to collect a basket of potatoes or a bag of maize, material for a new robe, and household items. The anis from the Bigu valley were supplied more often with fresh fruits from garden and field, and products were often exchanged. Those nuns who had no family to support them - like orphans and old widows - had two other options. The first was to enter a servant relationship with another nun who was better off; the second option was to beg in the village. It has to be stressed, however, that these instances have been very rare in the past as well as at the present time. Fürer-Haimendorf only mentions one case of a begging nun, Sangesomu, who had no relatives to look after her (ibid.:140-41); during my stays at the nunnery I encountered no one doing so. A servant relationship usually occurs between two nuns who are relatives anyway, such as an orphan going to live with her monastic aunt or cousin. The poor ani would live with the older nun and do all the household jobs, including the gardening work and the fetching of firewood from the forests uphill. As a matter of fact, all novices start to live with a nun, who then taught them the Tibetan alphabet and the first *pecha* in return for services, but they usually move out after about six months whereas the poor novice tends to stay with her teacher and supporter for the rest of her monastic life.

I encountered three cases of servant relationships. Ani Maili has been the first Thami nun of Tashi

[21] In a next section, *The community's internal organisation*, I will expand on this new hierarchy based on knowledge and age.

Gomba (see also ibid.:146). Her father was a local shaman, who lived permanently in a pasture hut just below the gomba and the yield of his land was barely enough to sustain his four daughters (the mother died in childbirth). He had a few cows and buffaloes and by selling or exchanging dairy products and meat, he clothed and fed his children. When becoming a nun, Ani Maili went to live with Ani Sherap Omu, Kusho Tendzen's daughter,[22] with whom she was still sharing the same small room in 1994. Ani Sherap Omu, however, is on pilgrimage and ritual tours most of the time, only being at Tashi Gomba two months a year, so Ani Maili lives more or less alone. Ani Sherap Omu always brings her some material for a new robe, a new pair of shoes, a watch or some other present, and always a small amount of money. Ani Maili, however, always looks poor in her shabby robe and oversized shoes.

Ani Thupten Hoser, her mother and older brother and sister were left by the father who ran off with another woman. When the love couple returned after thirteen years with six children, the deserted mother had gone to live with a neighbouring widower and had left her former husband's house and land in the care of the children. When the father returned, the two eldest left for Kathmandu to work in a hotel. Ani Thupten Hosher, then thirteen years old, moved to her mother and stepfather, who were having three children. When she was eighteen, she fled her stepfather's place and asked the new abbot to cut her hair. He agreed and asked Ani Sonam (Ani Sherap Omu's half-sister) to take care of her. Neither her father - who did not want to care for his children from his former marriage - nor her stepfather support her with food or cash. Only lately, her father's second wife brings her eggs, flower and vegetables once in a while, under pressure from her oldest son.

Ani Thuli entered the nunnery in 1993. Like Ani Maili, she is Thami.[23] Her parents are tenants of the gomba land, and have always worked as day labourers for the nunnery, whether for threshing, butchering, or repair and cleaning jobs. As such, she grew up with the nunnery, and is now living with Ani Karma Sangmo, the Meme Lama's granddaughter.

In addition to their families' support, the nuns grew turnips (*mola*), potatoes, and a kind of endive for their own use in the tiny plots in front of their cells. Although the monastic vow implies a restraint from any agricultural labour, as it would effect the killing of millions of insects and thus the breaking of the oath not to kill, my pointing out the discrepancy between their vow and their gardening practices was only answered with a shrug, as if to say "what else to do? We have to eat, don't we?" Also Lama Kelsang, the Guru Lama's successor, remarked

> Yes, in former times, in Tibet, villagers donated enough money to feed the monks and nuns. In Kathmandu, we also receive enough money to do so. But here, the people are poor, so the nuns have to work in the fields as well. They have to live, and then it is the same as when you walk over a path or through fields. Also then you are killing many insects. We can't fly, can we?

Yet, the nuns had another, modest, source of income, namely the small payments they received for performing ritual services for lay people. Their religious practice during the 1950s, and the changes and extensions brought along by the Guru Lama will, however, be dealt with in the next two sections.

[22] See Ch.IV, *The monks' withdrawal.*

[23] And, like Ani Maili, Ani Thuli is also called by her Nepali name denoting her rank in birth (*maili*, "middle daughter"; *thuli*, "eldest, biggest daughter"). It cannot, however, be said that it is typical to call Thami nuns by their social name instead of (one of) their religious names, and thus drawing the conclusion that they are taken less serious than Sherpa nuns. A highly admired Sherpa nun is also known primarily by her social name, Ani Kancchi ("youngest, smallest daughter"). What these anis share is that all three spent most of their childhood at the gomba because their parents performed all kinds of small jobs for the gomba, so that they were known to the anis by their social names already for years before they became nuns themselves. Besides, Ani Kancchi happens to be small of stature, while Ani Thuli is a tall elegance.

*The village lama and a pragmatic orientation*

Kusho Pema and the Meme Lama may have remained responsible for the financial affairs of Tashi Gomba, but these two ex-monks could not have any religious authority over the nuns' community. This lay in the hands of the Drugpa Rimpoche's youngest nephew Kusho Tsetsu. The abbot of Bakang Gomba and general supervisor of all his uncle's gombas, however, had hardly time to visit and stay at Tashi Gomba; moreover, he was also the carer of the little boy who was recognised as the Drugpa Rimpoche's reincarnation. During the 1950s, Kusho Tsetsu's presence at Tashi Gomba was mentioned only once, accompanying the young Tulku on his first visit to the nunnery in 1958 (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:126). A flyer, calling for donations for the renovation of Bakang Gomba,[24] records that it had its last renovation in 1959. All this suggests that during the 1950s Kusho Tsetsu was far too occupied to be able to fulfil his task of *guru lama* at the small nuns' community in the Bigu valley.

Consequently, religious practice at Tashi Gomba during the 1950s entailed what the succession of lamas had managed to teach - which was not much.[25] Some nuns were able to read and memorise the few religious texts the Drugpa Rimpoche had ordered from Tibet. According to Ani Dorje Dolma, these were the *Diksha*, texts for purification rituals, and the *Bum pecha*, the "Book of 100.000 Lines" (*Prajnaparamita Sutra*; Samuel 1993:193). The nunnery had neither a copy of the *Kangyur* nor of the *Tengyur*, the canonical works of Tibetan Buddhism.[26] The two books the anis had at their disposal were read respectively at *Losar* (New Year) and *Buddha Jianti* (the Buddha's birthday). Very likely both Kusho Pema and the Meme Lama led these annual festivals, as well as the *puja*s on the four sacred days of the Tibetan month,[27] simply by participating and chanting the texts for the nuns to follow.

The Meme Lama may not have been allowed to act as a religious teacher within Tashi Gomba, but outside its walls he did his utmost to educate the Sherpa laity, and no lama was there to withhold him from also including the Bigu anis in these activities. Those anis who were able to read became his assistants and, together with the male lay students he gathered around him, they formed an impressive board at funerals rituals, memorial rites (*gyewa*), and *kurim*, a generic term for exorcising, curing and protecting rituals. Their main activity consisted of the reading of appropriate sacred scriptures. The spoken words of the Dharma had to expel demons, show wandering ghosts their way back to *bardö* or silence them when they acted out of the netherworld, to pacify upset *lü* (skt.*naga*, serpent-like guardians of soil and water), or to protect a house (*domang puja*) or a person who was about to set out for a possibly dangerous enterprise. Like in many an oral tradition, the spoken word has an inherent power, power exacted through its sound. In Tibetan Buddhism it is thus believed that the more mouths utter words of the Dharma, the stronger its effect will be (cf.Tambiah 1976; Tieman 1992). In consultation with the lay sponsor (*jindak*), depending on how many "mouths" he or she was able to feed, and to pay for, during a *puja* that could last for one hour to several days, the village lama decided what kind of *puja* was needed, its duration, and who would assist him in performing it.

Needless to say that the rituals performed by the Meme Lama, his lay students and the anis were largely of a pragmatic nature, in accordance with Samuel's definition of the "pragmatic" orientation in Tibetan Buddhist practice belonging to

[24] The flyer was distributed by Lama Kalsang on a trip to Germany as well as among his foreign visitors at his office in Kathmandu. It said that Bakang Gomba consisted of sixteen monks in 1995; a trifle compared to the about sixty nuns at Tashi Gomba. Several Bakang monks, however, had followed their abbot Kusho Tsetsu to Kathmandu to his new gomba in 1980, when he transferred the supervision to the Tulku, while Tashi Gomba started booming exactly in that year. See Ch. VIII, *Lama Kelsang and his scheme*.

[25] See Ch.IV, *The problems of language, teaching, and practice*.

[26] Only in 1986, the *Kanjur* copy was brought from Sailung Gomba to Tashi Gomba, after the Guru Lama had died (cf.Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:124). See for Sailung Gomba Ch.VII.

[27] See next section, *The Guru Lama and the karma orientation*.

> The realm of this-worldly concerns, conceived of in terms of interactions with local gods and spirits, and carried out by a variety of ritual practitioners, foremost among them being the lamas, who employ the techniques of Tantric practice for this purpose (Samuel 1993:31).[28]

After all, in order to consolidate his religious position among the Bigu Sherpa laity, the Meme Lama had to play on their needs in coping with death, illness and misfortune - the kind of concerns they had been used to turn to their shamans for. On the other hand, his emphasis on the reading of religious texts by as many "mouths" as possible, indicate that he also prospered clerical Buddhist notions of practice. Having been a monk himself and a student of the Drugpa Rimpoche, it is very well possible he also expressed "karma-oriented" interpretations during his lecturing his students and lays, emphasising the "ideology of merit" in relation to death and rebirth, and past and future lives (ibid.:31). Particularly with the Guru Rimpoche *puja* on every thirtieth day, he must have intended to create an occasion during which he could educate the laity in matters of religious merit and compassion, just as the Guru Rimpoche (skt.Padmasambhava) was said to have converted the Tibetan people to Buddhism. But precisely its lack of a direct this-worldly concern, if it were not for taking part in its *guthi*,[29] attracted but very few. Nevertheless, thanks to the Meme Lama the efforts of the Drugpa Rimpoche to "tame" Bigu to Buddhism were not entirely forlorn.

For the anis, however, the Meme Lama had been of vital importance. Not only had he extended their religious knowledge and activity, but in bringing them in regular contact with the laity through the performance of rituals, he ensured their reputation as religious specialists. If he would not have taken up the ambition to become Bigu's village lama, and would not have engaged the anis in his activities, Tashi Gomba's community would, once again, irrevocably have died out.

Nevertheless, the anis were considered to be the lowest in rank. As the presiding lama and teacher, it was natural for the Meme Lama to be seated higher than his students. Both laymen and anis sat on the same level, but the laymen flanked their lama, while the anis constituted a row facing them. This distinct positioning, as the Meme Lama explained to me, reflected the notion that every male student of the village lama was a potential village lama himself, a post no woman was ever allowed to take up. As such, the payments they also received differed. When the Meme Lama received Rps.30, his lay students would collect Rps.15, while the anis got only Rps.10.

In 1992, however, I witnessed the sponsors of a *Bum puja*, the reading of the "Book of 100.000 Lines", in a nearby village paying nine Bigu anis the same amount of Rps.200 as they gave to their village lama, whereas his two male assistants got only half of it. Being now treated equal to a village lama, and valued more highly than the "would-be village lamas", I only can conclude that during the past four decades the anis have become appreciated as religious experts in their own right. In other words, that the anis of the 1950s had lacked a religious identity as a community, but had been depending on the Meme Lama, the village lama. As such, they had been treated as "village anis".

One might ask how the Meme Lama received all his religious knowledge. We have to recall that he claimed to have studied with a Tibetan village lama, before he took his monastic vows with the Drugpa Rimpoche.

> I was working and living on the pastures, herding cattle. We had sheep, and *chaunri* [i.e. half-breeds], and yaks. Yes, we had many sheep. But I wanted to learn to read *pecha* [i.e. religious texts]. So I went to Tibet. But I didn't like it there and I came back.

Maybe he came back in 1935 because word had reached him about the Drugpa Rimpoche, maybe he only heard about him on his return. In any case, it was in Yelmu where he met the Rimpoche and became a

[28] See als Ch.I, *The paths of dharma*.

[29] See above, *Economic base*.

monk.[30] His teacher in Tibet, then, must have been a village lama, whose teaching how to read and chant the sacred Tibetan must have been through texts he used for rituals himself. Consequently, the Meme Lama's expertise as a village lama was largely based on these instructions during his youth, added to what he had learned as a monk from the Drugpa Rimpoche, his *guru lama*. Besides, one of his brothers founded a village gomba in Kalinchok, a day's walk to the south of the Bigu valley, to become its village lama. The two brothers visited each other regularly and may have exchanged texts and knowledge. Both were highly respected for their religious knowledge and devotion.

With the arrival of the Guru Lama, however, the Meme Lama's religious monopoly came to an end, and with it the anis' dependence on the village lama for their religious reputation and practice.

*The Guru Lama and the karma orientation*

When asking the older anis who had been teaching them the protecting, curing or exorcising rituals they performed either individually or in small groups, they would answer either the Meme Lama, or the Guru Lama, or an old or already deceased ani. Some of these rituals were still practised at the request of a lay sponsor, sometimes they were part of the (older) anis daily routine. Also in the anis' exposition on these ritual practices both pragmatic and merit-making intentions were given side by side.

*Sur* and *Tormathoong*, for instance,[31] are rituals against wandering ghosts. Ani Thupten Omu explains

> You have to do it at night, on smouldering embers. Not on a big fire, because the dead from the netherworld are afraid of fire. Like of dogs. Living people get sick when they encounter wandering ghosts. That's why they need to be fed. They are hungry, and will look for food everywhere. Every night I put milk, and curd, and sugar, and *tsampa* [i.e. roasted and ground wheats], and *ghi* [clarified butter], and honey into a bowl, and make many little balls out of it [fieldnote: "I only saw *tsampa* and water."]. Ten little balls are enough for one ghost. But before I bake the little balls on the charcoal, I first have to meditate. I have to make myself into a god, have to imagine I am Pawa Chenrezig [Skt.Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of Compassion]. And I read *pecha*. Only afterwards, I am allowed to cook the balls and to offer them to the dead. Yes, sometimes this dead person is a specific person, when a sponsor has come to ask for this *puja*. He has to supply the *tsampa*, and the butter, and so on. Four years ago, for instance, a friend became very ill, because her dead husband was bothering her. The lama found out they had not done *gyewa* for him. Those things happen to poor people. They are too poor to pay for *gyewa*. Then I was asked to dedicate my *Sur puja* to this friend's dead husband. They gave me *tsampa* for two weeks, so I did it for two weeks. But no, usually it's not for anyone specific.
>
> I also do *Tormathoong*. It nearly the same *puja*, but the *pecha* differs. And this one you do in the morning, at sunrise. It's mainly for the little children who are in the netherworld, because they are orphans, or because they died in an accidence [signals bad karma]. They have been playing all night and have become thirsty. If their parents don't offer them milkwater, then they suck on an empty tap and injure their mouths. That why we have to pour milk over the little balls constantly while reading the *pecha*. When I heard this story for the first time, I felt such pity for these little children that I wanted to learn this *puja* very badly. Besides, it's very good for my *dharma*. And afterwards, we throw the little balls around the *chörten* for the pigeons to eat. Sometimes the dogs eat them. That is no good. The pigeons can fly away, and spread the Dharma over the world.

[30] See also Ch.IV, *The problems of language, teaching and practice.*

[31] Unfortunately, neither *Sur*, nor the *Luthor* and *Tormathoong* given below, were an entrance in the literature I consulted; nor did I come across any description of rituals that matched what I observed and was told by the anis. Consequently, I have to rely solely on my own information here.

When Samuel states that "it makes little sense, in many cases, to attribute any particular practice to one category [of orientation] or another" (Samuel 1993:172), we find in the ani's interpretation of *Sur* and *Tormathoong* a fine example of both a pragmatic and a karma orientation. Compassion with (and mercy for) hungry ghosts make of these practices meritorious acts, "good for the Dharma" (read: *karma*) of the practitioner as well as for the whole universe. As such, most of the elder anis, who already had served their terms in the gomba organisation[32] and felt they had to prepare themselves for dying - i.e. to accumulate as much merit as possible for the rest of their life to secure a good rebirth - dedicated themselves to this daily routine of offering to the dead of the netherworld. In the example Ani Thupten Omu gives, however, *Sur* becomes a curing ritual. Two weeks of feeding the dead husband is presumably enough to get him off her sick friend's back. Here, as in all cases when a lay person sponsors with a specific deceased relative in mind, the ritual becomes predominantly pragmatic.

Although the karma orientation may have been taught by the Meme Lama as well, the daily performance of these rituals suggests that they were adopted by the Guru Lama as part of Tashi Gomba's monastic routine, now emphasising their quality as "*dharma* work". The integration pulled the anis out of the social realm of the village lama, back into the confines of their gomba. Besides, as they performed these kind of rituals on a daily basis, they became experts on these kind of rituals in their own rights. Consequently, the laity had the option to ask either the anis, or the village lama, or may be both - but then probably on an equal basis, as during the *Bum puja* I mentioned above.

A similar breaking-up of the village lama's monopoly occurred in the context of the *gyewa*. During the 1950s, this memorial rite had always been organised in the village gomba under the direction of the Meme Lama. In the next decade, however, *gyewa pujas* shifted into the nunnery. This was not the result of deliberate competition with the village lama enacted by the Guru Lama, but the simple consequence of the latter's religious reputation. Having been known as a very learned monk and once a student of the Drugpa Rimpoche, he must have attracted more sponsors than the village lama. The anis welcomed this development for it meant that, since a *gyewa* took place in their own gomba, all the anis were to participate and all of them would be offered a payment and free meals too, whether they could actually read or not.

The shifting of *gyewa* from the village temple to the nunnery, however, did not necessarily result in a total exclusion of the village lama. A *gyewa* I witnessed in spring 1992 at the nunnery inspired me to imagine how the Meme Lama and the anis may have come to play complementary roles in this memorial rite under direction of the Guru Lama.

At *gyewa* I observed at the village temple in 1994, the Meme Lama would sit inside with his students leading the ceremony, while, the laity wandered in and out the gomba, chatting and socialising over constantly served buttertea, *chang* (beer) or *arak* (liquor). They would all gather inside to occupy every inch of the small temple for two kinds of reasons: to accompany the sponsor with a repetitious chanting of *Om Mani Pe Me Hum*, the *mantra* of the Buddha of Compassion, during those moments when he or she is invited to make offerings (*chok)* and prostrations to the gods. Together they plead the gods for mercy and compassion, and "to show the dead the right path through *bardö* ". Also, the twice daily meals were served inside. The Meme Lama would take this opportunity to lecture on the meaning of *bardö*, on the importance of merit-making - as "a clean-washing of sin" - the karmic Wheel of Life and the six realms of existence. Only at the end of a ritual of one to three days duration, would the Meme Lama lead an outdoor ceremony. During this concluding rite, the *torma* (dough effigies) were brought outside and thrown on to a large fire (cf.Ortner 1978:108-9). Lured by the reading and chanting of the Meme Lama and his assistants, these effigies were to contain demons, who may have been attracted by the corpse to bother both the spirit on its way through *bardö* (trying to lead it astray) and the living.

Also during those three days of February 1992, the guests were strolling around the gomba square and

[32] See next section on *The community's internal organization.*

the kitchen building, drinking and chatting. The *gyewa* had been requested by a Bigu Sherpa whose wife was dead and cremated in Kathmandu, where they had lived for the past three years. The memorial rite was to cover the last three days of his wife's spirit through *bardö*, day forty-six to forty-nine. He told me he had preferred to have the *gyewa* at the

> *thulo gomba* ["big" gomba, i.e. the nunnery] because here were many anis who can read the *pecha* and I am able to pay them all. Only the poor go down to the *sano gomba* ["small" gomba, i.e. village gomba].[33]

At the big gomba, however, the guests were not invited to sit inside the *duang*; and neither was the Meme Lama. While the anis were reading and chanting, and the sponsor conducted his offerings and prostrations in front of the statues inside, the Meme Lama would gather the lay people on the verandah outside the *duang* to lead their *Om Mani Pe Me Hum*-ming. It was on the verandah too, that the laity was having their meals while the Meme Lama gave his teaching, making use of the frescoes on the porch walls. And above all, there was no big fire on gomba territory and no exorcism ritual. Instead, the *torma* were thrown away behind the temple hall to be eaten by the dogs, after which an ani waved an incense burner at the temple entrance.

During the *gyewa* at the nunnery, then, the Meme Lama was not so much excluded from the ritual as he was kept out of the temple hall. Added to the fact that he was nevertheless present to lead the congregation in their chanting part - and to give a teaching - as he would have done in the village gomba, makes clear that he and the anis fulfilled different tasks in the performance of this ritual. These different tasks emphasised a different orientation. In his capacity of village lama, the Meme Lama was to accommodate the pragmatic needs of the laity, who are only permitted as observers at ceremonies performed in a monastery and to pay reference to the gods and the lamas. Except for a sense of *communitas*[34] their collective chanting created - particularly important in the case of death - and expressed their compassion with both the deceased and the family, it also had to support the sponsor's plea to the gods to protect them against demons as well as to prevent the dead from becoming wandering ghosts. Monastics do not bother about these kind of this-worldly affairs in their collective rituals. The anis thus focused merely on the merit-making, i.e. the karmic part of the ritual, in order to secure a better rebirth for the dead woman.

It may well be possible that this fragmented form of the *gyewa* became common under the supervision of the Guru Lama. Like the exorcism rituals, treated above, he may have initiate a "clericalisation" (Samuel 1993:35) of the *gyewa* in favour of his monastic community.

Next to the "incorporation" of rituals the anis had learned from the Meme Lama, the Guru Lama also introduced new practices. The first to be mentioned was the annual *Nyungne*.

> Nyungne is explicitly a microcosm of the highest ascetic ethic of the religion, normally observed only by monks [sic!] and even higher adepts. The two renunciations of Nyungne, from food and conversation, embody the two basic dimensions of monasticism transposed into terms appropriate to the conditions of lay life. The abstention from conversation, symbolising the renunciation of social inter-

[33] It seems that the family of the deceased were free to choose whether they wanted to have a *gyewa* in *sano gomba* (the village gomba) or *thulo gomba* (the nunnery). However, with the growing of the ani community and, with it, the needed food and cash for their reward, more and more sponsors turned to the village gomba, the Meme Lama and his assistants. Until in 1993, the Tulku abolished the performance of *gyewa* at Tashi Gomba. The laity's drinking - and subsequent fighting - would disturb the purity and peace of the nunnery.

[34] Ortner describes how the *gyewa* in Solu Khumbu "are feasts which, in a variety of ways, deny social status and hierarchy" (1978:109).

course, parallels the monk's more dramatic actions of breaking completely with family and society, and foreswearing marriage and the formation of new family bonds. The abstention from food, symbolising the renunciation of sensuous gratification, parallels the monk's more dramatic vow of celibacy and the renunciation of sexuality (Ortner 1978:43).

At Tashi Gomba, this purification ritual - to accumulate merit and to "wash away sin" as its present abbot put it - lasted eight to sixteen days, when observed by the whole community of anis. It is always counted in couples of one day of abstention of food and conversation and devoted to silent prayers and prostrations, one day of collective prayer, and being allowed to talk and eat however only white, i.e. pure food (rice porridge, curd, cucumber etc.). As a collective ritual it was sponsored by one main lay person, who would give a payment to each ani and donate the bulk of provisions needed to feed them. The participants of the *guthi*, set up with the introduction of *Nyungne*, would return their loans as well as pay their interests in kind just before its performance. Their contributions, mainly butter and *tsampa*, were used for tea, butter lamps and *torma* (effigies). The Bigu Sherpas, however, may have supported the ritual, they did not participate in the observance of *Nyungne* like the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu have been doing as reported by Fürer-Haimendorf (1964) and Ortner (1978). Here, those in late adulthood and old people would observe the *Nyungne* restrictions and practices, in an imitation of monastic, ascetic life (Ortner 1978:35). In Bigu, on the other hand, only the main sponsor would join the anis - and lama, if present - and even then not to its full extent. He or she would renounce food and conversation on the appointed days, but, instead of the praying and prostrating inside the temple, would circambulate the temple hall while praying *mantra* on a rosary. No other lay person, whether *guthi* client or not, would do so. The reason is not simply to be found in my earlier conclusion, namely that the Bigu Sherpas were not particularly accustomed to religious, *dharma*, practice for *Nyungne* was only a recent introduction, by the Guru Lama - if we may believe the Meme Lama and Ani Dorje Dolma. Rather, the Guru Lama's attempts to create a solid monastic community with his anis excluded any participation by a laity - and certainly not inside the *duang*.[35]

If the Guru Lama was such a dedicated adept of the Drugpa Rimpoche, as oral history would have it,[36] then his introduction of *Nyungne* was certainly inspired by his *guru lama*. For it was said that the Drugpa Rimpoche had been dedicating his retreat at Phuma during the last years of his life in the performance of this purification practice. It may not be surprising, then, that *Nyungne* was not only practised collectively, once a year, but also became an option for individual retreat, *tsam*. With the permission of the abbot, an ani could be allowed to start a *Nyungne tsam* during the raining season. Its length would depend on her ability to supply herself with "white" food, her own capital and the support she might arrange with her parents and brothers, as well as her endurance - for, indeed, the physical demand of 108 prostrations to be performed every other day should not be underestimated (cf.Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:183; Ortner 1978:35). Usually, an ani would stop after the 32nd day.

Next to the *Nyungne* retreat, the Guru Lama taught the anis two other *tsam*. The shorter one called *Tsam Nyenba* is devoted to an emanation of Tara (Tib. Dolma), the consort of Pawa Chenrezig (Skt. Avalokitesvara) who is said to have sprung from his tears out of compassion for the suffering of living beings. During one month, the renunciate has to recite "the single most important canonical text of the

[35] It should be noted, however, that the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu observed their *Nyungne* practice in the village temple. Their religious practices have always been dominated by the Nyingma Pa, the "old school" of Tibetan Buddhism, with the non-celibate village lamas as their religious leaders. Nevertheless, according to Ortner the "ideals of monasticism", renunciation of lay, family, life and sexuality, "are [i.e. have become?] the highest ideals of Sherpa religion" (1978:44). In Bigu, *Nyungne* was never introduced in the village gomba. The Meme Lama did not even manage to popularise a one-day *puja*, let alone a initiation into monastic life lasting several days, what is more, exemplified by women the laity was only beginning to respect as religious experts.

[36] See Ch.IV, *The problem of authority*.

Tara cult, the *Hommages to the Twenty-one Taras*" (Beyer 1973:13), each day, and complete her day with praying the *Om Ami Deva Ri* mantra. This *pecha* is part of the *Kangyur*, the main body of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. As Tashi Gomba only got a *Kangyur* in 1986, I have to conclude that the Guru Lama brought this text with him on his flight from Tibet. It seems that he had a special bond with this deity. This may not be surprising because Tara is a central deity for both the Drugpa Kargyu subsect - in which he probably started his religious career[37] and to which the Drugpa Rimpoche adhered - and the Gelug Pa - by which he was trained several years, at Sera monastery in Tibet.

His personal devotion to Tara comes also to the fore with the relocation of *Tara puja* he initiated. As soon as his *simsung* (lama house) was redone, he moved this *puja* on the eighth day of each Tibetan month out of the *duang* and into the *simsung*.[38] No ani could tell me his specific reason for this move. Considering the meaning of this *puja*, however, some speculations could be made. This eighth day of the waxing moon was devoted to a specific emanation of Tara, Kurukulla, the most potent deity of subjugation, that is to the Dharma. In his "Magic and Ritual in Tibet, the Cult of Tara", Beyer describes this tantric ritual as a magical device of coercion by "killing" those who ignore or resent the teachings of the Buddha, attack the person of a *guru*, show neither love nor compassion, or hold perverted views about *karma* and its effects (Beyer 1973:301-10). As a collective ritual, it's aim is to convert, liberate, or "tame" all evil persons and malevolent spirits into the Dharma. As a tantric practice, the subjugating power the meditator gains through the visualisation of, and identification with, Kurukulla - and the Dakinis[39] - can be used with a specific person in mind. My suggestion is, that with the shift of this practice to the *simsung* its evoked powers could be directed towards the laity who sought the Guru Lama's blessings and advice in this same reception room. Moreover, as *Tara puja* lends itself also for more pragmatic oriented goals, like a desire for a child (think of the Thakuri who donated land to the gomba), this recurring, monastic ritual had the special attention of lay people. From a more sophisticated, karmic, point of view, it opened them up to its converting, *dharma*-enforcing powers. In this way, the Guru Lama may have continued the Drugpa Rimpoche's efforts to "tame" the Bigu Sherpas to his "higher" form of Buddhism.[40]

As a ritual against the three evils of ignorance, hate and envy - as an ani summarised it - but also against "those who break their vows and pledges" (ibid.:305), *Tara puja* could have served also as an disciplinary device for the anis. Once a month, it would remind them explicitly of the life they had chosen, and that in a room that left little space for distraction and relaxation. In addition, the Guru Lama gave most of the women whose hair he had cut a novice name that included "Dolma": Tsering Dolma, Pasang Dolma, Pema Dolma, etc.[41] As if their name had to remind them that they had to be like Tara, compassionate with all those who suffer, and consequently like Kurukulla, who ended all suffering by subjugating the ignorant to the Dharma. It would take, however, some more time until the anis actually were accepted as religious advisors.

The longest *tsam* the Guru Lama introduced is called after its main deity Dorje Sempa (Skt. *Vajrasattva*). It is the basic initiation into *tantra*, a purification practice consisting of four different actions, which have to be repeated for a whole month. The first month, as one young ani explained to me, was called *Tsak Bum*, after the 11,100 prostrations that should be done while reciting a four-line *mantra* to Dorje

[37] The Guru Lama was said to have originated from Kham (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:126). According to Beyer, Kham (in eastern Tibet) was dominated by monasteries belonging to this sub-school, "the *Drug Kajü*" (Beyer 1973:15-6).

[38] At the Guru Lama's time, the anis fitted into the *simsung*'s shrine room, but this room became rather overcrowded when the community grew in the 1980s. In 1993, the Rimpoche resettled the *Tara puja* back to the *duang* again.

[39] See Willis on these female "sky-goers", who represent "one of the most important, potent, and dynamic images/ideas/symbols within all of Tantra" (1987:57).

[40] See Ch.III, *The recognition of the valley's sacredness*.

[41] Although the anis receive yet another name when taking the vows properly, there are usually known and called by their novice name. The later abbot favoured "Thupten", Thupten Omu, Thupten Palmo, Thupten Dolma, etc.

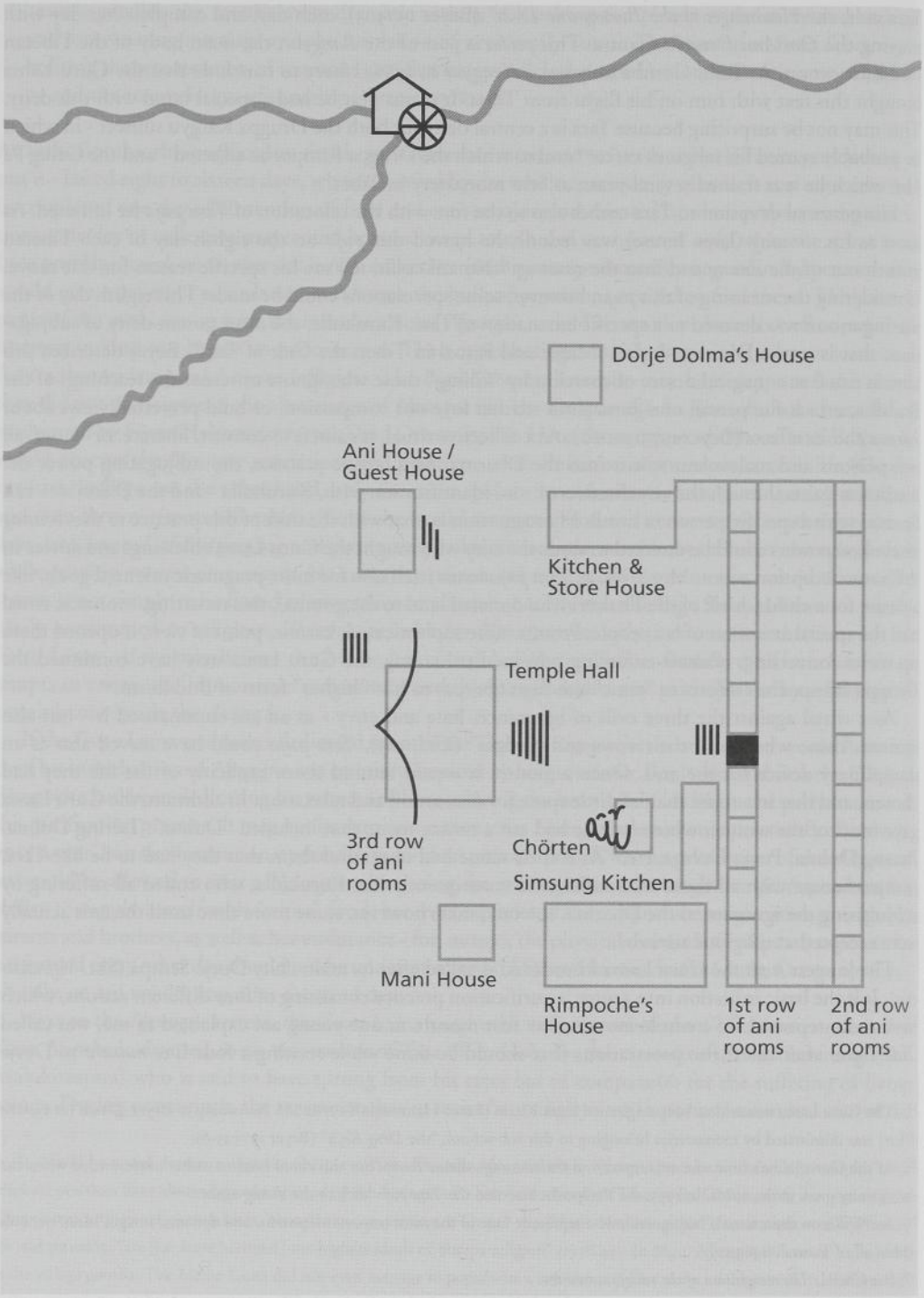



Figure 5 *Plan of Tashi Gomba in 1970*

Chang, a Buddha of Confession (Samuel 1993:222). The renunciate counts her prostrations on a rosary. The second month is called *Igja*, after the *mantra* of one hundred words they have to say 11,100 times dedicated to Dorje Sempa. The third month is called *Mendell* (*mandala*), after the *mandala* bowl of three rings, they have to fill, empty, and refill again - meditating on the impermanence of all things and beings - while citing another mantra to Dorje Sempa. The last month returns to Dorje Chang again, now called *Lami Landjur*. The preceding months focused on purification, "a burning of the sins", and offerings to the deities for help, as well as a more practical training of the mind in concentration. This last month is dedicated to the example of Dorje Chang. In him the anis have to see the Drugpa Rimpoche, their "root lama" (*tsawé lama*) and tantric master, "as an example of God in their own hearts". His mind has to become their mind, his heart their heart. During this meditation they have to concentrate on the throat *chakra*, "where all the lies and bad words come from, and then they have to think that they burn these lies and bad words in fire".

It will be clear that these retreats were only possible thanks to the privacy the anis could have in their own cells. When practising a *tsam*, she would lock herself into her small room, and put a small clay *mandala* on a shelf next to her door to warn another visitor not to disturb her. Nevertheless, in 1992 the anis complained about the difficulty of concentration. The voices and noises, and laughter of their neighbours were very distracting. As such, the later abbot's main project was to be the building of a separate retreat house, *tsam khang*, more uphill. In spring 1995, it was ready. It consists of four small apartments, each with a bathroom, a kitchen - where also the assistant was to stay - and a meditation cell for the renunciate. Because it can only house four nuns in retreat at a time, it is used by older nuns who do a one-year *tsam*, while the other nuns still perform their, shorter, retreats in their rooms.[42]

Particularly because of these retreats, the Guru Lama must have earned his title. When asked, the nuns would tell me that, in fact, their present abbot gives them more teachings and makes more disciplinary speeches than the Guru Lama did. Although both lamas had a Gelug Pa background, i.e. educated with an emphasis on the path of *sutra*, the Guru Lama was obviously much in favour of retreats, meditation and contemplation, the path of *tantra*. As probably his own desire to develop his tantric practice had brought him eventually to the Drugpa Rimpoche some twenty years earlier, he now was pursuing his *guru lama*'s lineage with the Bigu anis. In addition, it has to be noted that the Guru Lama also had to contend with problems of communication,[43] certainly in those first years. The Meme Lama had served as his interpreter in interaction with the laity, but it seems unlikely he also translated the abbot's religious explanations and instructions for the anis - which he did not state either. Perhaps Kusho Pema, although a layman now, was still respected enough as the former abbot and a Rimpoche to stand in once in a while, but most probably it was Ani Hishi Dolma, who claimed to have travelled to Tibet and was said to have been quite learned,[44] who assisted the Guru Lama in translating his Tibetan into Sherpa.

Furthermore, the Guru Lama's adopting of the exorcism rituals and larger ceremonies like *gyewa* and *Nyungne* established a bond between the nunnery and the laity, however with distinctions that only enforced the religious authority of the monk lama and his monastics. In due time, the anis gained in respect. It never lead lay people to ask an ani for advice in personal (religious) matters - as they would do with the Guru Lama or the Meme Lama - but certainly to a kind of reference towards them, and a trust in their religious knowledge and development. Parents gave their daughters permission to become an ani with more ease. They would also sent their sons to the gomba to study the Tibetan alphabet and some basic *pecha* for some years with one of the older nuns. This development, however, only started in the early 1970s.

The dispersed land property of the gomba, the changes and innovations of religious practice, and the growing amount of anis soon asked for a more effective management. This meant a division of tasks among the anis.

[42] See Ch. VIII, *Lama Kelsand and his scheme.*

[43] See Ch.IV, *The problems of language, teaching and practice.*

*The community's internal organisation*

When the Guru Lama arrived at Tashi Gomba, three anis were more or less in charge of the community's daily affairs. One acted as a head nun (*umse*), a second was the overseer of the gomba supplies and the kitchen (*niermu*), and a third took care of the temple hall (*konier*). In 1960, he expanded these three posts with several other offices, according to the traditional hierarchy within Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, and put into a line of succession.

The three anis who occupied the three posts before 1960 were presumably appointed by Kusho Pema when he became Tashi Gomba's abbot (*kempu*). Ani Tsangzum Sangmo, at least, stated that she had been *niermu* (kitchen nun) for seventeen years, until she was released in 1960 (Fürer-Haimendorf 176:144). The appointed head nun seems to have been Ani Ngawang Chutin, the Tamang nun who entered Tashi Gomba in 1943, whose age and experience had made her the best nun for *umse* - according to a young ani who took care of her during her last years at Sailung Gomba in 1994.[45] In practice, however, her job was probably focused on organisational affairs, the settling of disputes among the anis, and allocation of anis for rituals for lay people, in consultation with the Meme Lama. However, the leading of the chanting during communal *puja*, an important task of an *umse*, may well have been performed by Ani Hishi Dolma from 1952 onwards. Who had been the *konier* who also performed certain priestly functions during *puja*, nobody remembered.

In 1960, probably in concert with Kusho Tsetsu and Kusho Tendzen, a nun from Tsum Gomba was transferred to Bigu, to act as a teacher (*loben*) and to help with the nunnery's internal reorganisation as *umse*. Her name was Ani Tsering Yangdzum, but was called Ani Purbu by the Bigu anis. With her, a line of succession was introduced by which every *umse* would hold her position for seven years. After this term, her office passed over to the ani next in line, not of age, but of date of enrolment. Within this context also the distinction between *surba* and *thiba* nuns is important.

A novice can be six or sixty years of age when joining the community, while another could only be sixteen, but when the younger one entered a year earlier than the older one, the younger will be the first to hold an office. Yet another distinction excluded some anis from the right and duty to hold an office at all. *Surba* nuns might be compared to the christian lay sisters. They differed from *thiba* anis in that they no longer felt capable of learning to read and to memorise the religious texts. Commonly, *surba* anis joined the community above the age of forty, and often as widows.

Their social background, then, is often similar to March's "village anis" (1976:134) and Ortner's *genchu* (1978:35), as older women having decided to devote the rest of their lives to the Dharma. These, however, were not discriminated on the basis of knowledge and practice, for they were recorded to assist a village lama during rituals, and to take active part in the *Nyungne* ritual. Within the monastic community, however, they were discouraged in trying to learn how to read and, thus, to take full part in *puja*. Bigu anis held that persons beyond the age of forty are not able to learn new and difficult things such as an alphabet and another language. "My hair already turns grey, so my memory is failing me. I already have trouble to memorise *pecha*", or "my eyes have become bad. It is too tiresome to read", they would complain. Older novices were not expected to waste their time, but "to prepare themselves for death and dying" and a next life as an ani.

*Surba* nuns, then, were largely left to simple *dharma* practices like circambulations, prostrations in reference to the gods, and the praying of one-line *mantra* on their rosary. During communal ceremonies in the *duang*, they would sit with the other anis, again praying their rosaries, and occasionally join in with chants and prayers they memorised from hearing them being sung by the *thiba* anis often enough. During these occasions, they would be served buttertea and food from the gomba kitchen like the rest of the nuns. A share in the harvest as a gomba contribution to the anis' life subsistence, however, was denied to them.

44 See Ch.V, *The anis of 1952*.

45 See Ch.VII, *The rise and fall of Sailung Gomba*.

However, as in recent years no "old" woman had joined the community of Tashi Gomba, the distinction between *surba* and *thiba* disappeared. The younger nuns, who had enroled from 1980 onwards, only guessed the difference to be between those who had taken the monastic vows (*rabzung*) and those who had not done so, or not yet. While the women who could be assigned as *surba* at Tashi Gomba indeed had not taken the vows, this was not the criterion as Fürer-Haimendorf mentions that "some of the *surba* living outside the *gompa* precincts have taken the *rabzung* vow" (1976:136). The older nuns immediately pointed out Tashi Dolma - who entered as a widow in 1968, together with her ten-year old daughter (ibid.:138) - and Nim Pasang's widow as the two surviving *surba* anis of Tashi Gomba. By 1992, they were the only ones who could not read *pecha*, did not even participate in joined rituals, and had not held any office within the community's hierarchy.

I have used the phrase "taking the vows" as a synonym for "becoming a nun". This requires, however, some extension, as it might lead to confusion. When a woman's desire to join a monastic community is admitted by the abbot, he will cut a truss of her hair - to be finished off by an ani afterwards - and ask her ceremonially to take refuge in the "Three Jewels", *Buddha, Dharma, Sangha* and to comply with the rules of the gomba. Then, the lama blesses her and gives her a new name. With this ceremony, she has become a novice (*gyengi*, "living by virtue"). The *rabzung* vow, however, signifies a total commitment to the ten precepts and the eight *gurudhammas* (D.Paul 1979; Tsomo 1997). Besides, they have to swear they have never committed a major crime, like homicide, in their life, that they are not married and that they have the permission of their parents to take the vows. As such, the objections of the parents (or elder brother, or uncle, in case of an orphan) is not necessarily an obstruction to women from entering a nunnery, but it can be at their *rabzung* ceremony. Generally, however, parents have already accepted their daughter's choice by then. Most Bigu nuns, however, had understood little of the vows they had sworn. They said they were told to answer the lamas with the Tibetan word for "I will", and remembered only to have repeated this answer about twenty-five times, but nothing of the explanations they had been given with each vow.

A *rabzung* has to be administered by at least ten lamas of the rank of *gelung*. Whenever such an assembly occurs, whether specifically organised for a *rabzung* ceremony (usually in Kathmandu) or during a gathering at a pilgrimage site, the Bigu novices will take the opportunity to take the vows, while others may be wanting to repeat them in front of other lamas of higher religious esteem. In some cases, *gyengi* who take their *rabzung* have only been at Tashi Gomba for a couple of weeks, others may have been waiting for years to get the opportunity. "The requirement of scriptural knowledge", Fürer-Haimendorf noted in Khumbu (1964:143-5), however, never played a role in Bigu. The *rabzung* vow has an important religious significance, but had little effect on the clerical organisation of the Bigu community as it neither implied a spiritual or scholarly advancement, nor resulted in a change in status, rights or duties. The anis who have taken the vows received again a new name, but this second religious name was seldom used by, or even known to, the other nuns.

Although the *rabzung* vow is not a requirement to gain the right of holding a post in the community's organisational framework, all the nuns were given the opportunity to take the vows before they start their office careers. To be a *thiba*, however, has been obligatory, because some posts required the ability to read. Especially the post of *umse*, whose main duty is to lead the *puja*. She has to have an extensive knowledge of the scriptures, to know which prayers have to be recited and chanted in which order at specific rituals. Her voice has to be trained as well, for she is the precentor who also sets the pace of the chanting with the help of a small drum or a pair of cymbals. Besides, she also has to organise rituals requested by lay persons, and will, together with the lama, make a choice for the relevant *puja* to be performed - whether the ritual is meant to be for a cure, the initiation of a new house, directed against ghosts or spirits, to mention the most common applications - assigning the best day according to Tibetan astrology, as well as appointing the anis who enacts it. Especially when more than one ritual has to take place on the same date, it is necessary to compose teams of nuns who equal their ability of performing the ritual, or to

postpone a *puja* when it leaves too few nuns at the gomba itself. She also has the right to give nuns permission for leave, to go on a pilgrimage or to visit their family.

Although these decisions are often made in consideration with the *kempu*, abbot, she has to be one of the most knowledgable nuns of the community. Usually, a nun gains the necessary experience in the years before her becoming *umse*, but when the Guru Lama started to reorganise Tashi Gomba, he needed the assistance of a nun knowledgable of the ins and outs of monastic tasks, who was not available in Bigu at that time. This is why Ani Purbu was brought in from Tsum Gomba, which had a separate nunnery as an annex to its monastery. She guided the Bigu anis in their offices, and extended their knowledge of religious texts.

Ani Purbu held the office of head nun at Tashi Gomba from 1960 until 1967. "She died in 1968, one year after Hishi Dolma became *umse*", Ani Urken Palmo recalls. The succession of the *umse*'s position over the years was as follows.

| | *Umse* |
|---|---|
| Ani Purbu | 1960-1967 |
| Hishi Dolma | 1967-1973 |
| Dorje Dolma | 1973-1980; |

with Dorje Dolma, the *umse* term is shortened from seven to three years and an assistant, *utchung*, was added.

| | |
|---|---|
| Sherap Omu | 1980-1983 |
| Sange Gyelmu | 1983-1986 |
| Urken Dolma | 1986-1989 |
| Tserap Sangmo | 1989-1992 |
| Urken Palmo | 1992-1995 |

The two offices next in hierarchy were the position of *kutum* (or *gerku*), the disciplinarian, and of *niermu*, the kitchen nun. The *kutum* assisted the *umse* in several tasks, such as the appointment of anis for sponsored rituals, deciding when to have a break during long *pujas*, and deciding, together with the head nun, on the punishment given to a nun who broke a rule. According to Fürer-Haimendorf, minor offenses, such as "[c]ausing dissension among the nuns by telling tales", would be punished by a temporal suspension from gomba services and communal activities (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:134), which meant no accumulation of merit by partaking in rituals and no meals sponsored by either the gomba or a lay person. The suspension would be discontinued after the punished nun offered tea during an atonement ceremony (*mangse*) for all anis, which included 108 prostrations and the presentation of a ceremonial scarf, a *kata*, to the Guru Lama. For major offenses, such as theft, or a love-affair, a nun could be expelled permanently. However, before leaving she would be forced to wear a torn cap, called *tsapani*, and circambulate the gomba three times. After having been shamed publicly, she had to pay a fee to the gomba, which could be as much as 1000 Rps., in 1974 a lofty sum of money.

I myself, however, found the two *kutum* I experienced during their duties rather gentle. Torn caps were not remembered by any ani I asked, but they mentioned instead the use of whips in former days, a tough one for the major offenses, and a soft one for minor offenses. As they were not able to show them to me, I am afraid they were pulling my leg here. At some occasions, a nun would be seriously reprimanded by the *kutum* for not upholding the rules of silence, or for sitting on a elevated place such as a wall or a door step, during *Nyungne*. Also when improper behaviour towards men, leading to gossip, was assumed, the *kutum* would warn the nun in question in discrete privacy. Punishment for an acknowledged love affair, as Fürer-Haimendorf mentions, however, was laughed off.

Anis who have a love-affair just run away. Sometimes she, or her family, pays the fine after some years and also gives some money to perform *mangse* for her without her herself being there. Sometimes she just moves to Kathmandu and we never see her here again. You don't get a chance to punish her,

the *kutum* of 1994 remarked.

In fact, most cases of dissension, I witnessed, were often caused by the *kutum* herself, as the outcome of a disagreement between her and the *umse*. Conflicts and disputes between nuns were seldom arbitrated by the *kutum*, but usually by the *umse*. In unremitting cases, the abbot - or even the Tulku - will interfere, or, in their absence, a meeting with all the anis who had held the position of *umse* once would try to solve the problem, chaired by the Meme Lama. When we accept Fürer-Haimendorf's account on the *kutum* and the disciplinary measures she had at hand, and assume that the anis had their reasons for not recalling the instances rendered by Fürer-Haimendorf, we have to conclude that the *kutum* had more responsibility and authority during the 1960s than she had during the 1990s. This assumption could be subscribed by two factors. First of all, discipline was what the community needed during the 1960s in order to make the organise and ensure the changes the Guru Lama initiated. The ringing of the morning bell by the *kutum*, in which capacity she was called the *tilbu*, had been one of the innovations to discipline the nuns of getting up before dawn to start their morning prayers, individually in their own rooms. During the Guru Lama's absence in overseeing Sailung Gomba's construction during the 1970s, this habit bogged down, but by that time the morning prayers were already such a routine, and if oversleeping, a nun would be woken by her neighbour's activity in the anything but sound-proof rooms. Contacts with lay men, which had been frequent during the absence of an abbot at the gomba and during rituals for lay people under direction of the Meme Lama, became restricted and controlled. With the building of the two rows of rooms, with a porch entrance at the gomba-square side, men were forbidden to enter this ani compound, and certainly not to sleep there. Some nuns recalled a time when they were all told to stay overnight in the *duang*, because men were lodging in the guest house, even when they were only little boys. I have not been able to check this account, but problems with the vow of celibacy were not unknown in the history of Tashi Gomba.[46] Moreover, the community's image and monastic identity had to be safeguarded, particularly after the 1950s.

A second aspect of the *kutum*'s stronger authority may be derived from the fact that the disciplinarians of the 1960s had been older than they are since the 1970s. In the 1960s, many of the nuns were older than thirty-five years - as most of them had been older than twenty-five in 1952 - with a new influx of mostly young women between sixteen and twenty-four of age. As the term of this office lasted only one year, its succession went rather rapidly. In 1992, a nun was only in the *gomba* for eight years, and about twenty-six years old when she became *kutum*. The authority she had to radiate was in opposition to the socially accepted respect of age, so that she would seldom feel inclined to reprimand the older anis, that is, about half of the community. When necessary, she preferred to leave this up to the *umse*.

Besides assisting the *umse* in religious organisational matters, the *kutum* would also help the kitchen nun in organising teams of anis to fetch the harvest from the gomba fields and firewood for the gomba kitchen, and other labour-intensive jobs.

In addition, the *niermu* also holds her post of kitchen nun for only one year. Her responsibility consist of cooking and serving meals and buttertea on communal rituals to all the anis, and to receive guests properly with tea, *chang*, and meals. As such, she is also responsible for the processing of the gomba land's produce, such as the threshing and grounding of cereals and its roasting into *tsampa*, the drying of turnips, potatoes and tea leaves, the cleaning of butter, the making of *chang*, and to use the food supplies as economically as possible. Storage was on the upper floor of the kitchen, and in order to guard it, the *niermu* had to live in the kitchen during the whole year of her duty. In her tasks, she is assisted by the

[46] See Ch.IV.

*nieryok*, and by other anis when the jobs to be done needed many hands. The *niermu* supervised these activities, but also when lay people came to the gomba to sponsor a ritual. She would give them instructions on the kind and quantity of the food required, and manage the cooking and distribution of the food. The lay women involved usually help out with the preparations, and as they often have a close relative among the anis, this ani would help them and the *niermu* as well.

The *umse,* the *kutum*, and the *niermu* are the three nuns responsible for the management of the gomba, its resources, its division of labour, and the supervision of the nuns. The succession of the posts went from *kutum* (one year), to *niermu* (one year) to *umse* (seven years). Before becoming a *kutum*, however, an ani had to hold the post of *chöben* for one year, which consists of performing certain priestly functions during *puja*. She enacts the offerings to the deities, the burning of incense, the distribution of implements to the anis and lamas, such as grains, sacred water, and the bells (*ghanta*), at specific moments during the ritual. In addition, she had to supervise the preparation and burning of the butter lamps, and to manage the donations of lay people in return for butter lamps and *kata* (ceremonial shawls).

In her duties, the *chöben* is assisted by two nuns, who play the conch-shells (*tungba*) at the beginning and during rituals to invite the deities to join their performance of the Dharma, and by the *konier*, the sacristan. The *konier* is in the first place "responsible for keeping the *gompa* hall and altars clean and in good order" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:135), but has two additional religious duties too. She has to fill the water bowls in the *duang*, the *mani*-house, and the *simsung* in offering for the Gods every morning, and has to empty them every afternoon. The water, she has to fetch in a large brass pot from the well, "symbolises all the various offerings which according to Buddhist belief are the dues of the deities worshipped in the *gompa*" (ibid.:135). One hour before sunset, she performs solely a ritual for the *Srungma Chudin*, the protective deity of the gomba imaged by a terrifying painting in a wooden case in the right corner of the altar. With these tasks, *konier*-ship is a highly responsible job as it bears the responsibility for the benevolence and protection of the deities for the gomba; the *konier* works on a daily base as an intermediary between the gods and the monastic community. Knowing this, Fürer-Haimendorf's remark that "[f]or the post of *konier* the nuns usually choose a woman of no great intellectual ability, but strong and dependable, and above willing to take on what is undoubtedly the most onerous task in the maintenance of the *gompa* as a tidy and dignified place of worship" (ibid.:135) seems to me not only insulting the anis who I know to have been *konier*, but also is to be dismissed as definitely untrue. Besides, the anis did not choose the *konier*-to-be.

Whereas the succession of all the other offices followed a strict and obligatory line from

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Tungba* | 2 years | to |
| *Chöben* | 1 year | to |
| *Kutum* | 1 year | to |
| *Niermu* | 1 year | to |
| *Umse* | 7 years - after 1973, 3 years. | |

the position of *konier* was, until 1993, held on a voluntary base. I interviewed three nuns, who had held this post for many years. Two expressed their choice in very practical terms. The succession of all the other offices would take, after the reduction of the *umse* term from seven to three years in 1973, eight years. Due to the fact that the community witnessed more than one new member per year since the 1970s, the succession of the offices has been spread over as much as twenty years. By implementation of the Guru Lama, a *konier* could fulfil the obligatory years of offices consecutively, that is eight years. At the time of Fürer-Haimendorf's visit to Tashi Gomba, Ani Tuchi Dolma already held the office of sacristan for twelve years, thus having covered her obligatory years of duty. She "repeatedly expressed the wish of being replaced" (ibid.:135), but she had to wait another two years, before another nun was willing to

take over. Ani Kancchi was *konier* from 1976 to 1984, followed up by Ani Pasang Dolma from 1984 to 1992. The motivations of their choice were "to get done and over with the duties as quickly as possible, so that they would be free to do whatever they wanted ever after". In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the implications of this presumed freedom. It will suffice here to state that the choice for *konier* was not made on the base of the *konier*'s responsibilities and religious importance, as these were counterbalanced by, what Fürer-Haimendorf rightly stated as, the "most onerous task" in the community. It should be notified that a *konier* had no day off during all those years as the water offerings and the *srungma puja* had to be performed every day. Only in case of emergency, such as severe illness, somebody else might take over her task temporarily.

Only one nun expressed explicit religious motivation for becoming *konier*. In 1986, the Guru Lama decided to have a separate *konier* for the simsung, who would also be his caretaker and cook. He appointed one ani for the job, but when he died soon afterwards, she quit her duties, and the *duang konier* took that part back again. After a year, however, Ani Sonam Dolma became seriously ill, and the Tulku, according to her own account, suggested its cause was her disobedience. Filled with shame, she took up the job again, and bought additional water bowls for the shrine in the *simsung* to reach the sacred number of 108. She made the vow to fill and empty these 108 bowls one *bum* times, i.e. 11,100 times. After about three and a half years, she got so used to the routine, that she explained she felt a headache every time she did not perform the water offerings. All her energy and concentration were focused on the water bowls, and so she became one of the most devoted, but also most puritan, anis of the community. She openly condemned other nuns of their laziness and enjoyment of spare time, and even scolded visiting monks for the use of my radio.

The establishment of the offices not only organised the community, but, in holding these offices already from an early stage of their nunhood, the anis became a disciplinary device by themselves. From helping the *chöben*, to becoming responsible for religious actions, from helping the *niermu*, to being responsible for the produce and distribution, from assisting the *umse* as *kutum*, to leading the religious sermons and the religious community, each fully-fledged nun became educated in the economic, organisational, disciplinary, and religious tasks of the community, and learned to bear the responsibility for the well-being of their gomba. As the upkeep of a religious institution is interpreted as an act of *dharma*, a good execution of the duties, as well as the respect for those in office, were considered to render religious merits as much as religious practice in itself would pertain. This interpretation, however, served more often as a sop - by the Meme Lama and the present abbot - and a device by the anis themselves to keep their duties up while actually feeling fed up with them, than that the nuns considered it as religious practice *pur sang*. With the years, the community grew and the relations to the outside world became more complex. Many of the anis did not feel able to cope with the equally growing responsibilities, partly because they also felt they were lacking the proper knowledge to conduct their duties effectively: a knowledge of languages, of reading and writing, and of doing sums. Older anis complained that these duties kept them from religious practice proper. As such, the offices were very often experienced as a trial, a necessary evil. In the next chapter, we will see how these duties, together with the arduous construction activities, led to a generational conflict between the anis of 1952 and those who enroled after 1960. In Chapter VIII, I will return to the growing need for "secular" knowledge.

*Reflection*

The developments described in this chapter suggest a transformation of the nuns' community from a group of women held loosely together by the Meme Lama's activities as a village lama, into a monastic community led by the Guru Lama. Thanks to his efforts, and his personal reputation, Tashi Gomba acquired a religious reputation and identity of its own. Religious practices, the anis had learned to perform by the Meme Lama, were adopted into monastic practices or, to use Samuel's expression, "clerical-

ised". The separation of these rituals from the social realm into the monastic realm also procured the supplementing of the pragmatic orientation that dominated their usage for the laity, with a karmic interpretation of the rituals. This higher level of orientation both disciplined the anis into their monastic *habitus*, and emphasised their religious expertise vis-à-vis the Meme Lama and his lay students.

The expansion of religious practices, especially the meditational retreats, were, on one hand, only possible because of the improved living conditions of the anis which offered (more or less) each of them the privacy needed to meditate. On the other hand, they also caused a renewed influx of novices and, as such, more housing facilities for these newcomers. Similarly, the incomes of both the community as a whole, as of the anis individually increased - although still not sufficiently to support them on a daily basis, was nevertheless enough to create the impression of a flourishing gomba.

For the first time in its history, then, Tashi Gomba seemed to live up to its name as a "heavenly garden", where the Dharma would prosper as the Drugpa Rimpoche had wished for. In following his example, the Guru Lama not only continued to promote the Dharma among the Bigu laity, but also the path his *guru* had preferred, that is the path of *tantra*. However, this emphasis on meditation and retreat would already churn up the community in the following decade.

One could speculate on what would have happened if the Guru Lama had not returned to Bigu. The lack of a new influx during the 1950s suggests again a course towards extinction of the community in time. Perhaps the community would once in a while have attracted a widow, just as the life of a village nun had appealed to older women in other Sherpa areas, but I am inclined to think that the community would have dispersed and would finally have been reduced to a few nuns keeping up the gomba and its main activities as water offerings and burning butter lamps. This is now the case at Sailung Gomba, the monastery that was supposed to reduce Tashi Gomba to an annex of a monks' community. The impact of this gomba on Tashi Gomba of the 1970s, and the Guru Lama's role in it, are the subject of the next chapter.

VII

# Stretching Wings
## *Colliding Generations*

*Introduction*

During the 1960s, the Guru Lama had done everything that was within his power to construct a monastic *habitus* in Tashi Gomba. Thanks to his efforts, and his mere presence, the nuns' community gained a reputation of serious religious practitioners not only among the Bigu laity, but throughout the region. Both his personal repute and his religious instruction - notably his emphasis on meditation and retreat - however, contained the seeds of conflict which would germinate during the next decades.

The first event to bring the improvements at Tashi Gomba to a halt was the founding of Sailung Gomba in 1970. This new gomba was to complement the nunnery with a monks' community, equally under the Guru Lama's supervision. A second factor disturbing the religious community's newly established reputation resulted from the influx of young novices the Guru Lama's presence and innovation had brought about. The differences in motivation for, and expectation of, a life as an ani between those nuns who had entered before 1953 and those who had come after 1959 caused a true generation gap. Whereas the older generation learnt their lama's lessons on *karma* and adopted his preference for the path of *tantra*, the younger generation developed a taste for study and the exploration of the wider world. These different interpretations of a religious life came to the fore in the commotion around the *umse* (head nun) succession of 1973, and in what I will call the Dharamsala conflict among the anis of Tashi Gomba in 1976.[1]

As such, Fürer-Haimendorf's conclusion was already superseded the moment his essay appeared, namely that

> many of the nuns have travelled in India, Sikkim or Bhutan. Yet, these experiences do not seem to make them restless, and the nuns, at least, seem to be very content with their peaceful life at Tashi *gompa*. The large proportion of young nuns would seem to indicate that despite the awareness of the outside world there is as yet no trend away from monastic ideals such as has become apparent in the case of Tengboche and other monastic centres of Khumbu and Solu. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:152)

Fortunately, however, the Dharamsala conflict did not initiate an exodus comparable to monasteries in Solu Khumbu.[2] In fact, the population of Tashi Gomba would only increase substantially until well in the 1990s. The reason was that the anis may have become aware of the outside world, but the outside world was not yet intruding into their world. Except for Fürer-Haimendorf himself, who, particularly through his publication, may himself have played a role in the process of growing restlessness.

[1] See *The Dharamsala conflict* below.

[2] Devuche, Tengboche's annex of nuns, for instance, was already from the 1960s onwards waning. Ortner counted only thirteen anis in the early 1970s (Ortner 1983:101), while in 1995 Devuche only consisted of half a dozen aged anis (personal communication with Jim Schellenger and Tshering Sherpa). Devuche clearly did not attract new novices anymore, and as such resembled the Tashi Gomba of the 1950s.

*The rise and fall of Sailung Gomba*

The story of Sailung Gomba, the youngest shoot of the Drugpa Rimpoche's lineage at five-day hiking distance eastward from Bigu, is not only significant for the effects it had on Tashi Gomba, but also offers interesting comparisons to the nunnery's history.

About Sailung Gomba's founding Fürer-Haimendorf writes

> [...] there are indications that the influence of Kusho Tsetsu, and the dedicated nuns of Tashi *gompa* has been instrumental in the establishment of a new monastic centre at Sailung right in the heart of Tamang country. There used to be an old *gompa* inside Dorumba village, and some years ago a Tamang donated a site on a nearby hill in the name of Kusho Tsetsu, who provided the inspiration and initiative for the plan of establishing a larger *gompa* (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:153).

The major feature of Sailung Gomba was that it was a Tamang affair, not a Sherpa as Tashi Gomba had been. Not only did a Tamang man offer the land for the monastery to be built, but also

> local Tamangs of the Sailung area collected funds for the construction of the new *gompa*, and some people gave as much as Rs.200-300 or substantial quantities of rice to feed the construction workers (ibid.:153).

Tamangs are, like the Sherpas, a Tibeto-Burman speaking and Buddhist ethnic group said to have migrated from Tibet. Unlike the Sherpas, however, Tamangs were never engaged in orthopraxic forms of Buddhism such as renunciation, celibacy and monasticism (see Holmberg 1989). They never seemed to have maintained relationships with monasteries in Tibet, nor initiated the founding of monastic institutions, as the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu did. However, also in other Tamang regions a "gradual transformation toward monasticism" was noticed during the same period (Holmberg 1989:233). As in Sailung, where Fürer-Haimendorf granted Kusho Tsetsu the initiative of founding a monastery, in the Gorkha district a high lama also played a crucial role.

> The Dukpa [i.e.Drugpa, Bhutanese] school of lamas has become prominent in the greater western Tamang region through the activities of their millennial guru. He was a respected teacher until his departure at age ninety-six for more important Buddhist sites; during his residence - with two "nuns" - he held numerous retreats and initiated some fifteen Tamang lamas. He also embellished the lore of local geography by linking it to Buddhist prophesies and legend (ibid.:233).[3]

An equation of Kusho Tsetsu and this *guru lama* from Gorkha, however, falls short on the basis of the local population's acquaintance with monasticism. The Gorkha lama's appropriation of the local religious landscape and his reputation as a man of retreats resembles the activities of the Drugpa Rimpoche in Bigu in the early 1930s, since both men had to introduce monastic, clerical, Buddhism into an area that was governed by village lamas and shamans.[4] Sailung, on the other hand, was not as unfamiliar with monastic life anymore. Kusho Tsetsu's founding act was already paved by the very existence of Tashi Gomba and, more importantly, by the Tamang anis who were part of its religious community. I would like to argue, therefore, that only Kusho Tsetsu's position and authority as supervisor of the Drugpa

3 The "millennial guru" of Bhutanese origin, Holmberg mentions here, as well as the area of his activities, the Gorkha district in which also Tsum Gomba is situated, made me consider whether this *guru lama* may have been Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Tsetsu's brother who moved to Tsum after a love affair with an ani and was never heard of thereafter. Holmberg, however, offers no detailed information on which this idea could be substantiated.

4 See Ch.III, *The recognition of the valley's sacredness*.

Rimpoche's gombas granted him the honour of having founded Sailung Gomba, but that the actual work had been conducted by the oldest Tamang nun of Tashi Gomba.[5]

In 1953, Fürer-Haimendorf met two nuns from Tashi Gomba in a Tamang village on his way to Khumbu (see Fürer-Haimendorf 1964). Their "statement that in Bigu *gompa* Sherpa and Tamang nuns lived side by side, for I had been under the impression that these two ethnic groups, though both professing Buddhism, seldom joined in the creation of religious communities" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:122), in fact, had brought him to Bigu in 1974 for short-term research. The presence of Tamang anis at Tashi Gomba clearly predated a Tamang development towards monasticism, to a time when it must have been as uncommon for a Tamang woman to become a nun as it had been for a Bigu Sherpa woman. To join a Sherpa-dominated religious institution this far away from home, however, asked for a profound decision of the first Tamang woman in particular to set an example. Her name was Ani Ngawang Chutin.

Based on the little information available,[6] it seems that Ani Ngawang Chutin's personal history had been decisive in making her the first Tamang nun of Tashi Gomba. Before she became a nun in 1944, at the age of thirty, Ngawang Chutin had worked many years at the royal palace in Kathmandu as a maid. She was originally from the Charikot area - a five hours walk from Sailung. When she heard about Tashi Gomba, which was then still under construction, she requested leave from royal service from the King, which he granted. Two month later, she moved permanently to Tashi Gomba (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:139). Had she been "pushed into the position of serfdom or slavery as many non-Hindu indigens in the plains were forced to" (Bista 1991:42)? In any case, to this aging spinster already living away from her home and family for so long, nunhood seemed to be an attractive alternative.

Ani Ngawang Chutin seems to have maintained (or re-established?) contacts with her relatives in her home area, for she enjoyed the support of her two brothers who "send her cash, grain and butter" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:139). Whether they had done so from the day she had become a nun onwards - in other words, whether her status as a celibate, religious woman was accepted by her family from the onset - remains unclear. Fact is that for twenty years she remained the only Tamang ani at Tashi Gomba. Only in 1964 she managed to recruit another Tamang novice, a seven year old child for that matter, her orphaned niece (her brother's daughter). In 1966, a young Tamang woman became a nun "when in the company of some older nuns from Temal [?] she first visited Tashi *gompa*" (ibid.:141). In the same year, a Tamang widow from Sailung joined Bigu's religious community after "[t]he Guru Lama and Kusho Tsetsu had visited her village and had accepted her as a nun", to be followed by her brother's daughter in 1969 (ibid.:145). They all originated from the same area between Charikot and Sailung. What is striking is that not one Tamang woman from the Bigu valley has ever joined the nunnery, although the valley knew several Tamang families.[7] The family network of Ani Ngawang Chutin, then, seems to have been crucial to the recruitment of Tamang anis.

Ani Ngawang Chutin, however, was not only engaged in recruiting and fund collecting activities in her home area. She must have been the key figure in Sailung Gomba's founding, since Tashi Gomba also had several Sherpa anis from the Sailung area, but it had been a Tamang, and not a Sherpa, who donated the land for the monastery. One might ask what had motivated her. No doubt, Ani Ngawang Chutin was a very religious woman; perhaps she wanted her people to convert to the monastic Buddhism she had come to known. Perhaps her reasons were based on ethnic grounds, maybe Tamang and Sherpa anis did not live harmoniously side-by-side as it may have appeared to Fürer-Haimendorf. Understandably, there

[5] In this context I wonder what the role of the two "nuns" Holmberg only describes as companions of his "millennial guru" (1989:233; see quote above) has been in their guru's founding of the "Dukpa school". Despite his writing "nuns" between inverted commas, they were important enough to be mentioned.

[6] See also Ch.V, *The anis of 1952*.

[7] Dorje, Dawa's husband, was surprised to hear Tamangs were Buddhist people too, for in Bigu they were always taken for Hindus since they never had shown any interest in Tashi Gomba nor in the Buddhist rituals performed at the village gomba.

are no reports on dissensions between the nuns of Tashi Gomba based on their ethnic background - since this past belonged to a social world that was renounced by their vows - during those years, urging Ani Ngawang Chutin to enact a separation of Tamang and Sherpas anis by fighting for a Tamang gomba in their home area. However, in 1986 a dramatic event would bring Sailung Gomba to a fall, which evidently led to disturbed relationships between the Sherpa and the Tamang anis, and between the Sherpas and Tamangs of Sailung.

To understand what happened to Sailung Gomba in 1986, we have to return to the Tamang man who is considered to be the lay founder of the monastery. Whatever Ani Ngawang Chutin's reputation and actual role may have been, the Tamang's willingness to agree to such an unusual act as founding a monastery had to be based on a strong personal inclination too. Although we came to know little about this man, it was in fact the 1986 event that revealed his political agenda, a motivation which made him in many ways comparable to the lay founder of Tashi Gomba, Nim Pasang.[8]

In 1986, the Guru Lama died at Sailung Gomba. A Bigu Sherpa, whose father had been a close friend to the Guru Lama, recalled,

> Nepal was not a democracy then yet - it is now, since four years - but at that time it had the *panchayat* system. The king was the only ruler, but each *panchayat* could choose its own village *panchayat* chairman. Then, just before the Guru Lama's death, there were elections, and a Tamang man wanted the lama to support him publicly. But the lama did not want to. He said that, as a lama, he did not want to get involved with politics. The Tamang man got very angry with him. I do not think that he really killed or poisoned the lama, but due to these events the lama had a heart attack, or something like that. A week after these quarrels, he died. That is what my father told me.

Where this Sherpa tried to avoid an accusation of murder, a Sherpa ani (now in her sixties) made the Tamang directly responsible for the Guru Lama's death, by shifting the date of his passing away immediately after the Tamang man visit. She still had to suppress her indignation.

> The Guru Lama died on the day when people from a certain party came to ask him and his monks for their votes. He said he did not care for politics, and he did not care what his monks would do. He did not want to vote. But of course they knew that if he would not vote, his monks would not either. One Tamang went to see him at night, to persuade him, and in the morning his monks found him dead. He sat like a Buddha, as if he was meditating, but he was dead.

The old painter, the Meme Khepa - who had been working on Sailung Gomba's frescoes, but had not been there during these dramatic event - even mentioned the occurrence of violence.

> When the lama refused to vote for the Tamang, this man got very angry. He said the lama owed that to him, because he had donated so many things to the gomba. When the lama still refused, he went away but came back late at night with his gang and they stole all the statues and all the *pecha*. They plundered the gomba. The Guru Lama became afraid and locked himself up in his upstairs room. The next day, they [i.e. police officers] found him there, dead. They took Sange Lama [then a monk at Sailung] to the police station, to make a statement about the Meme Lama's death.

From the Tamang man's insistence on the support of the Guru Lama and its monks I conclude that Sailung Gomba played a major role in his political rally. This was hardly limited to his efforts to collect votes for the elections of 1986, but must have already been reasoned the Tamang's initiative in founding

[8] See Ch.II.

the gomba in 1970. Certainly he knew the "success story" of Tashi Gomba of a Sherpa eventually becoming *mizar*.[9] Perhaps Ani Ngawang Chutin reminded him of it in order to ensure his support; perhaps he even had met the lay founder of Tashi Gomba, Nim Pasang, personally, or the latter's son and grandson, the actual *mizar* of the Bigu valley on their regular visits to the district's capital, so close to Sailung. His political ambitions were clearly as strong as those of Nim Pasang, and most probably based on the same grounds. For, although the Nepal state had undergone a big change with the demise of the Rana regime in 1951, on local level "the rivals for power in the village in the 1970s remained the direct descendants of the most prominent headmen of the Rana era [...] local Bahun (Brahman), Jaisi Bahun, and Chetri" (Holmberg 1989:47). The Tamang man, however, was not running for *mizar*, the best position available to a non-Hindu like Nim Pasang in the 1930s, but strived for the position of *pradhan panchayat*, chairman of his administrative village: not a governmental designation, but an eligible position for which he needed votes from the local people.

Taking into account that Sailung and its surrounding villages also had a substantial Sherpa population, it is obvious that the Guru Lama's political support was instrumental to the Tamang man assuring Sherpa votes - the votes of the Sailung monastic community in itself would hardly make a difference, since it only consisted of six monks, two Tamang, four Sherpa. The Tamang man, however, did not reckon with the Guru Lama, a man of high principle when it came to the monastic rule of renouncing the social world, and certainly of political involvement which would only cause a disturbed state of mind and fractions within a monastic community.[10] The Tamang's pressure turned out to be counter-productive, to say the least. Whether it involved physical violence or not, his insistence and the abbot's passing away shortly after were interpreted as cause and effect by the Sherpas of Sailung, and of Bigu. Needless to say that he never made it to *pradhan panchayat*.

The Guru Lama's death and the Sherpas blaming the Tamang man and his supporters for it had severe consequences for both Sailung Gomba and Tashi Gomba. For one, both gombas lost their abbot. The Guru Lama was replaced by Lama Kelsang, the *kempu* of Yelmu Gomba and Kusho Tsetsu's assistant and interpreter who from the late 1970s onwards started to travel around the world to give teachings and lead initiations.[11] This latter occupation already left him little time to spend at Yelmu, let alone to divide his time among three gombas in Nepal's foothills at considerable distance from each other. Tashi Gomba had become a thriving community by that time, so he tried to spend at least a month per year at the nunnery. Sailung Gomba, however, was left to fizzle out. Of the six monks, one became Lama Kelsang's assistant in Kathmandu, three left the robes, and only two already aged monks remained. They were joined by an old nun from Tashi Gomba, Ani Ngawang Chutin.

She was not the only ani who moved to Sailung. Already during Sailung Gomba's construction phase, both Sherpa and Tamang nuns of Tashi Gomba who originated from the Sailung area were sent there for help.

> There was the intention that the *gompa* should ultimately be staffed by monks, but as it takes time to collect sufficient monks for the establishment of a new monastery, nuns from Tashi *gompa* have taken it on themselves to look after the new religious centre. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:153)

That was observed in 1974, and no doubt the Sailung anis continued to spend a few months a year in Sailung until the gomba's *ramne* (consecration) by the Tulku in 1981. What is conspicuous, however, is that none of the Tamang nuns who were in Fürer-Haimendorf's listing, were still at Tashi Gomba at my

[9] See Ch.II, *Nim Pasang for mizar*.

[10] A discussion on whether monastics should participate in elections or not became again an issue in 1994. Then the nuns of Tashi Gomba decided to bring out their votes (See Ch.VIII).

[11] See Ch.VIII, *Lama Kelsang and his scheme*.

first visit in 1992. When I inquired about them, the older anis would answer evasively that Ani Ngawang Chuting had died and the others had left the nunhood. At that time, they did not tell me that Ani Ngawang Chutin had moved to Sailung Gomba. Nor did they tell me whether the other Tamang anis of Tashi Gomba had accompanied her to Sailung. They only volunteered that the Tamang anis of 1974 had left nunhood. Had they left the robe and Sailung Gomba, because they were disappointed about ani life at the new gomba; because they were not welcome at Tashi Gomba anymore? Had they gone voluntarily, or had they felt forced to leave for the Tamang gomba, being Tamang themselves? For Sailung Gomba had become identified as a Tamang gomba. Once I asked a Sherpa ani from the Sailung area why she did not stay at the gomba there instead of Bigu.

"Sailung is a monastery, for monks."
"But there are also *anis*, aren't there? Two other anis from Tashi Gomba are living there now."
"Yes, but they are Tamang; I am Sherpa."

The two anis mentioned were the only two Tamang nuns I met at Tashi Gomba in 1992. They were of a later generation. One became a nun in 1971, only seven years old, and was made a nun by her parents. She remained living with her parents, until the Tulku send her to Tashi Gomba in 1981. She was the only Tamang who seemed to have survived the turbulence of 1986. Perhaps the fact that she had only recently started her eight-year term as *konier* (caretaker of the temple hall), had made her stay. In 1993, however, when her *konier* term was finished she was sent to Sailung Gomba - much to her dismay - to take care of the *duang* there, and the two old monks. Her cousin, who had become an ani at Tashi Gomba in 1988, was sent with her.

Equally, Sailung Sherpas considered Sailung Gomba as Tamang, and as such not suitable for the *puja* they wished to sponsor.

"Why aren't you sponsoring *Thoongchö* at Sailung Gomba?" I asked two Sherpa *jindak* from Sailung.
"Because there are far more anis here than there" one of them answered. The other man added, "and Sailung Gomba is a Tamang gomba."

A full discussion on the subject was evaded, but the message was clear. Sherpas and Tamangs seem to have chosen sides after the 1986 election, with a long-lasting hostility between the two ethnic groups.

To conclude, two last remarks on Sailung Gomba's impact on Bigu's nunnery. What would have happened if the Guru Lama had not died at that time, so soon after Sailung Gomba's consecration, is an unanswerable question. It should be noted, however, that the Bigu anis complained they had not seen much of their abbot and *guru lama* at their own gomba ever since Sailung Gomba was founded. This might be understandable considering the fact that he had to oversee the gomba's construction. On the other hand, the fact that Sailung Gomba was set up as a monastery, that is for monks, and that it owned a copy of the *Kangyur*, one of the Buddhist canonical texts, which the monks read with the Guru Lama, is significant. Tashi Gomba never had this text, and the Guru Lama also did not seem to find its purchase necessary. Considering the fact that he introduced many minor texts, of which most were introductions to meditation practices, I am inclined to think that he thought the *Kangyur* not suitable for the anis. In other words, it seems that his emphasis on the path of *tantra* he advocated at Tashi Gomba may have been a gendered choice. This impression is fuelled by remarks the present abbot of Tashi Gomba made in my presence concerning the anis' capacities as religious specialists.[12] Nevertheless, Sailung Gomba's *Kangyur* was transferred to Tashi Gomba in 1986, where they were but venerated as sacred books, stored in the lama house, but never used. Because its letters in red made them hard to read, it was said. In 1993, the

[12] See Ch.VIII, *Lama Kelsang and his scheme.*

Tulku brought another copy of 108 volumes, with black letters, which the nuns now read every summer. The abbot, however, has no time to explain, and to stimulate discussions on, its content.

Finally, the Bigu anis involvement in the construction of Sailung Gomba became an important issue at their home base. It stirred up the dissensions between two generations of nuns. Let us first have a closer look at these two generations.

*Recruitment*

As we have seen in Chapter VI, the community of Tashi Gomba did not receive any novice between 1952 and 1959. With the Guru Lama's arrival, however, the nuns' community experienced a gradual growth. According to Fürer-Haimendorf's rendered life histories (1976), ten women became nuns between 1959 and 1965, eight between 1965 and 1970 (among whom three widows), and seven between 1970 and 1974 (one widow). Together they made up a community of twenty-nine nuns in 1974, of which eight belonged to the older generation.[13]

The majority of new anis were young women of marriageable age, which reflects the changed image of Tashi Gomba from a mere place of refuge for widows and orphans to a religious community with prospects for a younger generation of nuns. Four of these young anis were children of a village lama, shaman, or ex-monastic; most of them had, not surprising, a relative among the nuns. The Guru Lama seems to have played an active role in recruiting nuns for his nunnery. He had asked a Sherpa man who had become a close friend to send his seven year old daughter to the nunnery. She was Tsering Dolma, whom we will meet more extensively in the next section. In another case, he urged Ani Dorje Dolma to become a ritual friend, a *mitini*, of a young Sherpa girl from Sailung to assure the latter's interest in nunhood and eventual became a nun. He seems to have persuaded parents to let a daughter go, who had already knocked at his door with the wish to become a nun, by telling them it would be a sin to keep their daughters from a life of *dharma* if she really wanted it. Parents still preferred their daughters to stay at home until they got married. Nevertheless, the community gained a respectable size thanks to its abbot's reputation and supervision.

However, his teachings of the 1960s which emphasised meditation and retreat, and his extended absence from the nunnery since the founding of Sailung Gomba took its toll.

*Problems surrounding the umse succession*

Since 1970, the Guru Lama spent most of the year in Sailung. According to the nuns, he only came back to Bigu for about two months a year, between April and June, to supervise the yearly transfer of duties and the sponsored *Nyungne* rituals. An ex-monk of Sailung stated that the abbot had not shown his face for many years in Bigu. Obviously, the Guru Lama had put all his time and energy in the new gomba and left Tashi Gomba in the hands of the Meme Lama and the *umse* (head nun). The Meme Lama had already been assisting the Guru Lama in the previous years, and naturally continued to take care of the administrative affairs of the nunnery. Its daily affairs, however, were foremost in the hands of the *umse*. The problems which arose from this for the Bigu anis' new experience of responsibility - of a community of nearly thirty - came to the fore with the transfer of the *umse* office in 1973, but had their prelude at the first *umse* transfer in 1967.

In 1967, Ani Purbu was eventually succeeded by Hishi Dolma.[14] Eventually, because this transfer of duty did not go without blows being struck. According to the line of seniority (of fully-fledged nuns), there were three candidates for the office of *umse*: Ani Hishi Dolma, Ani Dorje Dolma, and Ani Sange Gyelmu, all of whom had entered in 1952. Fürer-Haimendorf writes, that "there was no consensus among the nuns" about who should be the next head nun, so

[13] In 1979, Kunwar counted 32 nuns, and a decrease by 4 in 1981 (Kunwar 1986:57). From 1981 onwards, the community started to grow steadily again to 44 in 1985, to 60 nuns in 1994.

[14] See Ch.VI, *The community's internal organisation.*

> the Tulku, who had come to Tashi *gompa* for the occasion, arranged for each of the three names to be written on a piece of paper. He then made each slip into a ball and placed the three paper balls on a dish which he half covered with a scarf (*kata*). Raising the dish, he prayed to the gods and then moved it in such a way that one paper ball after the other fell out. The nun whose name was on the paper ball emerging first was to be *umse*. Hishi Dolma's name came out first, and I was told that the two other candidates wept with disappointment. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:133)[15]

At the end of Ani Hisi's seven-year term in 1973, however, again a choice had to be made between Ani Sange Gyelmu and Ani Dorje, but

> neither Sange Gyelmu nor Dorje Droma wanted to become *umse*, and the latter canvassed the name of Sherap Omu [...], who is relatively junior but extremely gifted and popular. The Tulku who had come to Tashi *gompa* consulted all the nuns, and they unanimously recommended the appointment of Sherap Omu as *umse*. (ibid.:133)[16]

However, the Tulku did not choose to break with rule of seniority in the *umse*, so he appointed Ani Dorje Dolma. But he did yield to the anis in creating a separate *umse* assistance office, *utchung*, for Ani Sherap Omu. As Ani Hisi had been ill quite often, this newly introduced post would be able to stand in for the *umse* in case of emergencies, and at the same time would prepare the assistant for a full take-over of the head nun's position.

What strikes me about these succession quarrels, is the eagerness of becoming *umse* in 1967, and the disappointment by Ani Sange Gyelmu and by Ani Dorje Dolma, followed by a reluctance to take the office over from Ani Hisi seven years later. In my view, there are two approaches to this change of attitude. The first is what I would call a monastic-cultural interpretation, the second is more connected to notions of responsibility and duty, a social-organisational issue.

*The forty-year itch*

When I asked Ani Dorje Dolma why she had not felt much for becoming *umse*, she confided in me that by 1973 she already felt too old. After having learnt the *tsam* practices, she wanted to devote her life to *dharma* as fully as possible and retire from as much responsibilities towards the nuns' community as possible. In 1973, however, Ani Dorje Dolma was only 39 years old! But the imagery of the age of forty as a dividing line in life is a very common and accepted one, at least among the anis of Tashi Gomba.

Forty is the age when the grey hairs begin to show. "Grey hairs itch", one ani explained while a young ani was seeking through her bristles, as if she was looking for lice, to pull the grey hairs out. Anis who already turned grey at a young age felt embarrassed and, nowadays, colour their crew-cut black with rinse shampoo they get in Kathmandu.

Forty is not an age to start new enterprises, but to rehearse what you already know, as a preparation for death and the next life. Ani Pema Dolma expressed her discomfort with reaching her forties by asking me: "Aren't you worried about getting old? You are already thirty-three. You know, our time is running out. Death is coming very close". Ani Sonam Dolma said, "Life is fun until you are twenty. After that life is suffering, and after forty it's all over." This nuns' image of a life cycle is definitely different from how

[15] See, for instance, Ekvall on divination in decision-making, *Pra PHab* ("lot fall") and the use of paper balls (Ekvall 1964:258-269).

[16] I doubt whether we should take Fürer-Haimendorf's appointment of the Tulku as the decisive authority in both the 1967 and 1973 *umse* transfers for granted. It could have been just as well the Guru Lama, who in 1967 may have avoided any accusation of preferring one ani above the other. He had not been at Tashi Gomba when the three anis entered nunhood in 1952. Or it could have been Kusho Tsetsu, for that matter. The anis usually only referring to "Lama-la" or "Rimpoche-la" could be very confusing to me too.

laywomen see it. When I asked two neighbours in their sixties whether they also experienced life as over at forty, they started to laugh.

> Are you crazy? Then it only begins. Then your children are grown up. Your daughters are married or big enough to take care of things in the house. Your son has married, and brought a wife into the house. When you are forty, life becomes more easy. You have much more time for leisure, to visit family, to see your children who live in Nepal [i.e. Kathmandu]. When you are really old and you cannot do anything anymore, because your body aches, and you feel helpless and fully depending on your children, then you are old, and death can better be soon.

Nuns, having renounced motherhood and family life, did not experience such phases in their life. Theirs were connected to the different positions they were to hold within the community but, in general, life as an ani was felt as ongoing, repetitive, to a large extent boring. "What happened around here?" our young monastic friends would reply, shrugging their shoulders, whenever Dawa and I returned from a short break in Kathmandu. "Nothing. The only thing that happens is that we die sooner or later." And the first sign of this "sooner or later" was the greying of their crew-cut, the first and most obvious sign of the decay of their body, and, more important, of the mind's slowing down.

Anis over forty years of age did not welcome new knowledge, but when forced upon them they would accept it reluctantly. "When you study in this life, but you don't have the talent, or you are too old to understand or to memorise it, it doesn't matter. It will be of use in your next life", Ani Sonam Dolma explained. Upon which Dawa remarked, "it sounds like a bank deposit." When, however, the Tulku asked Dawa and me to organise courses in Nepali and English, Ani Sonam and other anis reaching middle-age refused to take part. They said their minds were already too full with *pecha*. They were afraid they would lose their memory of the religious texts when learning something entirely new. Others complained of fatigue when having to read too much. This attitude was clearly initiated, and stimulated, by their abbots. When discussing which nuns were to join our classes, Lama Kelsang said, "well, you ask all the younger ones, except those who have duties. Not the older anis, because it is better for them to prepare themselves for death. They better do *tsam*." The preoccupation with death and rebirth, and past and future lives forms the essence of what Samuel called the "Karma Orientation" (Samuel 1993:26). In order to ensure a good rebirth, one has to get rid of sins (*digpa*) committed in former lives and in this life, and subsequently to accumulate more merit (*sonam*). In Lama Kelsang's words, "it is like dyeing cloth. You first have to wash the material, before colouring it. Otherwise, the dye won't stick properly". *Dorje Sempa tsam* - introduced by the Guru Lama[17] - for instance, aims specifically at the extermination of accumulated sins. *Nyungne tsam* - also performed by the Drugpa Rimpoche during the last years of his life - focuses particularly on the accumulation of merit, to secure a rebirth as a human being and, when repeated, is believed to bring one even to the level of a Rimpoche or a heavenly being.

The older anis I questioned about their hopes for a next life often wanted to be reborn as a man, and hopefully one with the opportunity to become a monk; others' ultimate desire was to be reborn "as a God in heaven".[18] In order to achieve a state of being such as these, they had learned they had to meditate as much as possible. However, the duties they had to perform in and for the community held them from extended retreats. They only could devote themselves to *tsam* between the subsequent offices they were to hold and after their *umse* term.[19] For the first generation anis, however, time became pressing. At the time they had finished the duties of *tungba, chöben, kutum* and *niermu*, they were already approaching their forties. The *umse* term of seven years then had still to be gone through. No wonder nuns like Ani Dorje Dolma tried to get away from this obligation.

[17] See also Ch.VI, *The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.*

[18] The youngest generation of anis expressed during my fieldwork yet another, significant, alternative. See Ch.VIII.

[19] See Ch.VI, *The community's internal organisation.*

In 1967, the position of *umse* as the right hand of the Guru Lama then still seemed to be a desirable position. Those in turn were still in their early thirties. By 1973, however, Ani Dorje Dolma and Ani Sange Gyelmu already started to feel the forty-year itch. They wished to intensify the life as a monastic renunciate, by renouncing the outside world as much as possible, by going into retreat. This inward focus, however, was diametrically opposed to what the position of *umse* requested of them, especially from 1970 onwards. Not only did the Guru Lama's involvement in Sailung Gomba's establishment render the next *umses* more responsibilities than were used to, and felt capable of. Also, the changing outside world asked for more interaction between the social and the monastic realm. In addition, the introvert interpretation of the older anis countered the expectations the younger generation cherished of nunhood. The ground was cleared for a true generation gap.

*A new generation*

Without the Guru Lama present, Ani Hishi Dolma had to bear the responsibility over the nuns' community to a large extent alone. Of course the Meme Lama took care of the gomba's financial affairs, particularly concerning the *guthi* (gomba loans) and the management of the gomba land, but probably also advised in ritual requests by lay people, so the *umse* found in him a prop and stay. Or perhaps one might state that the Meme Lama was the one largely in charge of the gomba, and she merely his voice towards the anis.[20] Ani Hisi Dolma was not remembered as a strong, authoritative woman, but rather as sickly and reserved. The decision of the Tulku (or Kusho Tsetsu or the Guru Lama) to make her *umse*, however, was not surprising. Before she joined Tashi Gomba, she had been on pilgrimages to monasteries in Tibet, and had learned to read, and also write a little, Tibetan. As such, of the three nuns in line for *umse* she must have been the most qualified; for the religious tasks of a head nun, that is. However, a year after the Guru Lama had left to spend most of his time in Sailung, the Meme Lama went to India, leaving Ani Hishi Dolma and the anis all by themselves.

In 1971, Bigu and surrounding areas had experienced a serious famine (cf. Kunwar 1986:89). Dor Bahadur Kharka, who was Bigu's *pradhan panchayat* at the time, managed to organise food aid by the government. Wheat, rice and potatoes were transported from the Terai to Kathmandu over the new Arniko Highway, that had become ready only a year before (in 1969). From Barabise, the bags were carried up to Bigu. The potatoes especially turned out to be of such a better quality than those cultivated in Bigu, that the Meme Lama decided to import its seeds. On his quest he first went to the Terai, but ended up in the Punjab. Only a year later, he returned and made a small fortune with seeds he had obtained at British agricultural development farms.

The year without both the Guru Lama and the Meme Lama must have highlighted the necessity of a decisive *umse*, one with the authority and self-confidence to manage the community. During my stay, I witnessed several arguments between the head nun, the disciplinarian and the kitchen nun, about appointments for rituals to be performed at lay people's homes, about the division of labour during harvest, for threshing, for fetching fire wood for the gomba kitchen, for taking care of the cow, and so on. Their disagreements could lead to each side swearing like fisherman's wives on the gomba square, or calling on other anis to take their side. Constant gossip could be heard about their functioning. Ani Tserap Sangmo, for instance, who was *umse* in 1992, was much criticised for her inability to speak proper Nepali and to negotiate with officials and village council members. Whenever the Meme Lama was not there to receive them, she preferred to hide away in her own room, her *utchung* to act in her place.[21] Ani Urken Palmo, who followed up Ani Tserap Sangmo up as an *umse*, was much respected by the nuns, but still complained

[20] The Meme Lama had not returned to the robe yet.

[21] She also refused to talk to me the very first time I went to see her for an interview. Although not hiding from us, she told us Ani Sonam would do the talking because her Nepali was not good enough. Only during my return in 1994, when her *umse* term was over, she dared to invite us without an "interpreter" and jabbered away.

Whatever you do, it's always wrong. There is always someone complaining 'you should have done this, you should have done that'. There is always someone who knows better. The Rimpoche [i.e. the Tulku] shortened the *umse* term to only one year last year [in 1993], and I begged him to let it start with me. That would have made me done already last year. But he didn't let me. He said I had to finish the whole term of three years, and that the change would only start after me. But perhaps, I can reduce my term to two years. One year less. Being an *umse* is very difficult. We also have to start the chanting, we always have to be in good voice. No, I want to quit as soon as possible.

I could extend these kind of complaints with those of disciplinarians and kitchen nuns as well who felt bullied by the *umses*. Also in the 1970s. Tsering Dolma's brother recalled his sister's stories,

the older ones told the young ones to do all kinds of hard work, and then the young ones said: 'why don't you do it yourselves?' And then the older ones replied that they had done much harder jobs than that before, that it was their turn to concentrate on *dharma* and that their [i.e. the young ones'] time would come later.

The younger generation, however, did not feel like waiting until "later", that is until they were *umse* themselves and thereafter. Already from the onset of their life at Tashi Gomba they felt disappointed in their lives as anis. Because their main motivation to become a nun was not to avoid a life of marriage and motherhood, as had been the older nuns' drive.[22] Theirs was a desire for learning, inspired at first instance by the image of Tashi Gomba as promoted by the anis themselves. Ani Urken Palmo, the *umse* also quoted above, explained her disappointment during the years following her taking the vows in 1964.

I thought it would be like a school. Everyday reading and teachings. That was what I grasped from the stories the nuns told me when they stayed overnight at our house in Dolangsa whenever they went to fetch the rice from the fields near Barabise. They told stories about the Guru Lama, and how they had to read *pechas* everyday. Besides, we heard that Bigu had a school [since 1955], but in Dolangsa the council had only one a couple of years ago [1985]. I always thought it was the same, the nunnery and the school. Only when I was here, I learnt they are two different things. Anyhow, there was one ani, we became good friends, but she was much older than I was. Now, she is dead already. One day, I decided to come here, to become an ani. I had to run away from home, because my parents didn't allow me, they needed me in the house. This ani took care of me. She also went back home with me later, to ask my parents' consent. She taught me. But it was not like a school at all here. It was hard work. First, the building of the new *simsung*, then the kitchen.

Ani Genden Dolma, a Sherpa from Sailung, recalls

When I was very young, I already didn't care about parties, music and dancing. Everybody was eagerly looking forward to festivals, to the gatherings and entertainment, but I didn't. Already as a little girl, I was always intrigued by pujas, on funerals, at gyewas. I always went to watch the [village] lama or other lamas come to perform a puja. Sometimes I hid myself, to peep, to look anyway, when it was at someone else's home. As long as I could hear them, I was happy. I loved the sound of prayer, of the reading of the pechas, immensely. And I always dreamt of being able to read the pechas myself, and to sing as beautiful and to perform such pujas myself.
Then the Khamko lama, the Guru Lama, came to Sailung, with a couple of monks and nuns. One of those nuns was my mother's sister, and I adored her. She was so pretty in her red dress. I wanted to

[22] See Ch.V.

wear a dress like hers as well. I just run away from home to Bigu, to the Guru Lama (in 1969). He called my father and told him it would be a sin to object me becoming a nun. Then I was allowed.

Already a year after her becoming an ani, however, she was sent back to Sailung together with the other anis from her home area, like the Tamang anis and her mother's sister (Ani Sange Gyelmu), where they were to work on the construction site of the new gomba. They only returned to the nunnery during the monsoon and the cold winter months, during which she was taught the basic *pechas*.

Ani Sange Gyelmu must have told her young niece similar stories of a studious ani life as Ani Urken Palmo's friend, Ani Sangesomu, had done. The reality of Tashi Gomba, however, showed a different picture. It should be not surprising, then, that in 1973 the anis - especially after the agitated early seventies - tried to leave Ani Dorje Dolma and Ani Sange Gyelmu to their path of retreat and pushed Ani Sherap Omu forward as the next *umse*.

Ani Sherap Omu was the illegitimate daughter of Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Tsetsu's brother, who left his monastic lover pregnant and moved back to Tsum Gomba in 1942. Ani Sherap Omu became an ani in 1961, at the age of eighteen. Her being the daughter of Kusho Tendzen gave her opportunities other nuns did not have, for she regularly goes to Kathmandu to visit Kusho Tsetsu, to accompany him all over Nepal to perform rituals, and to listen to teachings of high lamas during these occasions. Besides being a very intelligent woman, she learned much more about the scriptures than any of the other nuns, and was much more triggered to study than the other Bigu anis.[23] Since Ani Sherap Omu was, in addition, also known as a strong personality, she would have made the perfect *loben* (religious teacher) and *umse* in 1973. Nevertheless, the Tulku (or the Guru Lama) decided to stick to the rule of succession, and appointed Ani Dorje Dolma as *umse* for the next seven years, with Ani Sherap Omu as her right hand.

Ani Dorje Dolma was remembered twenty years later as a good and sensible head nun. Still, she was not able to control the growing dissatisfaction among her anis.

*The Dharamsala conflict*

Based on the nuns' travel stories, and the postcards and photographs of pilgrimage sites they had visited, which they treasured in their private shrines and in little albums, the *Kalachakra* in Bodh Gaya in 1973, led by the Dalai Lama, was their first pilgrimage. While the Guru Lama remained at Sailung, and Ani Dorje Dolma in her first year as *umse* had to stay at Tashi Gomba, the majority of the anis went in the company of the Tulku, Kusho Tsetsu and Ani Sherap Omu.

Mullin describes how for this tantric initiation he "joined a crowd of a hundred and fifty thousand Himalayan Buddhists" from "Ladakh, Lahoul, Spiti and Kinnaur on the west, to Sikkim, Bhutan and upper Arunchal Pradesh on the east, all of whom practice Tibetan Buddhism" in the winter, late in 1973 (Mullin 1991:15-16,27). To give an idea what kind of event the *Kalachakra* is I render here his account, since I never participated in one myself.

> Most public Kalachakra initiation ceremonies are preceded by five or six days of essential Buddhist teachings. These usually begin at about noon and continue until dusk, with everyone sitting on blankets in the sun, the children playing games between the islands of adults. Mothers breast feed their babies while older people snooze discreetly in the shade, the steady melody of the Dalai Lama's rich voice flowing over them in waves from a network of loudspeakers. [...] After these fundamental teachings have been given the actual initiation process commences, beginning with a day of lama dances, in which the place of initiation is claimed and consecrated. This is then followed by either two or three days of initiations, and generally a day of spiritual celebration in the form of a *gurupuja*

[23] In 1992, she borrowed my walkman to listen to tapes of teachings, she had attended at various initiation ceremonies and *Monlam*, "Wish Prayers". In 1994, I brought a walkman as a gift to the nunnery for general use, but she soon confiscated it. "They [i.e. the other anis] can come and ask me for it."

ceremony, in which the lama gives his parting advice to the crowd. Finally the entire group of however many thousands of initiates lines up and files in single column through the temporary chapel in which the Kalachakra sand mandela has been constructed, and then past His Holiness in order to receive an individual hand blessing.

[...] The entire event traditionally takes place over a period of ten or twelve days [...] (Mullin 1991:28-9).

It is not difficult to imagine how impressive this event must have been to the Bigu anis. For many of them it had been the very first time they had left Nepal's foothills. The trip to India by bus from Kathmandu, all those pilgrims gathered at one site, to be at Bodh Gaya as such - the place where Gautama sat under the bodhi tree and reached the state of Enlightenment, "where the Buddha became a Buddha" the anis would say. Friendships for life were made (*mitini*),[24] especially with nuns from nunneries in Pokhara, Chitwan and Tsum (Nepal). The apex, of course, was to see the Dalai Lama, to hear him speak and to get his blessing by the touch of his hand.

You know Hishi Norbu ("Wish fulfilling Gem" as the nuns call the Dalai Lama) is Avalokitesvara? They say that when you touch his shadow you can be sure to be reborn as a human being. His shadow is already so powerful that it melts away all your sins. Have you ever met him?

an ani asked me. "Yes", I said, "by coincidence. He was in Holland once for a big meeting with all kinds of business people. The tickets were horribly expensive. But then, one day I nearly bumped into him on the street, when he was exploring the Red Light District with a guide and two monks." Fortunately, she did not know, and did not ask, the meaning of "red light". "Then you are saved by his shadow too."

When I asked an ani who had financially supported approximately twenty anis to go to Bodh Gaya, who had paid for the bus and their food, she said "the Rimpoche". "Which one, the Tulku or Kusho Tsetsu?" "Both, I guess. I don't know. But for the food we didn't have to pay anything. People would come and give us food. Everyday."

When three years later, in late 1976, a similar *Kalachakra* ceremony was organised in Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama's place in exile, in India. Of course all Bigu anis wanted to go. The choice of who was allowed to go, however, caused a lot of resistance. The gomba had to remain staffed, not only by those holding an office, but also an additional group of anis was needed to perform *puja* both within the gomba as outside, on request of lay people. The ani who was to make the selection was, of course, the *umse* Ani Dorje Dolma. She tried to be reasonable in letting go those for whom it would be their first *Kalachakra*, and telling those who had already been at Bodh Gaya to stay. Objections were raised by the latter, as well as by those anis who, after three years, again were holding an office. If not now, when would they finally get a chance to meet the Dalai Lama?

In 1994, I witnessed similar dissension among the anis, this time on whether they were allowed to go to a big *Monlam* ceremony in Lumbini, Nepal. The Tulku, who was visiting Tashi Gomba over the winter, gave about thirty nuns leave to go to Lumbini. Three nuns were visiting relatives outside the valley and eleven were in charge of the gomba, which left another fifteen nuns in case lay people came to ask for a *puja*. As I was told, however, the Tulku had promised them that in case no request for a *puja* was

[24] In Nepal, this kind of friendship between men (who become each other's *mit*) or women (*mitini*) is accompanied by a ritual of an exchange of gifts and a *kata* (ceremonial scarf). Interestingly, the individuals involved should be of different *jat* (caste or ethnic group), but become "siblings" with the ritual. In practice this also means that the mutual parents have to treat a *mit* or *mitini* of their children as if they were their own children. In addition, a *mit* or *mitini* is not allowed to marry his friend's biological brother or sister. Cf. Fürer-Haimendorf, who mentions this "system of ceremonial friends (*thowu*)" (Tib. *thokpo*) as a confirmation of a trade relationship (between men; 1964:15), who "regard each other as brothers and their children are forbidden to marry" (ibid.:48).

made within four weeks, they were still allowed to go to Kathmandu where a bus would take them to Lumbini.

When Dawa and I returned from a short interval in Kathmandu, the fifteen nuns were still there. The tensions were rising as the day the last bus was leaving was coming closer and closer, but without the Tulku's giving his word of release. A couple of nuns accused the *umse* and the others in charge for not letting them go out of envy. The Tulku observed the slanging matches of the two parties from behind his window, on the *simsung*'s second floor, but restrained from any interference as if he was testing them. Finally, he called all nuns present into the *simsung*, and told them it would be better for all of them to stay as Dawa and I were going to teach Nepali and English. He promised, however, that they would be the first to be selected for Lumbini next year. Dawa and I felt rather awkward about this situation, feared being blamed for giving the Tulku reason to hold them back. Indeed, for a few days there was a lot of gossip going on behind our backs. However, the classes started the day the last bus left Kathmandu, and the subject "Lumbini" was not touched upon again.

It turned out that two anis used the trip to Lumbini to leave Tashi Gomba altogether. They disappeared after the ceremony, to join two Bigu anis who had already headed for Mysore after a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in 1993. This "tradition" of running off originated with the Dharamsala *Kalachakra* in 1976. According to the brother of one of the anis who did not return from Dharamsala to Tashi Gomba, the tensions between the older anis and the young ones built up. The anis in charge tried to soothe them by saying that would get plenty of other opportunities, but the younger anis refused to accept this.

> That is when they decided to leave for Dharamsala, a whole bunch of them. But that wasn't easy either. After some time their money finished and they had to do some work. Then you can marry as well, it makes no difference.

The brother's sketch makes us believe that all twelve nuns had left nunhood after the *Kalachakra*, and had intended to do so from their very onset, but this was not the case. His sister volunteered afterwards.

> We went with a small group. Some stayed, others went back [to Bigu] again. I have stayed there nine or ten months, but in the meantime I ran out of money. I had taken seven thousand Rupees with me. After that, I stayed for three months in a gomba with only foreign nuns. With one of them I became close friends and she took me into her room and she paid everything for me. But she had to go back home and I was back on the street again. That's when I went to Chö Pema. I knew people from Bigu living there, but they were not relatives. I wanted to work there and save money to return to Dharamsala after about two years. But then I met my husband. I married him. My husband was also from Bigu.
> "Why did you all wanted to go to Dharamsala so badly?", I asked her.
> "Oh, we wanted to see more of the world. We were young. Now, I think I wouldn't do it again, but we wanted to see more. We had heard life was much better there, more possibilities and so on. And we were young."

I told her of the young nuns who had left Tashi Gomba recently, after Bodh Gaya and Lumbini, and that they had written to me their motivation as being a quest for more education.

> "Was that also the case with you?"
> "Sure, also. More teachings, more *pecha* to read, more lamas, more rituals. Yes, of course."

It was impossible to question the anis who were already around in 1976 about the Dharamsala event, who had gone, who had left. Ani Urken Palmo, who, despite the fact that she was mentioned as one of the Dharamsala group, denied her participating,

Why do you keep asking about Dharamsala? Only because Tsering Dolma left? There was nothing special about it, except for her not coming back. We went three times to Dharamsala, once every few years. For *Kalachakra*. I never went there. The first time I was ill, the second time I was *niermu*, and the third time there was something else, I don't remember. The first time, Ani Sherap Omu and Ani Tashi and others went. Only the second time, Tsering Dolma went. And she stayed.

Ani Thupten Chuckey, when I found out that she was Tsering Dolma's youngest sister, shrugged, "why should I have told you? Is it of any importance now she left?" She herself became an ani in late 1974. After a while she returned to the subject, showing me pictures of her sister with husband and son,

It was not good news. So, why should I tell you. Look, this my sister. She was only eight years old when she became ani. Until she was about thirty or thirty-two. She went on pilgrimage to Dharamsala, together with another sixteen anis from Bigu. There is where she met this man from Pari. The others came back, Genden, Kanchi, Urken Palmo, Pema Dolma. But she didn't. But she is still doing a lot of *pujas*, you know. From inside, she is a very good person and does a lot of *dharma*. Only her clothes changed. She is very talented, and it was her who took the initiative to go to Dharamsala, to get books and teachings. Fifteen anis supported her and they left. Only when they were on their way, the Rimpoche [the Tulku] gave them his blessing and permission.

Both Ani Thupten Chuckey and Ani Urken Palmo stated that only Tsering Dolma choose to stay. Her brother, however, as well as Tsering Dolma herself, gave the impression that more anis did not return to Tashi Gomba. When checking Fürer-Haimendorf's list of anis of 1974, not only the Tamang anis were missing, but three Sherpa anis too. Chembal Chindu, Kusho Pema's daughter, had become a child nun in 1963. The anis were only willing to say that she left for India some years ago. Her elder brother was already in the service of the Dalai Lama in 1974 (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:142). She may have joined him in 1976. Karsang Dolma from the Jiri area (ani in 1959) had a father who disappeared to India after she was born. She had no relatives who supported her, but had to depend "on alms and fees for ritual services" (ibid.:143). Dharamsala may have offered her more security. Sange Chiring (ani in 1970), whose father was a village lama close to Bigu. Her brother was a monk who stayed with the Tulku in Bhutan in 1974 (ibid.:144). Karsang Dolma and Sange Chiring were said to have left for marriage, but none of the anis seemed to remember when. In 1976, perhaps? And the Tamang anis, released from their construction work at Sailung Gomba during winter, did they choose neither to return to Bigu nor to Sailung? A Sherpa villager, who had been taught to read *pecha* with Ani Dorje Dolma (the *umse*) as the time, gave his view on the Dharamsala event.

Only three came back, as far as I can remember. Pema Dolma, Kanchi, and Genden Dolma. The others married. They went away. The rules at the gomba are very strict and many of them could not handle it. And then the others started to abuse them. That's when they left. And also, the gomba had much land here and there, and they had to go there to fetch the harvest. Perhaps they thought it too heavy work and they left and got married.

Naturally the Dharamsala event was discussed much in the village as well. Even after twenty years, a father who refused his daughter permission to become an ani rendered his motivation as follows.

Nowadays, when the girls grow up they understand better what life is all about. That's why they want to spend the rest of their life to *dharma*. Although I don't think *dharma* has much to do with it. They think, from outside, that it's a kind of school. But when they are ani they are disappointed and run away with a boy friend. Once, ten anis ran away. Eight of them got married and only two came back.

During the late 1970s, many parents may have, like this father, deterred their daughter's desire for nunhood based on the Dharamsala event. Using their interpretation of the anis having run away to Dharamsala for marriage in particular, they rather liked to keep their daughters at home than to see them marry someone far away and, therefore, out of their control. The figures Kunwar offers, however, show an increase of the community to thirty-two nuns in 1979 (Kunwar 1986:57);[25] from which I may conclude that Tashi Gomba had not lost its appeal among young women themselves. Unfortunately, it is irretrievable how the Guru Lama and the anis explained the recent drop-outs to them. If there was any past event that was definitely considered a non-topic, it was exactly the Dharamsala issue. Because only a couple of months before, the anis had been given a tough lesson in discipline - if we accept the story Tsering Dolma volunteered[26] - which was to vow in front of *Mahakala* never to share any disturbing information about their community with any outsider again. The outsider, who had caused the Tulku's displeasure with the anis' frankness was, of course, Fürer-Haimendorf whose essay on Tashi Gomba appeared earlier that same year. One might even speculate whether there was a cause-and-effect relation between the Tulku's reprimand and the Dharamsala conflict. I can imagine that his criticism enforced feelings of responsibility and authority among the older anis, and influenced their decision of which anis were disciplined enough to be allowed to go so far away from their base. For sure, the *Mahakala* vow must have caused weeks of gossip and accusations, of who had actually told too much to these foreign, curious people; rumours that not only went on within the gomba walls but, as we have seen, also in the village. In the light of the already existing dissensions between the older and the younger generation, however, the older anis' selection for Dharamsala may only have fuelled rebellious feelings among the younger ones. Anyhow, whatever happened, the Dharamsala event seemed a true black page in their history.

*A growing awareness of the outside world*

In 1966, the construction of a paved road was started along the Bhote Kosi ("Tibetan river"), between Kathmandu and Khasa (Tib.Dram) with Chinese aid. A bus service was set up that shifted its terminal with the progress of the construction. In 1969, the bus came as far as Barabise, a small town easily reached from the Bigu valley although still a two-day hike. A year later, this road became crucial in the transport of food aid for the people in the foothills suffering famine.

The famine, and the Arniko Highway, urged a growing amount of young men to seek new opportunities. They went to "Nepal", that is Kathmandu, and further to India. Some found seasonal employment, and returned with a small fortune, like the Meme Lama. Others migrated permanently to Kathmandu, Calcutta, the Punjab. Some came to fetch their family,[27] others left them behind ignorant of their whereabouts.

Unlike Solu Khumbu, Bigu had not known a Edmund Hillary who initiated hospitals, schools and air strips (Fisher 1990). Only in 1981, development aid, in the form of the Swiss Development Cooperation, came to Bigu to build an extension to its school, to construct cesspits, and to renovate footbridges along its ways. Its mountains did not attract "large scale visitations by foreign tourists" (Sacherer 1981:160). In fact, the first groups of tourists were only led through Bigu to Dolakha by Kathmandu trekking agencies from the early 1980s onwards. During the 1970s, "Nepal" dripped only in through its language. The *panchayat* was now to be elected, but requested a proper knowledge of Nepali. Also those who had sought employment in Kathmandu had been confronted by their inadequacy in the national language, especially in writing. The school, already founded in 1955, had merely attracted children from a Hindu background. In 1979, the illiteracy rate among the Sherpas of Bigu was still 66.77%, with another 5.96%

[25] Fürer-Haimendorf counted 29 anis in 1974 (1976). One of them died (Tsangdzum Sangmu). If we assume that four anis returned from Dharamsala - based on the villagers' statements - then about eight anis entered in only three years time.

[26] See Ch.IV, *Harmonious and disharmonious time*.

[27] Kunwar reports that ten families had left Bigu during the 1960s and 1970s (Kunwar 1989:88).

who could "write a bit but have no formal education" (Kunwar 1989:130). From 1976 onwards, however, half of the school-attending children were Sherpa, that is, Sherpa boys.

Women stayed behind, while husbands and brothers sought employment in the city and abroad. As the main pillars of the household, they were to take care of the children, the fields and the herds. While more and more sons were sent to school, daughters had to remain at home to help their mother. Anis, on the other hand, were thought to enjoy similar opportunities as men. They said they learnt to read and write at the gomba. And they travelled, first to Bodh Gaya, then every so often to Kathmandu, and to Dharamsala. Whatever their parents brought up against nunhood, for a growing amount of young women it promised them a freedom and education they were not to get as daughters and wives. This process only set in during the 1970s, but when the intrusion of the outside world increased in the next decade, so did the influx of novices. By 1994, Tashi Gomba consisted of sixty-two anis.

*Reflection*

The generation gap between the nuns of 1952 and those who entered after the arrival of the Guru Lama reveals a difference in expectations of a nun's life. After decades of hard labour and poverty at Tashi Gomba the older generation wanted to sit back and enjoy the fruits of their work, and put into practice what their *guru lama* had been teaching. They wanted to follow the path of *tantra*, of meditation and retreat. The younger generation, however, still had plenty of years ahead before they would feel death approaching. They did not wished to retreat yet from a world that was asking for exploration, a world that was changing and offered them opportunities they had never dreamt of before. It would be going too far to state that during the 1970s the young nuns already desired to follow the path of *sutra*. Their desire for knowledge was not yet directed towards a more profound knowledge of *dharma* texts, but merely at more - as Tsering Dolma said "more teachings, more *pecha* to read, more lamas, more rituals".

The Tulku must have acknowledged the problems that arose between the two generations. In 1978, for Ani Dorje still three years to go, the Tulku decided to shorten the period of *umse* from seven to three years. Considering the ages of the *umses* to come, also this measure would not prevent anis from becoming *umse* when already in their forties, but it did shorten a long and heavy duty which asked more and more for an interaction with the social world outside.

The changing social world was not just a blessing, although it seemed to push more young women towards the gomba. Sailung Gomba failed, not only because the death of the Guru Lama, but also because he obviously did not manage to attract a substantial amount of monks to populate it. Lopez jr. reports that in large Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India during the 1980s

> young men only became novices, often renouncing their vows before full ordination on their parent's advice, returning to lay life to work on the farm. The great monasteries were becoming, in effect, boarding schools (Lopez jr. 1996:264-5).

Sailung Gomba, however, did not even reach the status as a kind of boarding school. The political changes and the onset of (temporal) migration streams to Kathmandu and India asked for a different kind of schooling than the Guru Lama had to offer. Sailung Gomba, one might conclude, came too late. By 1986, its community was too trivial for its next abbot to be continued. As such one might conclude that Sailung Gomba went down in the same stream of disinterest as the monasteries in other Sherpa areas.[28]

[28] According to March' figures, monasteries in Solu Khumbu experienced a particularly high influx of celibate monastics between 1945 and 1960. "Much of the growth [during the 1960s] can be accounted for by the immigration of refugee Tibetan monastics" (March 1979:129-30). During the 1970s, the monastic communities decreased, in Rolwaling (Sacherer 1977:175), in Khumbu (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975:102-5; Fisher 1990:158-9), in Yelmu and in Tsum (the Tulku and Lama Kelsang, personal communication), due to new economic (tourism) and educational opportunities.

Tashi Gomba, however, stood on the eve of flourishing; that is, when measured by its amount of anis. The reason behind this, as I will claim, is the gender difference in opportunities the changing social realm has been offering. In this chapter, I could only offer a glimpse of this development, since this process had also only begun. By the 1980s the impact of a modern world, however, became really tangible.

VIII

# When the iron Bird flies[1]

## *Tashi Gomba in a transnational Context*

*Introduction*

One evening, at the fireplace in the gomba kitchen, a Sherpa woman in the gomba kitchen started to tell the following story.

> There was a girl who had to walk one-and-a-half hours to school everyday. She was a very good student and she already attended class ten. One day she heard a voice coming from the bushes. "Marry me!" The girl got scared and ran away as fast as she could. But also the next day, when she passed that same spot, the voice was there, "Marry me!" And the next day again, and the next day again. Finally, she told her father and he accompanied her to school, and at the same spot again the voice was coming, "Marry me!" Then her father shouted into the bushes: "When you are a real man, you come and ask for her." That night, a snake slide into their home and twined itself around the girl. And afterwards, the girl stopped eating.

At this point, she was interrupted by Ani Hishi Dolker.

> That snake wasn't a snake. That was her teacher!

Ani Karma Sangmo, who had heard the woman's last sentence and Ani Hisi's remark while coming into the kitchen, exclaimed. "Will you stop this! That's all nonsense. Don't tell her this nonsense. She's going to write down all this nonsense."

The woman had asked why I had stayed in Bigu for so long already, so when I told her I was interested in Sherpa culture and was going to write a book about Bigu and the nunnery, this story seemed to be the first thing that came to her mind. Clearly, it was an associative response to me being an educated, young woman who had travelled from far away, while she herself had grown up in a culture where education and mobility was viewed as endangering women, or rather, womanhood.[2]

However, in an ever-expanding world, from the Bigu Sherpas' point of view, education and mobility became an issue for both men and women. Employment and settlement in Kathmandu and abroad, family ties and trade relationships trespassing the boundaries of the Bigu valley and its surrounding regions demanded literacy in Nepal's national language, and knowledge of Nepal's societal structure and culture. During the 1980s, the process of Nepalisation as well as global networks also touched the lives of the Sherpas of Bigu with younger women in particular being affected. This development, however, may have been acknowledged by young men and women who were struggling their way out of "backward village life in Bigu" towards city life in Kathmandu. Their parents, on the other hand, felt their Sherpa identity was endangered by the new focus of their children and still preferred to see their children, and

[1] "When the iron bird flies, the dharma will come to the land of the red people" is "a statement widely circulated among Western Buddhists as a Tibetan prophecy. [...] The authenticity of this statement as a Tibetan proverb is being investigated" (Gross 1998:n.1). I thank Rita Gross for allowing me to use it for the title of this chapter.

[2] I will return to this subject in *The school and the nunnery*, below.

particularly their daughters, as a sort of "guardian" of the local "tradition"; as mothers to safeguard Sherpa language and customs and as wives to keep intact the ties with "home". In the 1990s they had finally to concede that they were losing the battle.

During the last two decades, many young women saw in nunhood at Tashi Gomba their only option in breaking with the traditional roles their parents tried to confine them too. Religious life as a nun seemed to offer opportunities for education and mobility that was denied them in secular life. This image of life as an ani was created during the 1960s and 70s, when the nunnery gave the impression of being a studious environment and the nuns made their first and recurring travels abroad. If education and mobility were the prerequisites for, and the signs of, city life - in other words, were to indicate cosmopolitanism and modernity (see also Pigg 1996)[3] -, one might state that among the young women of Bigu nunhood came to be seen as "modern". It definitely became popular.

However, at the nunnery forces were also at work to turn its women into "guardians of tradition". The different interpretations of religious life that lay at the heart of the generation gap of the 1970s were intensified when an awareness of a larger world turned into an actual involvement in its global network; an intensification caused particularly by the differing responses of the nunnery's abbot and its Tulku.

*The religious alternative*

The popularity of nunhood at Tashi Gomba was most obviously reflected in its increasing population. In 1979, Kunwar recorded thirty-two nuns and twenty-eight in 1981;[4] numbers that still did not deviate from Fürer-Haimendorf's records in 1974. Then, at his return to the gomba in 1985, there were forty-four anis (Kunwar 1986:57). In 1994 I counted sixty-one nuns. The nuns community had more than doubled in about thirteen years.

It subsequently appeared that the Tulku made an initial move which set off the high influx of novices. In 1981, he recruited a son and daughter of a village lama in whose house he used to stay overnight on his way up to Tashi Gomba. The son, only eight years old at the time, went to Bakang Gomba, while the fifteen-year old daughter accompanied him to Bigu. Between 1981 and 1985, her example was followed by five other young, unmarried women from Dolangsa. While the village lama had gladly given away his daughter to the nunnery, her peers had to force their parents' permission by asking his, and the Tulku's,[5] intervention. The village lama was, despite his notorious drinking, highly respected among the Dolangsa Sherpas, and the village gomba showed a prospering religious practice, unlike the village gomba in Bigu. Neither his influence, nor the Tulku's (and Lama Kelsang's) esteem, however, caused a continuation of this trend of Dolangsa novices. Except for one other in 1987, young Sherpa women from Dolangsa obviously did not go for the nun's life any more.[6]

In the same period, Tashi Gomba welcomed seven novices from the Bigu valley (and only two from the Jiri area), and another fifteen during the next ten years. This is interesting since the community

[3] My findings fit with Pigg's conclusion that "in popular consciousness *bikas* (development) describes anything new and/or foreign. Being modern is being *bikasi* (developed)" (Pigg 1996:172) and that in "rural areas, bikas is associated in people's minds with social mobility. There has emerged in Nepal a new kind of status that is correlated with economic advantage but not reducible to it. Being cosmopolitan, being a kind of "developed" kind of person, is a form of cultural capital. [...] Being cosmopolitan means having the capacity to understand the ways of other places, to make a living away from the village, to be mobile" (ibid.:173).

[4] According to Kunwar, four nuns had left the robe for marriage (1986:57).

[5] I ascribe a more important role to the Tulku than to the Guru Lama in this new influx. Both lamas did the anis the honour of visiting their nunnery for only about a month a year. However, the novice names of the anis having entered after 1980 seem to be indicative for the Tulku's importance. Whereas the anis of the 1960s and 70s, accepted by the Guru Lama, used to have "Dolma" as their second name, most anis after 1981 carried "Thupten", the Tulku's favourite, as their first name.

[6] Interestingly, Dolangsa's primary school was established in 1985, but I have no school records to confirm the assumption of a direct link I hold between school as a new option and the halt to the influx to the nunnery from Dolangsa.

seemed always to have consisted of about as many anis from Bigu as from outside the valley - most from Jiri, Charikot and surrounding villages like Sailung. However, as these numbers suggest, anis from the Bigu valley itself came to dominate the community from the 1980s onwards, with only two new anis from Jiri, one from Charikot and one (Tamang) from Sailung.

How to explain the concentration of Bigu's novices, and the decrease of anis from other areas? The fall of Sailung Gomba and the death of the Guru Lama[7] may have had some impact, but could hardly account for the small number of nuns also from Jiri. My assumption is that an ani life at Tashi Gomba lost much of its appeal in the light of the geographical and infrastructural position of these places. Already in the 1960's, Charikot and Jiri were connected with Kathmandu by roads and bus services. Charikot had replaced Dolakha as the district capital, and Jiri had become the starting point for Mt.Everest treks. Both places experienced a booming economy, based on trade and tourism. This changed world may have offered young women opportunities other than a religious life, opportunities young Sherpa women from Bigu, as I will argue, were lacking. Dolangsa may be seen in a similar socio-economic situation as Bigu. However, the road towards Kathmandu was only a day away, while Bigu lay in the other direction, "backwards" over the pass which formed both a physical and psychologically obstruction. In short, Tashi Gomba's popularity among young Bigu Sherpa women was, in my view, by and large caused by economic factors with its social and cultural outcomes.

This view seems to hold when looking at the backgrounds of the nuns who entered between 1981 and 1995. About sixty percent of them had lost their father, some of whom had died while others had simply disappeared. Their mothers were either single, carrying the responsibility of the farm alone, or had remarried, often to a widower. In both instances, the life of the daughter was not getting any easier. As a widower usually also had children of his own, his newly gained stepchildren would have second class status when it came to paying for their marriages and houses. Stepdaughters had an especially hard time, for they were often treated worse than servants. In the case of a single mother, the daughters were to take over responsibility for the younger children and the herd, while poverty was always hanging over their heads (see also Tieman 1993).

As such, Tashi Gomba seemed to have literally become a place of refuge for half-orphaned girls, who at marriageable age opted for nunhood. Interestingly, all these anis reported to have been encouraged, or even ordered, by their mothers to become a nun. Their daughters increasingly expressed a motivation founded upon the hardships of a woman's life in general, and of a single mother's life in particular. Life in the nunnery was interpreted as a life without sorrow. To illustrate these statements, I will give a few life histories of anis of, what I have called, the third generation.

The mother of *Ani Thupten S.*, sixty-two years old in 1994, married when she was twenty, had three children, and was widowed two years after the birth of her youngest son in 1977. Her daughter was then fifteen years old. They did not have much land, but, instead owned a large herd of cows and goats. While she took care of the house and the fields, and her sons went to school, her daughter took care of the animals on the pastures. She could learn later, the mother said. When her eldest son moved with his wife to "Nepal" (i.e. Kathmandu) to work in a spinning factory in 1983, she sold the herd and sent her daughter to Tashi Gomba. Nowadays, her youngest son is also living in Kathmandu. In response to my question why she sent her daughter to Tashi Gomba, she answered

> So she does not have to marry and does not have to have children. An ani life is a good life. She has gained weight since she became ani. She is not strong, but very healthy. And she is very happy now.

Whether she herself had never wanted to become an ani?

[7] See Ch.VII, *The rise and fall of Sailung Gomba.*

Oh yes, I did, but our parents did not allow us. They needed our help at home. They got angry whenever we mentioned it.

Why did they get angry?

Because anis run away. And what happens then? But not my daughter. She is good. No, [she contemplated] nowadays they don't run away any more.

Didn't she miss her daughter's help, when she left?

No, the youngest was not a little child any more. And I sold the herd. Now he is gone as well, I am alone to eat from the fields.

As what would she like to be reborn?

Well, my daughter taught me that if we do Nyungne, we will not be reborn as a raven or a white monkey. We sponsored that ritual several times. I only can hope to return as a human being again, but I hope my daughter will be reborn as a man or a god.

Ani Thupten S.'s mother never remarried. She divided the yield of the sale of the herd among her two sons so they might migrate to the city, as the fields they owned would never be enough for each of her sons' families to live upon. She had already decided when her daughter was a child to make her an ani. She was afraid her daughter would not be strong enough for marriage and motherhood. Her own experience as a widow must have played a role in this. Besides, by sending her daughter in the nunnery, she also hoped that she would not be reborn as a woman.

*Ani Thupten H.*'s life experience shows the consequences of a second marriage. When she was only a little girl, her father fell in love with a woman from Dolangsa and the loving couple fled to Bhutan. They stayed there for fifteen years and had seven children. Her mother stayed behind with her three children, of which Ani Thupten H. was the youngest. When the neighbour widowed a couple of years later, she decided to live with him. The children first stayed at their father's house, but when the two oldest left for Kathmandu to start a tea shop, Ani Thupten H. went to live with her mother and stepfather. In the meantime, the mother had send message to her first husband in Bhutan to let him know that his house and children had been abandoned. After some years, the father returned to Bigu with his new family, rebuilt the house, but refused to have his daughter stay with him. She remained with her stepfather, who used her as a servant and beat her and scolded her every time he was near her. In 1989 when her own father beat her even more during a discussion - the scar behind her ear looked like a burn injury - Ani Thupten H. decided to run off to the gomba. Rejected by two families, the nunnery had been her place of refuge.

*Ani Thupten C.* was about ten years old when her father decided to take another wife. They formed a polygynous household, but soon the climate was full of tensions and hard feelings. After four years, the father decided to move with his second wife and their four children to Dolangsa, leaving Ani Thupten C. alone with her mother. These experiences did not make married life appealing. Ani Thupten C. fled to the nunnery the day a man came to her door to ask for her hand in marriage when she was twenty years old. Her mother had supported, even stimulated, her choice. In 1994-5, the mother had left for Kathmandu to stay with her eldest son, while she left the house and the fields in the daily care of Tamang servants, under Ani Thupten C.'s supervision.

Her mother and brother ask Ani Thupten Chuckey on every occasion to join them in Kathmandu, to stay at a nunnery in Bouddha, but she refused. "My life is here. Simple and without sorrows", she remarked.

*Ani Thupten T.* is the Nim Dolma's daughter from her second marriage.[8] She was not even born when the father disappeared to Kathmandu. To earn money, so he claimed, but he never returned and nobody knows what has become of him. When she was only seven years old, her mother brought her down to the nunnery.

Several men left their home and family in Bigu to search their fortune elsewhere. Some returned after many years, others never did. Of course, Sherpa men are renown for their trading with Tibet, to do business in Darjeeling or the Punjab, or to join the Gurkha army (see Fürer-Haimendorf 1975; Ortner 1978; Fisher 1986, 1990), but in Bigu these men had been exceptions. The only Sherpa of Bigu ever to join the army was Calcuttako. Extensive trade was limited to men like Nim Pasang and the Meme Lama. During the 1980s, however, temporal labour migration or permanent migration to Kathmandu or India, and during the 1990s also to Saudi Arabia or Hong Kong, took a spurt. Unmarried and married men searched for additional income and left the women and children back home to take care of the fields and the herds. These women had to deal with all the work, and with the insecurity of a departed husband. Many women felt trapped, stuck to the village and their homes.

One day, a Sherpa woman came to see us for some medicine. She was thirty-six years old, and had three children, a son of sixteen and two daughters only one and two years old. Their marriage had been arranged - forced upon them she stated - while she was eighteen and her husband only sixteen years old. One year after their son was born, her husband had a fight with his father. He first left for Kathmandu, came back for a short while and then left again. To return only after thirteen years. "To the Punjab, he went, or the gods know where to. He does not tell anything. And after thirteen years, he only brings me thousand rupees and some new clothes." She envied us (Dawa and me), she said, having beautiful clothes and enough money, and the freedom to go wherever we liked. She herself stayed with her parents-in-law during all those years, even though she had her own home. In this way, the land could be cultivated together. It once had been theirs, her parents-in-law's, anyway. She felt deeply humiliated and had thought of committing suicide. Especially when her husband reappeared and she became pregnant again.

Of course it goes without saying that not only women, but men could also feel unhappy with their marriage. The difference, however, was that for men labour migration became a way out. And often they liked their new living conditions so much better than village life, or found a new love in the city, that they never felt to return home.[9] The husband of Tashi Ongdi's daughter[10] obviously was also not content with his marriage. He left his wife and child, and the Meme Khepa's land he was to inherit, and disappeared. Ani Dickey Chöden's brother left his wife and children, to seek employment in India. The last thing they heard of him was a letter from Germany, eight years ago. Ani Lobzhang Lhazin's former husband wanted to migrate to Kathmandu, but she was afraid of the big city where she did not know anyone and thought she would feel lost. He divorced her and took another wife. They had no children, and without a parental home to go back to, she turned to her mother's sister at Tashi Gomba to become a nun. I could go on with another twenty cases or so.

[8] See also Ch.V, *Two former anis and their silence.*

[9] Young Sherpas men from Khumbu, I met in Kathmandu, communicated to me the dilemma with which they had to cope. They did not care for the women their parents had chosen for them, and they did not want to return to their villages after having become used to city life in Kathmandu. They did, however, feel responsible for their children and their father's land. Generally, they merely sent money up whenever they could. Sometimes, their wife would suddenly appear at their doorstep, blackmailing them: "More money, or I stay here with you."

Besides these stories of runaway husbands, it might also offer us insight to tell the story of a Sherpa woman I met at *Narak* at the village gomba. She was drunk and wanted to impress me.

In the over-crowded village temple, we sat close to a woman who slurred her words while breathing the sickening smell of *arak* into our faces. She shouted in my ear a question, whether she could also go to school. She thought I was a new teacher at the Bigu school. "Yes, sure, why not?" "In which class?", she asked. "Have you ever been to school before?". "No, I'm forty-six. I never went," she replied. "Then you will have to start in class one." She laughed loudly. Then she told me that her daughter was studying class nine in Kathmandu, and that her youngest had stopped after class three, but wanted to go back to school again. She herself had no time to go to school. She did some courier work with gold and jewellery to Hong Kong. About three times she went. It did not pay much, but what else to do as an uneducated person? Now, she was living here in Bigu again, with her husband who drinks too much and beats her when he is drunk.

When we told this story to our neighbour, she laughed heartily.

> That woman has never been outside the valley in her entire life, let alone outside Nepal. They are so poor that they had to ask for her husband's brother's clothes when he died recently. And her daughter is living on the pastures and has never been to school. Her youngest son, yes, he finished class three, but I don't think he will ever go back. What a liar she is. She drinks too much, that's her problem.

The picture this woman drew was one of wishful thinking, for herself and for her children; make-believe that, against the background of many young anis' life histories, reminded me of their motivations for nunhood. Instead of a married life with a man who might drink too much, gamble away their little wealth, beat them, or would just leave "when it suits them" never to return - of which they had seen too many examples - they preferred a celibate independent life that would offer them the opportunity to travel. In addition, nunhood provided them with a guaranteed life sustenance for which the work to be done was not to be compared to the responsibilities of their mothers and married sisters. During the 1980s, the cash economy came to dominate also rural Bigu. It seemed to offer advantages to the nuns as it did to the average villager.

*Socio-economic changes in the valley*

Bigu's virgin land had already become sparse during the 1950s, when His Majesty's Government enacted a law forbidding reclamations in 1964 (cf.Regmi 1978:585; Shrestha 1990). The consequences were, however, mainly experienced by sons who set up their household from the 1970s onwards. The division of their fathers' land property left them with parcels too small to sustain their own households. Also stock breeding was lost as an important additional method of life sustenance since the Chinese government withdraw their permission for the Sherpas of Bigu to graze on Chinese pastures in 1983 (Kunwar 1989:76). The need to look beyond the valley for other sources of income grew with the years.

The construction of the Arniko Highway and a bus service between Kathmandu and Khasa created new options. One of them was trade. Where the Sherpas of Bigu had previously traded primarily between Lapthang, just over the border with Tibet/China, and Dolakha, the road shifted their attention to Nepal's capital. The Nepal-Khasa trade, which was opened in 1980 with the permission of the Chinese, and the bus transport made the goods cheaper than when carried down along the Lapthang smuggling route. Nevertheless, in 1985, only four households were engaged in the Khasa-Kathmandu trade (after having sold their herds) and twenty-five households, most of them herdsmen, were still engaged in the Lapthang trade, exchanging butter, *chaunri* skins and oranges for towels, bed sheets, matches, thermoses, shoes, slippers, umbrellas, and salt (Kunwar 1989:81).

According to the small number of households engaged in trade, the road mainly functioned as a trajectory towards temporal or permanent labour migration. The distinction between these two migration forms needs some elaboration. Between 1965 and 1985 only ten families moved permanently, that is, after having sold their farms[11] - usually because of prohibitive debts (ibid.:88). Bigu Sherpas would rather let their land to tenants than sell it. As Pasang, who migrated with his family and widowed mother to Bouddha, said, "we were born as Bigu Sherpas and we will stay Bigu Sherpas for the rest of our lives. Our land there will always be our home, a place to return to." Thus, even when living and building up a future for their children in the city, migrated parents still experienced Bigu as their home, the place where they were given their citizenship card, where they participated in elections, and where they preferably wanted to have their funeral, or at least their *gyewa* (memorial rite[12]).

According to the survey I conducted with Dorje on Bigu's *wari* side (the nunnery's side of the valley), of every forty-five households at least one male member was living in Kathmandu or abroad,[13] of which twenty-six married men (fathers) and the others unmarried (sons). Nineteen of the husbands had not visited their families for at least two years, and their wives did not know about their whereabouts.

Although Kunwar who conducted his research in Bigu in 1985 does not give us numbers of, at least intended, temporal migration, we may assume that during the 1980s and 90s the appeal for employment in spinning and weaving factories, in construction work, and in hotels, restaurants and self-owned teahouses and little shops, took a spurt. For women, this option, however, was restricted, unless their husbands called on them to join them. The majority of wives had to carry the responsibilities of "the home to return to".[14] Whereas sons were stimulated to go to Kathmandu to find a job - so that the total of their father's land could be inherited only by the youngest son[15] - daughters were expected to stay at home, to help their parents, or mothers. This trend, however, had its consequences in matters of marriage which began to show, particularly in the 1990s. Before, parents called a son back home when they thought the time ripe, and had found an appropriate girl for marriage. The son generally obeyed. Even parents living in Kathmandu turned to their home village to find a proper wife for their sons. During my period of fieldwork, however, parents complained that their sons rejected their marriage arrangements. They either wanted to postpone marriage beyond the age thought suitable in Bigu, or refused to marry a girl from Bigu altogether. "They are village girls. They don't know anything about the city, they can read nor write, and they don't look nice".[16]

As such, the first young "spinsters" occurred (seven in 1995): four young unmarried women in their twenties who were either never sought after, or refused to marry "a village boy"; two young divorced women whose husband's deserted them after some years; and one young widow. Only one of them was interested in the life of an ani; the others dismissed nunhood with statements like "anis are ugly with their shaven heads", and "anis are bullied by the lamas". Although not stated explicitly, it was clear to me that they also disliked the idea of remaining unmarried, and celibate, for the rest of their life. They

[10] See Ch.V, *Two former anis and their silence.*

[11] The mapping of land property by governmental land surveyors (*napis*), who came to the Bigu valley in 1995, showed that about 65% belonged to Kharka families. This can be explained by the fact that Kharka sons received higher education, and left the valley, and their land to the family, for governmental and medical jobs in Kathmandu and elsewhere. However, since they had the necessary cash resources, we may assume that it were mainly Kharkas who bought up the land of indebted Sherpa families.

[12] See Ch.VI, *The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.*

[13] Compare with Pigg who notes that in Nepal "subsistence farmers (estimated to be 80-90 percent of the population) [...] increasingly depend on the employment of one or more family members as a source of cash [...]" (Pigg 1996:173).

[14] See also Sacherer on the "burdensome responsibility which rests more and more on women" due to the absence of young men in Rolwaling who "find it economically advantageous and socially more interesting to porter for tourists" (Sacherer 1981:163-4).

[15] See Ch.V, *Marriage, nuclear families and Bigu Sherpa wives.*

[16] I will return to this subject in a next paragraph, *The school and the nunnery.*

wanted to take part in this changing, social world, they dreamt of being "modern city women, like you and Dawa." One was allowed to live with an aunt and uncle in Tatopani to participate in their trade activities between Khasa and Kathmandu. Two started their own trading business between Khasa and Bigu, furnishing the local shops with commodities. Another was setting up a rabbit farm, for its wool, with the help of the American Peace Corps (stationed in Charikot). Yet another became a nurse, and had been to Japan for training. One eventually joined her brother and sister-in-law in Kathmandu and found a job in an orphanage. Only the young widow, whose only child died at the age of two, already had her own means of sustenance, her late husband's land share which she let to her brother. The independent way of living of these young Sherpa women, their unguided travels and increasing contact with alien men, however, caused a lot of backbiting in their village about their unmarried status and their presumed immoral behaviour. But from their own point of view there was little to lose, and much to be gained.

Although the growing awareness of city life in Kathmandu made the image of Bigu look evermore poor and backward, the village did not remain untouched by the new developments. In 1985, Kunwar still noticed that "[m]ost of the Sherpas of Bigu ... are not very much familiar with radio and watch" (Kunwar 1989:86), but only a few years later consumerism swept through the valley. During my stay in the 1990s, Chinese made household items - watches, radios and torches running on batteries, kerosine for lamps, Chinese cigarettes and liquor, hair clips and soap, and a new taste for foodstuffs such as sugar and sweets, ready-made noodles and instant noodle soups, rice (formerly only for festival meals) and curry powder, were present in nearly every household. Furthermore, increased contact with Tibetans and Sherpas from other areas had changed the clothing customs of the Bigu Sherpas dramatically. While the men had been used to wear Nepali dress (*daura* with *surawal*) with a woollen Sherpa coat (*lukuni*) and *topi*, the Sherpa women wore a same coat with floral full *kenam* (petticoat-like skirt), tight-fitting long-sleeve blouses (*cholo*), a white waistband, and a striped woollen apron, as March noted both in Yelmu/Helambu and Bigu (March 1979:53). While March detected a change towards Tibetan and Sherpa style dresses (*chowa*) and ornaments, especially among the wealthier women, in Yelmu during her fieldwork in 1974-75, Kunwar still encountered the Sherpa women's "Nepali" dress style in Bigu ten years later (Kunwar 1989:143-4). Only a few Bigu Sherpa men had changed their *lukuni* into Western suit jackets. In 1992, the *kenam* was disappearing, signifying the poor who were unable or unwilling to spend their little cash on the more expensive material and the tailor a *chowa* needed. Two years later, however, even the poorer had abolished the *kenam*.

The imported consumption goods required cash. Most of a household's cash money was sent by the father or son from Kathmandu. For large expenses a household could sell a cow or *chaunri*, or even the entire herd. Others started to make paper sheets or dried cheese (*churpi*) for wholesalers in Kathmandu, and still others borrowed money from the gomba funds (*guthi*) to repay in butter and foodstuffs. The need for cash, however, was not only confined to consumerism, but appeared also in the gift giving of guests during the final wedding ceremony,[17] replacing the traditional gifts of butter, rice, grains and cattle. When attending a marriage, a guest (representing a household) is obliged to give the couple a "gift", called *larke*, that supports the new household in setting off. With this gift, the guest expresses his wish to include the wedding couple (that is, a new household) into his network of mutual reciprocity.[18] However, the gift can also be seen as a kind of investment, since the couple is obliged to return double the amount of the received quantity at the marriage of the guest's son. The span of time between the initial gift and the return gift, by which the transaction would be closed unless the gift-returning couple entered a new transaction with a new stake to be returned at their own son's marriage, varies between three days or a couple of years. But even when a doubled return gift was due after only a few days, it had rarely

[17] See Ch.V, *Marriage, nuclear families, and Bigu Sherpa wives.*

[18] The mutual reciprocity system is a network of cooperating households during harvesting and house construction. See Ch.V, *Marriage, nuclear families, and Bigu Sherpa wives.*

brought the young household into problems, until the 1980s. First of all, there had seldom been more than two final weddings in the same season.[19] During the 1970s and 80s, the Sherpa population - although there are no statistics -certainly had doubled, if not trebled (see also March 1979:129), and with it also the amount of marriages and an increase of return gifts on a short notice. Secondly, the amount of foodstuff initially given was rather fixed by the giver's amount of land and cattle, known by everyone in the valley. This changed, however, when money came to dominate the *larke* system.

The change from foodstuff to cash occurred slowly during the 1970s, starting off with small amounts of money in addition to butter or rice. In 1983, Pulba Lhazin and his wife were the first to receive only money for a wedding gift, with an average amount of Rps.15 per household. According to Dorje's father, the first Rps.100 note was put in about eight years ago. At a marriage Dawa and I attended in November 1994, the groom's father accused his guests of stinginess when they only offered Rps.500. A factory worker or a waiter in a tourist restaurant earned less than Rps.1300 per month in Kathmandu, which definitely made Rps.500 in a village like a Bigu into a fortune. The obligation of double return, however, made it even worse and turned the marriage gift system into a kind of stockholding market. With nearly every household having a member living in Kathmandu, and some engaging in trade activities, the household's capital was no longer to be estimated by fixed standards (land and herd). The gift giving on the day after the wedding ceremony was turned into a constant negotiating by which the groom's father tried to raise the amounts as much as possible, by threatening the guest's banishment from the mutual reciprocity system and a clan feud. With this bargaining, however, a father had to bear in mind whether the gift giver had a son who could be married off soon, which would entail a double return within the near future. With young men living in Kathmandu, however, their marriage may no longer include years of engagement with the bride living at her parents-in-law's household. Instead, a marriage could be announced unexpectedly, or, on the contrary, not take place at all for years. The father then had to take a risk. There were couples known to go bankrupt because they had to return too many gifts before they had yet been able to earn the double reimbursement with their harvest yield, cattle breed, or wage labour. In autumn 1988, for instance, Nim Tsering's younger brother was only "rich for two days. Then Tashi Gyelmu married, and then Sherap Dorje's younger brother, then .. I don't remember any more. At the end of the week, I had sold all my cows" in order to help his brother and father out.

*Socio-economic changes in the nunnery*

One popular way among the laity to get cash at short notice was by asking a loan from the gomba (*guthi*). Cash money had become a regular form of payment for rituals and butterlamps too, as well as of casual donations for which purpose a wooden box was put in the temple hall. In 1992, I was asked by the *konier* to write a sign in English saying "donation box" to attract the attention of the growing amount of tourists and other Western visitors. In 1994, the content of the box, larger donations given directly to the Meme Lama, and the interests of the loans together amounted to Rps.120,000. Villagers were allowed to borrow up to Rps.5000 for the next year.

Also individual anis collected a capital. With a relative in Kathmandu, they not only received food support from their parents or brother in Bigu but financial support as well. Added to what they earned with sponsored rituals both in the gomba and at lay people's homes, some of them saved enough to lend out to lay people against a modest interest.[20] In 1995, the *umse* could hand out the Rps.6000 a Sherpa

[19] That is, in November or April, after harvesting.

[20] Monastics pledge a vow "not to touch money". The Bigu anis, however, justified their transactions as necessary for their life maintenance as much as they had to work on the fields although "it killed thousands of insects and other little animals". They even were permitted to run a little shop at the gomba (see below). Also in Kathmandu, I have seen monks working in trekking equipment shops and *thanka* shops. In Rolwaling, monks were known for taking up jobs as porters and trekking guides (Sacherer 1981:159-60).

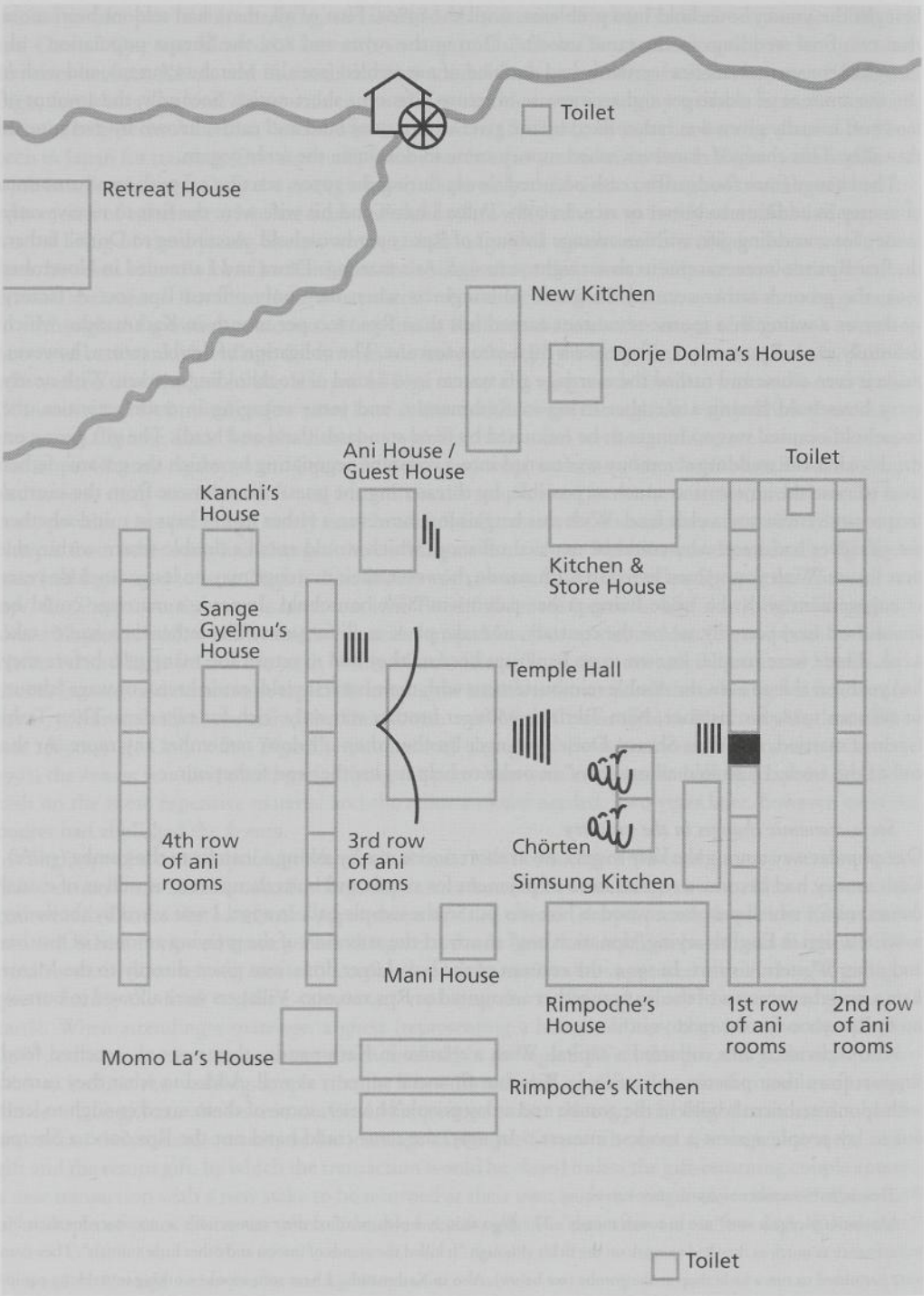



Figure 6 *Plan of Tashi Gomba in 1995*

couple needed for both the marriage of their oldest son and for being a sponsor (*jindak*) for the *Narak* festival. The *umse* accumulated this amount during the first two years of her office. "I'm stuck here now I'm *umse*, so I'm not spending anything. But when I'm off duty next year, I will have collected enough to go on pilgrimage". Ani Karma Sangmo, the Meme Lama's granddaughter, also accumulated a small fortune by lending it to people. It covered, to a large extent, her hospital and medical bills because of "stomach problems".

Also, the supervision of the land property of brothers who moved to Kathmandu with their families, in addition of their own share of land they received after having become a nun, turned a couple of anis into small business women. The produce of their brothers' land was usually sold to the gomba with a little profit they were allowed to ask for their services. Two anis earned about Rps.1,500 between 1992 and 1995 in this way.

Compared to their lay sisters, the nuns were rather well off, although for many their saving remained modest. It hardly covered the expenses for a pilgrimage abroad or a four-month retreat. More importantly, however, responsibility of land and their growing practice with money-lending in particular had made those who entered nunhood after 1980 more self-confident than most older nuns. They had to deal with tenants and villagers in need, as well as with traders and porters. In 1993, Ani Karma Sangmo and Ani Thupten Dickey asked the Tulku permission to open up a little shop on the gomba compound, so the nuns would not have to go into the village for shopping. Their request was granted and in 1994 half of the *simsung*'s ground floor was turned into a store with all kinds of commodities, such as noodles, oil, and rice, soaps and toothpaste and brushes, razors, candles and batteries, sewing utensils and cloth, which had to be brought up from Barabise. The shop not only served the anis and occasional trekkers and visitors, but also villagers from nearby houses.

Also in 1993, the Meme Lama asked the Tulku for retirement in favour of his granddaughter Ani Karma Sangmo, who had taught herself to read and write Tibetan and to count. She took over the administrative affairs of the gomba, the *guthis*, the harvest arrangements and the financial supervision of the gomba's expenses, renovations and construction building, which her grandfather had done for over fifty years. Having entered in 1970 as an eight-year old orphan, this thirty-four year old nun had grown up with the gomba's enlargement, which she took as a personal task to secure. With her "big mouth", she speaks with Nepali officials and members of the village council "like a man. Karma Sangmo is not afraid of anybody and she speaks very good Nepali. I could never do that", her cousin sighed. Her personality then contrasts sharply with the *umse* of four years ago, who turned away whenever she had to encounter officials.[21] In effect, this *nierpa* (treasurer) became the face of the nunnery to the socio-political, outside world. As such, she was the reason for the *umse*'s complaints that her post had little significance any more, reduced to its religious function of chanting leader and ritual manager. The post of *nierpa* was to last for five years, but in November 1996 I was informed of the death of Ani Karma Sangmo.[22] Ani Thupten Dickey, who had been the gomba shopkeeper and Ani Karma Sangmo's assistant, took over. These two anis acted as a stimulus to others who expressed their wish to learn calculation as well.

To the villagers, Tashi Gomba had definitely lost its image of a place of refuge for pitiful divorced, widowed or orphaned women, up the mountain secluded from the social life that was going on in the village. The amount of young anis that had entered after 1980, and their increasing involvement with the laity, as well as their growing participation in administrative matters of the gomba, demanded that the female community be reckoned with. This, for instance, was brought home to supporters of the Communist Party at the national elections of 1994.

Two years earlier, in 1992, I witnessed the Nepal Congress Party holding their electorial speeches at the gomba. Villagers (about 90% men) had come up the mountain to listen and discuss. Only six nuns,

[21] See Ch.VII, *A new generation*.

[22] She died of her liver disorder, most probably a cancer. See also *Lama Kelsang and his scheme*.

among whom the *umse* and Ani Sherap Omu, attended the meeting, but they urged all anis to vote for the Nepal Congress Party, since their district leader promised to donate money to the nunnery for new housing quarters in case they would win. They won, but the money never came.

The Tulku, having heard of the meetings next to the temple building, made it one of his points in 1993 to forbid political activities on gomba grounds. The *umse* rendered his instruction as follows.

> The Rimpoche [i.e. the Tulku] has forbidden any political gathering within the gomba confines, as happened two years ago with the Congress Party, and also any other gathering without a religious aim. He said that politics belong down in the village counsel house and not in a gomba. Also, he has asked the village people not to tell the anis to vote. That *dharma* people have to go along with any government which is in power, but should not engage in politics themselves.

Note that the Tulku, at least in the *umse*'s rendering, was not prohibiting his nuns to vote. He was merely advising them not to do so, in accordance with the monastic ideology. His ban on political activities on gomba grounds was to prevent situations as had taken place at Sailung Gomba in 1986 where lay people had tried to force voting. The way I knew him and had observed how he handled the Lumbini conflict,[23] he was not the man to tell his anis what they should and should not do, but rather to raise their consciousness about the effects of their actions.

In 1994, the Nepali Congress representatives made up for their neglect and, at their electorial session down at the school courtyard, promised the nunnery one *lakh* (Rps.100,000) before the end of the year. The promise caused a lot of discussion among the anis-in-charge and the older anis (the ex-*umses*), whether they should follow the Tulku's advise not to vote or to secure the donation by going down to vote for the Congress Party. Fact was that the Tulku had to tell six girls from Bigu, who had asked him to accept them as anis in Tashi Gomba, to come again after some years, because the nunnery utterly lacked the space to house them. Local Congress members, who sensed a growing support of the Communist Party (since they had forced Nepal Congress man and prime minister Koirala to step down and install new elections), came up to the nunnery and urged the *umse* to order the nuns to vote, so that they would inspire lay women to come to the polling station as well. Communist Party members also came up to the gomba, to remind the anis that the Tulku had forbidden them to take part in the elections. They, however, met with a cool Ani Karma Sangmo who told them it was not for them to say what anis should or should not do, and the Congress Party at least promised them financial support. With their reaction, the communists were clearly throwing stones at their own glass house. A few weeks after the election, Ani Thupten Dickey confided to a journalist,

> One of the things the lama told us was that people should not go to the political demonstrations in this area. However, people did not listen to him which made me feel very sad. People from the Congress Party came to the gomba and told us to vote for them, then others from the Communist Party came and told us **not** to vote. They also said that, in the future, we would not be allowed to wear our habits or to perform ceremonies. We would not even be allowed to live this way of life or to build monasteries because it would not be good for society. I started to worry. In my opinion *dharma* is for everybody and we practise it for the good of mankind as a whole (in Kipp 1995, italics in original).

The practical grounds on which the *umse* and Ani Karma Sangmo (among others) had called for a participation in the election, was enforced by a direct attack on the way of life they had chosen, their community in particular, and monasticism and the Dharma in general. Seventeen nuns choose nevertheless to abstain (six were absent), and thirty-eight descended on that November day to the polling station

[23] See Ch.VII, *The Dharamsala conflict*.

at the school. They were not standing in line yet when a tremendous commotion broke out around the registration table. People started fighting and yelling. Communist supporters objected against the nuns' voting, arguing that they had been bribed by the NCP. Only when the VDC council summoned a meeting with the local NCP and CP leaders, the matter was settled and the anis could use their ballot.

The Communist Party won, but the district officers of the NCP saw to it that the gomba was getting their promised one *lakh*. It was used for a new and large kitchen building that was ready in autumn 1996.[24] Nevertheless, the clash at the polling station had stirred the community for weeks. Since the Meme Lama's son, Lobsang Lama, had decided to vote against those who "follow the Chinese system", the anis who had brought out their vote too felt they had done the right thing. "They accuse us of hiding in our little rooms, and not helping to develop our country. What do they think we doing? Only pray *mantra* for ourselves?" Ani Thupten Dickey was still upset. An older ani tried to calm down the young nun:

> Don't let anger disturb your mind. Look at me. I'm perfectly calm. Because I refuse to choose. If they want my respect, they all can have it,

and she waved towards the portraits of the King and Queen of Nepal, a picture of Mao out of a Chinese magazine, and a photograph of the Dalai Lama, that were hanging next to each other at one wall of her room.

Needless to say that not all nuns were radiating independence and self-confidence, but on the whole the community gained an image of a stronghold of "knowledgable", that is "developed" (*bikasi*) women. This image created, and reinforced, the notion of the nunnery as a kind of school. It was also based on the nuns' travelling, mobility, to which I will return in a next section.

*The school and the nunnery*

The Gauri Shankar primary school of Bigu was founded in 1955 (Nep.2012). It consisted of five classes until 1981. Then the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) extended the Bigu school with two classes, to class seven, and built two annexes, one in Pari (to class 3) and one in Amatal (to class 5). For obtaining the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) after class ten, Bigu youth had to go to Laduk or Barabise. Only seven Sherpa boys and one Sherpa girl had been heading for the SLC during all the forty years of the school's existence.

Although the school only kept records of their students from 1981 onwards, my own survey on educational careers of Sherpa men and women, and their statements on caste differences in enrolment, showed a slow adaptation towards the new phenomenon of a school among Sherpas. Until the 1970s, the school was mainly attended by children of Hindu background, such as Chetri and Brahman, Newari, and Magar. Sherpa students, although constituting half of Bigu's population, remained a minority. During the 1970s, however, a realisation of the importance to be literate in Nepali also took its hold on the Sherpas. From 1976 onwards, half of the school population appeared to have been Sherpa and has remained so to the present day. The small number of Sherpas which have tried for their SLC, however, indicates both the low trust their parents had in the value of more education as well as their reluctance, or inability, to pay school fees of Rps.2000 a year and to have their children board at either Laduk or Barabise, both two days walking distance from Bigu.[25]

The SLC certificate is assumed to be an indispensable piece of paper when applying for office jobs,

[24] A Swiss practitioner, Lama Kelsang had met in Malaga in 1994, donated Rps.30,000 with which a new row of rooms was built together with the new kitchen.

[25] See aslo Kunwar: "Low literacy rate (33%)" in Bigu in comparison to two other Sherpa villages "indicates the extreme state of poverty on the one hand and lack of interest in education on the other" (1989:131).

but since "Sherpas never get service jobs anyway, what's the use of expensive schools", many a boy eager to continue his studies got a "no". Even in 1994, Dawa's later husband Dorje, who was going for an I.A. (Intermediary of Arts) grade at a Kathmandu college, was accused of arrogance and extravagance. He was urged by members of the VDC to stop studying and accept the position of headmaster at Bigu's school, so that he would be able to put his knowledge to use. He refused. With this recognisable attitude towards education in peripheral areas (see Reed & Reed 1968; Bista 1991:70-1; Skinner & Holland 1997), gender differences concerning the need for education are not surprising either.

In Bigu, I did not met one Sherpa woman above thirty who had ever attended school, meaning that the enrolment of one Sherpa girl a year between 1981 and 1986 must have started at the end of the 1970s. The records show, however, that these girls, although small by number, must have been rather determined as most of them finished class seven. Between 1986 and 1993, the amount of Sherpa girls in class increased to a 12.5 percent of all students, a one-to-two ratio with Sherpa boys, but their drop out rate increased to 30-40 percent, usually after class three or five.

The initial reluctance of Sherpas to send their daughters to school and their dropping out early in later years, were motivated as follows. The first reason given was one similar to their parents' reluctance to let them become a nun, namely that they needed their daughter's help in the house, fields and pastures.[26] With most sons away to school for the best part of the day, the daughters were doubly burdened by having to help out their parents with often only the mother around. Most of the young women and anis, who were able to read a little Nepali, confided in me they had learned it by looking over the shoulders of, and listening to, their brothers when they did their homework at night and in the early morning while the girls were doing their chores, cooking, washing up, cleaning, and so on (see also Bista 1991:66). Secondly, as future wives and mothers there was no need for them to be literate. Whatever they needed to know they learned in the practice of home, as it had always been. On the contrary, women should not be exposed to the Nepali language too much, since they had to preserve their Sherpa language and Sherpa customs as a young Sherpa stated.[27] During the 1980s, however, with the growing contacts with relatives in Kathmandu, and Nepali officials, tourist guides and foreign development workers, who came to visit their village and their homesteads, Sherpa wives also had to master proper Nepali. Therefore, daughters were sent to school more often, although in many cases only as long as was strictly necessary, that is three to five years.

A final reason is connected with the functional motivation of the Bigu Sherpa girl as future wife and mother given above, but now refers to the assumption that going to school might endanger her virtue. The story of the girl and the snake, I started this chapter with, is symbolising this threat on her sexuality.

Having reached class ten, the girl was already at a marriageable age. Instead of a good young man, a snake was asking for her hand. In Sherpa culture, the symbolism of a snake seems always to be negative (cf. R.Paul 1989). Dreaming about snakes demands exorcism rites, as these animals come from the underworld, or are *lüs* (Skt. *naga*) who pester living souls. There is also the notion of a white snake, who chase women walking alone, attracted by their breast milk. Breasts being the symbol of female sexuality among Bigu Sherpas, the chasing snake represents the danger of rape, a danger that might threat any woman who has to travel over long distances alone, as the girl of the story had to do - and for Bigu students class ten meant going outside of the valley. However, the snake may also represent sexual desire for "strange" men like the teacher, as Ani Hishi suggested, or a school mate; "strange" in the sense of not being Sherpa. Of course at school, girls met peers from all *jats*, and intimate relationships with, for instance, Chetri or Magar boys were out the parents' control. But teachers were also "strangers". Except for two Sherpa

[26] During the 1970s, Sherpa families "who have owned *chaunri* do not send their children to school with the except of a few families" (Kunwar 1989:73). With the abolition of extensive herds by most Sherpa households in 1983, the boys were freed to attend school, while the girls were left with the few cattle the family kept.

[27] See Ch.V, *Women and the Dharma*, on the "perfect Sherpa woman".

masters who already resigned after one term, and two Magar misses from Bigu, all other teachers appointed at the Bigu school came from other districts, notably the Terai region, and from Hindu castes. Their contact with their female students were watched with suspicion, while Sherpa girls discussed the attractiveness of particularly unmarried teachers copiously. In effect, intercaste marriages, exacted by a couple by running away to spend a few nights together ("capture marriages", Bista 1991:64), between a Sherpa and a non-Sherpa did not occur within the confines of the Bigu valley yet.[28] However, parents' fear of losing their daughter to another *jat*, the ultimate break with the rule of their arranged marriage custom, was ever existent.

Bigu Sherpas' keeping their daughters home and away from school as much as possible, however, began to have its repercussions. A growing amount of young men had been working themselves into the labour market of Kathmandu (and elsewhere), had received some education themselves and got a feel for city life, "modern" life. These young men started to resist partners for marriage from the village, from their home area, suggested by their parents or grandparents. Phur Nima's case was definitely not unique, but is most illuminating. I quote his complaints as rendered by Ani Karma Sangmo, his cousin, to whom he turned for airing his feelings and for advice.

> His parents are both uneducated, but he won a medal for being the first in SCL and first in I.Sc. [Intermediary in Science]. When he left for Kathmandu to study, his brothers became angry. Because he did not bring in any money, because he did not do anything for the household. And that his parents had to pay fifty rupees a month for his SLC and all his books. A waste of money, they said. They threatened that if he would not pass his exams, they would break his legs. But he was the best of five hundred students and the house was filled by classmates, parents and teachers to offer him a *kata*. Then, his brothers went silent. When he went to college his uncles and brothers paid his college fees and books and clothes. And later, he found a job himself, and started a carpet factory and brought his parents to Kathmandu. His father was running the factory, but since Phur Nima also won the medal in I.Sc., he is actually the boss. His younger brothers respect him more than their father. Because, in the meantime they have become the owners of three apartments in Kathmandu and he drives a motor cycle. They also built a house. And when his father went to an architect to discuss the construction plans, he did not understand a thing. Then the architect told his father: "Go and get your son. With him I can talk." His father felt humiliated, an old man, sidetracked, devoid of all respect. But what to do?
>
> A few days ago, Phur Nima was called on by Meme-la [the Meme Lama] to Bigu. And why? Because Meme-la had set his eye on a good wife for him. Tashi Ongmu, you know, Lhazen's sister. "It's a beautiful girl", Meme-la said, "and her parents are rich. They have a lot of cattle. Besides, your mother is a simple woman. She lived most of her life on the pastures. Tashi could take over the cooking, because your mother still cooks like a Sherpa." Phur did not want to hurt his grandfather's feelings. He did not say anything. For that he came to me, to air his feelings. He said: "My grandfather calls me all the way from Bigu to tell me he has an eye on a girl for me. The man is crazy. I do not want to marry at all. At least not for the next five years." He is studying for engineer now, you know. "And if my mother needs a maid, I can hire a maid for thousand or two thousand rupees a month!" You know, Tashi is a pretty girl. But, she is already in love with Namgyel's brother, only her parents don't want to

[28] The unmarried Hindu teacher from Bigu's school ran off with one of the Magar misses. They spent a couple of nights together in Barabise. On their return they bought a little house close to the school and took up their jobs again. One young Sherpa man originating from Bigu fell in love with a Tibetan girl he met in Kathmandu. After more than two years both their parents still fight their marriage, probably until the young couple has a child. Dawa and Dorje, although also a Tibetan-Sherpa couple, did not experience much obstruction. His parents felt proud of their son having married a "rich" Tibetan woman. Her family sought advice of a Rimpoche who approved the marriage, and so did they.

give her. They must be hoping for Phur, I guess. Because he is educated and rich. But he says "I don't want a girl from Bigu. I want a girl with education, a girl who can take over the factory when I'm not there. And who says she will cook better than my mother? She is from Bigu, isn't she? I don't want to hurt my grandfather's feelings, I never did. But this is my life and a woman is for life, isn't it? What do you think I should do?" he asked me.

Like Phur's, other complaints about Bigu Sherpa girls always centred around their inability to share responsibilities in life sustenance which required more than just a basic level of education. Bigu girls, however, were seen as uneducated, ignorant, backward village girls. "*Kura aundainan, kura bujhdainan*", they do not know things, they do not understand things.

Young Sherpa women from Bigu of course were hoping to be sought after by a Sherpa who managed to make a living in Kathmandu. An unmarried Sherpa woman of twenty-five years old, called Dolma, answered my request for describing the perfect husband as follows.

A good man does not fight, is someone who does not beat his wife, does not beat little children, who does not gamble and does not engage in fights. And when he is uneducated, he should at least be capable of showing some understanding. Our society is uneducated, so if a man is like that, he at least must be compassionate. If he is educated, that would be nice, because being uneducated is being like an animal. Those things make a good man.

What do you mean by "uneducated is being like an animal"?

Well, it's like when you are standing on a three-forked road and when there are signs to show which way to go. But if you can not read, you still don't know where to go. It's like walking in the dark. And if someone writes you a letter that things are stolen from his house, and he puts that on paper, than you are like an animal who doesn't know what he did wrong.. That kind of things. We just have a saying that when you are uneducated you are like an animal.[29]

Do men know more than women about *dharma*, about politics and so on?

It is wrong, but it is exactly like that. Men and women should both know just as much, but in our village it is not like that. Because women never went to school, they don't know much. But, in principle, both are able to acquire the same knowledge. But here they [i.e.women] are not allowed to go anywhere, to gatherings, they are not allowed to go along with a man. Because when they get up, they immediately have to make tea, clean, cook, then off to the field.

Are women animals then?

Yes, because they are uneducated. They are chickens!

On another occasion, Dolma told me about the Sherpa girl from Bigu, who had achieved a professional career as a nurse, living in Kathmandu. The nurse's parents called her back to Bigu several times to propose marriage, but she refused.

I don't want to get married. I don't want to give up my profession and my life at Kathmandu. I have a good job at a hospital in Kathmandu. Why should I go back to the village and become a farmer's wife? I'd rather become an ani.[30]

Dolma admired the nurse, because the latter had had the courage to go to school secretly until her teachers went to see her parents to persuade them to support their daughter's wish to study. Then she was asked for a nursing programme, especially developed for students of village schools to staff the local

[29] See Ch.III, *The recognition of the valley's sacredness*, on the Tibetan *dulwa*, to tame, to civilise, in contrast to be wild, uncivilised.

[30] See also Pigg (1996:197 n.21), "Some women pursue education as a way to avoid marriage."

health centres.[31] In 1994, she was working at a developmental hospital especially for hill people - free of charge and with a staff able to speak local languages besides Nepali - sponsored by a Japanese non-governmental organisation. She had received her training in Japan. The nurse was educated, well-travelled, independent, in short *bikasi*, "developed". Dolma herself had been her classmate - they were about the first Sherpa girls to finish class seven - but she was not allowed to go to Laduk for SCL where the nurse had been recruited. When, instead, Dolma expressed her wish to become a nun, her parents refused. "They say three children in the monastery is enough. There also has to be married in this family." Nevertheless, Dolma's father accepted her refusals of Bigu Sherpa men.

Girls don't want to marry that eagerly any more. When they don't like the boy, they simply refuse. In former times, they were just forced to marry with a proper beating up, but nowadays parents are more indulgent.
Why don't they want to get married that eagerly any more?
Because they go to school nowadays and know more about the world. Are there many spinsters in your country?
I guess so, but it is hard to tell. The difference is that in my country girls also get proper education and can take care of themselves pretty well. That's different here, isn't it?
Yes, but that's also why they want to become *anis*. That is a good alternative to marriage. In Nepal, there are many gombas and every where the *sangha* is growing. Nepal has few jobs, because it has no industries, except for the carpet factories. There is no future for young people. That is why gombas are growing so much.

When Dolma was getting older and suitors came to ask for her younger sister's hand, her father granted her wish to move to Tatopani with his brother and sister-in-law to help them in their trading business. She hoped to start her own business one day.

Dolma's initial shift from scholarly education to a monastic life, as alternatives to a village life as a wife and mother, had become a common move. The nunnery, where "anis study all day", was seen by many a young girl as even a better option than school. Lhazen, for example, shyly responded to my question what she planned to do after school,

I want to become an ani after class ten. My father said he will send me to Laduk, if I pass [class seven]. I never told him about my wish, but I think he is scared I will run away to the gomba. He doesn't like the anis. He says they only sit there and babble and eat other people's food, food they got by hard work on the fields.
Then, why do you want to become an ani?
Because now I have to read other people's books, but anis read *pechas*. Tashi Dolma, she is my cousin, she told me about the *pechas* and about *dharma*. I like to study, and want to learn about *dharma*.

Like Lhazen, Ani Ts.D. had also come to the nunnery to learn to read *dharma*. She had been to school up to class five,

but I only learned useless things. *Dharma* tells you how to live a good life, how you can end all suffering, and how you can be sure of a life as a human being again. In school books it says nothing of how to become a good person. I liked to learn how to read and write Nepali though. I also learned some English words, but I don't know how to speak.

[31] The health centre in Bigu was only inaugurated in 1994, during the elections, constructed with Nepal Congress Party funds. I was told it was staffed for a few days a week early 1996.

Ani Sange Dolma told me she first had tried school, but when the teachers did not come with books after a week, she went home and asked permission to become a nun. In her case, permission was granted immediately (she is the founding *mizar*'s great granddaughter). While she, and many anis with her, felt disappointed about the opportunities Tashi Gomba was offering, it might be refreshing to meet an ani for whom ani life was exactly what she was afraid it would be, a school. She was a thirty year old and divorced by her husband. Since she had no other place to go, she had turned to the nunnery on advice of her monastic aunt.

> People told me the gomba was like a school. I never went to school, and never wanted to. Now I'm here and I have to read. I don't like reading. I don't like to memorise all these texts. I just forget and then ani-la is hitting me. Actually, I don't like to be an *ani* and to have to read so much. Last night, my [late] mother appeared in my dream and she told me to lay off this robe. But what can I do? I have no place to go. Only ani-la is so good to take care of me. If only she would not force me to read *pecha*. Ani Tashi and Ani Sangchup [*surba* nuns] also don't read. But ani-la says it's good for *dharma*.

Ani life at Tashi Gomba, indeed, had developed into a studious life, certainly when compared to educational opportunities their lay sisters had. Yet another feature of their way of life had turned them into *bikasi* women: their travel experiences. For the anis themselves, however, these pilgrimages and visits to other monasteries were also confronting.

*Pilgrimages and encounters with other monastics*

As mentioned in Chapter VII, Bigu anis's first collective pilgrimage took place as part of the *Kalachakra* initiations led by the Dalai Lama, in the 1970s. According to the Meme Lama, transport to the holy sites where the *Kalachakra* was to be held, as well as to the later annual Lumbini ceremonies, were sponsored by the World Federation of Buddhists Nepal,[32] to bring monastics from all over the country, and from all kinds of Buddhist schools and sects, in touch with each other and with the increasing international network of Buddhists.

From the anis' memories, souvenirs and photographs I got the impression that their travelling to large religious gatherings and pilgrimage sites increased after 1986. This might not be surprising as their new abbot - after the Guru Lama's death in 1986 - was, and remained also, Kusho Tsetsu Rimpoche's assistant. Lama Kelsang started to invite the Bigu anis to participate not only in pilgrimages abroad but also to large *pujas* in Nepal as, for instance, the celebrations of *Buddha Jianti* (the birthday of Gautama Buddha, in May) and the Dalai Lama's birthday (on July 6), organised by Taiwanese sponsors. Also when a Kargu gomba in Pokhara requested monastics to perform *Nyungne*, or when *monlam* (Great Wish Prayer) or *wong* (blessing) ceremonies were to take place, Lama Kelsang would call upon his Bigu anis.

During these large religious gatherings, Bigu anis visited monasteries and met with monks and nuns from all over Nepal, from India, Sikkim and Bhutan, and Tibetan refugees. It was through these encounters that they learned the difference between urban and rural monasteries, as Ani Dicki Chöden concluded

> ours is only a village gomba. We don't have opportunities to study as the gombas in the cities have. And our Rimpoche has only gombas in the hills, so there is no other [monastic] place to go.

One young nun, Ani Sange Dolma, had been allowed to stay at Kopan during a monsoon, a Gelug Pa monastery famous for its courses and Western monastics north of Kathmandu, to learn Tibetan handwriting. The stories she brought home of Kopan confirmed the information the nuns had also gathered through monastic brothers and cousins in several other monasteries in Kathmandu, namely that they

[32] The World Federation of Buddhists Nepal was founded in 1980. Kusho Tsetsu Rimpoche was one of its founding members.

enjoyed a lot of education: in Tibetan writing, in English and Nepali, in discussion techniques, rhetoric and exegesis, in advanced music classes (*sangdung* and *geling*), in *thanka* painting and the making of sand *mandala*, and so on. Some younger anis envied the urban monastics also for their being allowed to watch video tapes of English language movies for free, and Hindi movies on their own expense, on Saturdays. This desire, however, was not shared by all. Lama Kelsang's teaching on the importance of "looking inside", meditation, instead of watching television and movies, led some to believe that Kopan was a bad place, where monks and nuns were engaged in

> parrot-*dharma*. They act and dress like *dharma* people, but they are only interested in all kinds of fancy things but never look inside. People say that's because it is Gelug Pa.

When I reacted to this ani's account by asking her whether she thought all Gelug Pa was engaged in "parrot-religion", and how she thought about the Dalai Lama then, being the head of the Gelug Pa order, she flushed with an "I didn't know".

Most nuns had little notion of the existence of different orders within Tibetan Buddhism. They had come to understand that some monasteries followed a different path, resulting in more or less retreats, or more or less reading, but these differences were always explained in terms of it being an urban or a rural monastery, with their differences of means and amounts of support.

The anis were aware of the fact that much of the advantages of an urban monastery were created by the larger amounts of tourists and Western Buddhists, visiting these gomba, as well as the travelling (and networking) of its abbots and monks abroad. With the donations coming in through these people, the urban gomba not only offered its monastics more opportunities to study religious and secular subjects (English), but also supported them with daily meals, new robes, and religious texts for free, without the monastics themselves having to work like the Bigu anis had to, and above all, on the land. In addition, with the occasional individual support of Westerners, urban monastics could afford to buy nice shoes and watches, silk shawls, down winter jackets, beautiful rosaries with gems and real golden or silver *dorje* and *ghanta* (the thunderbolt and bell), golden or silver *mandala* dishes and other religious items, and to follow new trends like small wrist "rosaries" with bright coloured glass pearls. Bigu anis, on the other hand, had to rely on their close relatives living in Kathmandu, which led more often to a distinction between "haves" and "have-nots" of these highly desired "modern" goods. Like the urban monastics, also the more advantaged anis within the community were subject of envious talk, and discussions on proper behaviour in terms of modesty, honesty and devotion to *dharma*.

In short, the economic advantages of monasteries in cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara, and their additional opportunities of religious and secular education, made the anis feel "backward" and "ignorant" village anis in a similar way as their lay sisters felt "backward" and "uncivilised" (wild animals) compared to the young people who led a city life, a "modern" life in Kathmandu, as well as to the anis. The anis' self-reference as "ignorant", however, was also connected to their social identity as Sherpas and, in addition, to the notion of *karma*. While Bigu Sherpas in Kathmandu experienced merely a disadvantage for not being Nepali, that is, not having Nepali as their mother tongue, the anis sensed a similar kind of inferiority towards Tibetan monastics. As one ani once remarked,

> in Tibet, when you can't speak Tibetan, you are nobody. That's why Sherpas are second-rate people. Our language is nothing. It's neither Tibetan nor Nepali.[33]

[33] See Ekvall on Tibetan distinctions between those belong to *gCig*, "we who are one": *CHos Lugs gCig* ("religion-system one"), *KHa Lugs gCig* ("mouth- or part-system one"; culture), *sKad Lugs gCig* ("speech-system one"; language); *Mi Rigs gCig* ("man-lineage one"; race); and *Sa CHa gCig* ("soil-extent one"; territory) (Ekvall 1964:93). Although religion was the first, and language only a third denominator, the Bigu anis still did not feel *nangba*, "those who belong" ("us"), because they felt disadvantaged in their religious practice by their lacking knowledge of Tibetan. See also Tieman (1992).

Language problems with Tibetan lamas had already its precedents in Tashi Gomba's past,[34] with their participating in large ceremonies, however, the anis again had to face the fact that the Tibetan in which religious sermons were communicated was incomprehensible to them. Some nuns accepted their inability and relied on the spiritual, meritorious effect of the words spoken over their heads by lamas and Rimpoches.[35] For others, their inability to understand Tibetan nurtured their feelings of inferiority, and had a moral ring as well.

Tibetans are much better and more honest than Sherpas, because they have more *dharma*

Ani Sonam once explained. Why, I asked.

Because even Tibetan lay people understand *pecha* better than we do. Because they speak Tibetan.

The Bigu anis found it quite natural that Dawa was able to read *pecha*, until she explained to them that the colloquial Tibetan (*phal skad*) she had learnt was quite different from the religious Tibetan language of the texts (*chos skad*). Nonetheless, they preferred to believe that it was easier for Tibetans to learn and to understand religious texts, and as such had a *karmic* advantage over themselves.[36] Similarly, Westerners were also considered to be more honest and reliable in their promises than Nepalis, by the anis as well as by Bigu lay people. According to the anis, I am attempted to conclude, there is a close relation between being more "developed" (Nep.*bikasi*; here, being from a developed country, whereas Nepal is underdeveloped), being better educated, being more "civilised" ("tamed", Tib.*dulwa*), and being more religiously meritorious. In the next paragraph, I will relate these assumptions to their encounters with Westerners visiting their gomba, as well as with their hopes on their next life.

*Encountering Western visitors at Tashi Gomba*

From the mid-1980s onwards, small groups of tourists passed by Tashi Gomba either on their way to Rolwaling or on the one-week trekking route Barabise-Charikot-Kathmandu. In the spring season of 1992, I counted only three trekking groups, in autumn 1994 and spring 1995 about two groups a week passing by.[37] As the number of tourists remained so small, local people between Barabise and the bottom end of the Bigu valley did not consider tourism as an economic opportunity. Only in 1994, two Sherpa families set up a lodge on the pastures of Tinsang La, the pass before entering the Bigu valley. Trekkers with guides, cooks and porters usually set up tents to spend the nights, but small groups of about four "members" could be accommodated at local people's homes. In Bigu, camps were either set up on the school compound down hill, or next to the gomba, and only stayed overnight. These tourists who do nothing more than pass through, seldom sought contact with the local population. The small groups that stayed in the gomba's guesthouse, however, sometimes prolonged their stay with a day or two out of curiosity. They were often served meals in the gomba kitchen, which rendered the *niermu* (kitchen nun) an important task as hostess. During the last ten years, the *niermu*'s reputation within the nunnery depended largely on the contents of the donation box, as it was assumed that the better she was treating foreign guests the more they were willing to give to the gomba.

Ani Dickey Chöden, for instance, had been famous for her easy way of making contact with "*inji*"

34 See Ch.IV, *The problems of language, teaching, and practice.*

35 See, for instance, Ekvall (1964), Tambiah (1985) and Goody (1986) on the magical power of words in oral traditions.

36 The Bigu anis did not know the Tibetan expression *Sems Gi sGo NGag Yin*, "the door of mind is speech" (Ekvall 1964:100), nor a Sherpa equivalent, but they fully agreed to its meaning.

37 Nepal's tourist seasons are in the months of September, October, November, and March, April, May. The Department of Tourism and the Immigration Office did not keep records of trekking permits issued to specific areas.

(the Tibetan term for "English"), by learning English words from them and creating a humorous atmosphere in the *tabsang*, the gomba kitchen. Which, however, resulted in the fact that she lost several cups and plates, and even a butter churn used for making buttertea that a tourist presumably took as a souvenir. When her duty came to an end, she - as the responsible ani - had to replace all the missing items, as was custom before 1993, and had to spend nearly Rps.2000 for her humorous hospitality. The donation box, however, had never been as full as when she transferred her office. Another *niermu* who had gained a reputation as an effective gomba hostess was Ani Thupten Omu, as she always managed to serve her foreign guests a wonderful meal out the little she had in store. These two anis were seen as exemplary to every *niermu* succeeding them, and served as a example to others' (assumed) stinginess, chagrin, laziness and lack of creativity.

Besides this sense of competition, some guests became pen pals to one of the anis. Mostly the *niermu* had turned into their favourite, but sometimes also other anis made foreign friends. The most enduring correspondences, however, were maintained with foreigners who stayed for a longer period of time, visitors who had come with another purpose than mere sightseeing.

Ani Sherap Omu, for instance, became the *mitini* (ritual friend) of a German linguist, a woman who came in the late 1960s to Bigu to collect myths and legends. Although she hated to be reminded of her research, she always stayed in touch and returned to Bigu every few years to visit her monastic friend. Another woman scholar, a French ethnomusicologist, stayed for a couple of months and attempted to research the Bigu Sherpas' oral and musical tradition.[38] She continued to write to Ani Dicki Chöden. Ani Hishi Dolker receives letters from a Danish student, who had been staying at Tashi Gomba in 1990. Ani Thupten Omu recieved mail from an American student, and Ani Sange Dolma had been in touch with a Dutch painter.

As none of the nuns could read nor write English, I was asked to translate the letters for them and to write a return note. Having been the gomba scribe for over a year, I noticed the envy among the nuns who never received any mail, and especially their looks when money, a photograph, or a small present was included. After writing an answer and a note of thanks, it often happened that a neighbour of the receiving ani came to ask me to write another note to be put, together with a photograph of herself, into the same envelope I was going to mail in Kathmandu. I was asked to copy addresses into school exercise books which listed addresses of people they had never met, whose faces were already forgotten, or whom they still remembered. Some had monastic names and addresses in Kathmandu or India, or Bhutan, some were Nepali names from other districts, but most of them were Western names, from Europe and the United States.

The eagerness to get, or remain, in touch with particularly a Westerner, an *inji*, was primarily based on the hope of receiving financial support. While Lama Kelsang and the Meme Lama tried to invite Westerners to support projects that were to benefit the gomba as a whole, the anis would ask for personal sponsorship like they heard their monastic friends and relatives in Kathmandu and other places had (see also Adams 1996; Lopez 1996).[39] It is from the requests they posed to me, and asked me to write to their *inji* pen friends, that I learned what their dreams were.

Not surprisingly, the anis who were approaching their forties, without exception asked for sponsoring of long-term retreats. Since the *tsam khang*, the retreat house uphill from the gomba - donated by the Meme Lama - was under construction they were looking forward to perform one-year meditation re-

[38] She bought the only "traditional" fiddle the Bigu Sherpas had from Dorje's father. No one bothered to make a new instrument ever since.

[39] See also Lopez jr. on his stay in a Tibetan monastery in India, "I was welcomed, but chiefly (I suspected) for my potential as a patron, being requested constantly by the monastery administration to support building projects, to buy raffle tickets, to translate appeals for donations. I was frequently invited by individual monks to elaborate meals which ended in the request that I become their "sponsor", one of the few English words they knew" (1996:274).

treats there. However, they needed the financial means to obtain specific meditation objects, to offer gifts to their *guru lama*, Lama Kelsang, and to pay their retreat assistant as well as for their supplies. Many were afraid they had not saved enough for the one-year retreat, let alone for a three-year, three-month or three-day retreat that is the ultimate meditational practice for a Tibetan Buddhist monastic.[40]

The younger nuns, on the other hand, would request sponsorship to be able to make pilgrimages, but foremost to be invited to the home country of their Western friends. When I asked them why they would like to come, their disarmingly simple answer "why? Well, you are coming here too, aren't you. I would like to see your country, your place." Or, as an other nun admitted, because

> it is boring here. Nothing happens, nothing changes. The first few days, it's nice to see everybody again and to enjoy the peace. But after two weeks, I get bored again and want to go away. But they always find some job for me: to oversee the harvesting and carrying it up here, to supervise the threshing. Or to get firewood for the kitchen from up the mountain. Or to do shopping in Barabise. They always say "you have to do it, you are the champion because you walk so fast". But why can't they do it themselves? When the monsoon starts, I'm off again!

The patron-client relationship the Bigu anis tried to establish with Westerners, into which also Lopez (1996)[41] felt dragged into, was already a phenomenon in Khumbu, as exposed and analyzed by Adams (1996). She writes

> When Sherpas or Westerners give money to monasteries, it is interpreted by Sherpas as a means of gaining both religious merit and local prestige. Likewise, when foreigners give money to Sherpas, it is viewed by Sherpas as a way for foreigners to achieve merit (through acts of compassion) and form local friendships of reciprocal nature [like Ani Sherap Omu and her *mitini*] (Adams 1996:165).

Since the Sherpas in Adams' case were like the younger Bigu anis hoping for small gifts, money and, above all, invitations to, for instance, the United States (ibid.:221), a Westerner sponsoring a Bigu ani was supposed then to gain merit both by doing "*dharma* work" (supporting female monastics and their gomba) and by way of compassion with the anis (that is, as a kind of charity). The very fact, however, that sponsorship is a means of gaining religious merit also entails the notion that the more well-off can spend more money on supporting monastics, and thus potentially have more merit than those who are less well-off. As such, Bigu anis definitely conceived foreigners as more meritorious than themselves based on their financial means. One ani wanted to be reborn in the West, i.e. The Netherlands, because she seems to engage the idea one can "buy" oneself into heaven.

> I want to be reborn in your country. I do not think you have to be an ani to get to the heaven of the gods. Also as a lay woman, you gain merit. It's all a matter of money. Look at you, you are even paid by your government to do *dharma* work. You can go and visit high lamas. You can even go and meet Yeshe Norbu [i.e. the Dalai Lama]. We Bigu anis only see him at *Kalachakra*, from a very far distance.

The idea of having been born in the West is the result of good *karma* was also expressed by the Meme Lama. He once remarked to me,

> you must have led a good former life that you were reborn there where machines do all the arduous work.

[40] Lama Lobsang, the Meme Lama's son, had finished his three-year, three-month, three-day in 1994, and was highly revered since as a tantric master.

[41] See Ch.VIII, n.37.

But particularly in the company of anis, he liked to emphasise the uselessness of my work and knowledge. Unlike the anis, he did not perceive my research as religious work, but understood its "scientific" nature and its academic goal. He tried to get across to the anis that my work did in no way lead to a spiritual development, as *dharma* practices, the meditations, the *pujas*, and the reading of the *pecha* they themselves did. He failed, however. For many anis, I was much more of a religious expert than they were since I carried all these books on religion with me, knew names of deities and *bodhisattvas* and Rimpoches they had never heard of, and my questions on, for instance, concepts such as "attachment and detachment", "*sems*" (soul) and the "inherent Buddha nature", on the difference between "compassion" and "charity", "heaven" and "Enlightenment" raised more questions in them than that they could provide me with answers. It took me my entire primary fieldwork to understand that these issues went far beyond their comprehension, unaccustomed as they were to think about, and discuss, the Dharma critically. In the meantime they already assumed I knew more about these matters than they did. The fact that they had to teach me even the basics of religious practice, even showed pride in teaching me short *mantra*, how to use the rosary, how to prostrate properly, did not detract from my assumed knowledge of the Dharma. My innocence in these simple practices were explained by my "not being born as a Buddhist", that is, in a Buddhist society. They could be learned easily, and were as such not comparable to the booklore I had. And which the anis felt they were lacking.

Monks who had accompanied the Tulku and Lama Kelsang to Bigu then used to address me as "Ani-la", as an appreciation of my devotion to the study of the Dharma (as they conceived my work at Tashi Gomba), which eventually was to lead to something comparable to the *geshé* degree - the apex of monastic Tibetan Buddhist learning. This honourary title, "Ani-la", was soon taken over by, particularly, young anis.[42] Also other foreigners, who presented themselves explicitly as Buddhist practitioners, were considered to be religious specialists who earned the right to be addressed either "Ani-la" or "Lama-la". Again this title was earned by their religious knowledge - although theirs, unlike mine, was not only accumulated through books, but also through teachings, initiations and meditation practices often from a large range of lamas at different Tibetan Buddhist centres in Europe and the United States. But it was most obviously earned by their knowledge of religious texts, read and recited with the help of transcripts from Tibetan, which enabled them not only to take part in *puja*, but also to explain to anis the content of the texts (with the help of Dawa).

The religious knowledge of the *inji* Buddhists who visited their gomba the anis interpreted as a clear-cut outcome of a good *karma*. Not only were they (re)born in a society wealthy and developed enough to provide education for all, they must also have been Buddhists in their former lives that they felt attracted to the Dharma while being born in a non-Buddhist society. In other words, they must have been Tibetan, Bhutanese, or Sherpa in an earlier life.[43] Like the *kutum* of 1992 I had asked to become my *loben*, my teacher, reacted to my learning of the Tibetan alphabet within three days,

> you must have been Tibetan in your past life, may be even an ani, that you learn *Ka-Kha* so fast. It takes most of us three months! You probably just have to recall it.

It is not surprising then that several young anis like Ani Pasang Dolma wished to be reborn in the West. My usage of "the West", however, needs some elucidation. Of course the anis never used anything

[42] I did not always feel comfortable with my honorary title. On several occasions I tried to explain to them the distinctions between reading, knowing, and understanding. However, the anis argued that I at least understood the language in which the Buddhist literature was written, was literally able to read what they said and thus able to study their contents (Nep.*pathaunu* means both "to read" and "to study"). Most of them had no such entry to the *pecha* they merely learned to recite.

[43] The anis may also have heard of the reincarnations of Rimpoches in Spain and the United States from Lama Kelsang, but I did not consider this during my fieldwork.

like *pashicam* (west), but had adopted, like many Nepalis (see Pigg 1996:172), the notion of *bikasi desh* (developed country as opposite to underdeveloped Nepal) or simply *bidesh*, foreign country. Nevertheless, they had come to understand that *bikasi desh*, with its wealth, was more or less synonymous with "west", that is west of Nepal (including Hong Kong and Singapore!) as exemplified by the following statement.

> A Rimpoche once told me that I would be reborn as a daughter of a rich family in Western Nepal [note "rich" and "Western"]. But, maybe, if I do many *tsam*, I could be reborn even further west, may be in your country.

Usually, however, anis would refer to a specific country that they knew was a *bikasi bidesh*. It is interesting that in answering my question where they would like to lead a next life they would always mention a country where one of their foreign guests came from, notably Holland (because that is where I who posed the question came from, as well as the Dutch painter), Germany, France and America, but never Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Singapore - they knew as *bikasi* home countries of sponsors of major Buddhist festivals and ceremonies. This seemed strange to me since they had learned from Lama Kelsang that these countries were Buddhist (probably in the sense that they had a long Buddhist history, and large portions of their population considered themselves Buddhists). I presumed they would prefer a "developed" as well as a "traditional" Buddhist society above a non-Buddhist *inji* country. But of course I had not yet taken into account their ideas on Western Buddhists as "reincarnated Tibetans or Sherpa", nor did I realise the impact of direct contact with "developed" foreigners yet. For most of them who had stayed at Tashi Gomba for an extended period of time were, like me, women.

All the students mentioned above, from Germany, France, Denmark, the United States and the Netherlands, with whom anis were "corresponding" were young women in their twenties and thirties. All were highly educated and had sufficient means to travel but were, moreover, unmarried, independent, and courageous enough to travel all by themselves. One Buddhist practitioner also came alone, while another came with her husband.[44] In light of this, Ani Pasang Dolma's conclusion that you do not need to be an ani to "get to heaven" could be pulled further, into the social realm, with a statement like "you do not need to be an ani to become an independent, educated, well-travelled woman". In other words, these Western young women acted as social examples, as role models, and in a more profound way than Tibetan and Sherpa women leading a "modern" life in Kathmandu. Since it must have been the anis' contacts with these Western women that changed the gender-specific rebirth they wished for.

The trajectory of rebirth towards the best place they could imagine, "the heaven of the Gods", was valid for most older anis as well as lay women (like the mother of Ani Thupten S.) through a life as a man - "because a man's life is much easier" - and preferably one who would become a monk. Among the younger anis, however, voices were heard that the life of a Western woman (like the ani quoted above) would make a life as a man unnecessary.

> In your country life is easy. Then it doesn't matter whether you are a man or a woman. But I like to be a woman. I would like to be a woman in your country, or in France. I don't think I will become an ani, but I will get myself a good job like you, and then do a lot of *dharma* work.
> What do you mean by *dharma* work?
> You know, doing *puja*, being *jindak* [i.e.sponsor] for gomba, build *chörten* like the Rimpoche [i.e.Kusho Tsetsu] and Lama Kelsang did in Spain, going to many teachings, that sort of thing.

Through their encounters with Western Buddhist women at their nunnery, and their confrontations with urban monastics, the anis came to perceive Nepal as an underdeveloped state, and their home valley

[44] Besides this husband, a Buddhist practitioner too, two other men had come to practice a retreat, from France and from Spain.

and their gomba in particular in terms of economic means, of educational opportunities and of woman's position in society. Consequently, the overall self-image of the Bigu anis was one of being "ignorant", "backward", and "poor". As such, they seemed to conceive a life in a Western country as a prelude to "the heaven of the Gods", as a kind of paradise on earth.

The anis' negative self-image was only reinforced by the Western visitors, that is to say by those Western Buddhist practitioners whose stay I witnessed. They came with a similar paradisiacal image of the nunnery to Bigu as the anis fostered about the West and Western Buddhists; Tashi Gomba as a kind of Shambhala or Shangri La on earth, and its anis as "pure", "authentic" Tibetan Buddhists, full of wisdom and compassion. This imagery already has a long history in European and North-American perception of Tibet and its people (see Korom 1997), but with the growing Western interest in Buddhism, and the opening up of Nepal to mountaineering and tourism, the myth of Tibet extended to Tibetan Buddhist people such as the Sherpas.

> This expansion drew on portrayals of a forbidden and remote Shangri-la found in Western accounts. Along with thousands of Tibetans living in Kathmandu as refugees since the late 1950s, Sherpas became for tourists (and others) some of the most accessible living representatives of the Tibetan Buddhist culture (Adams 1996:129).

Unlike the Western gaze of tourists, however, the Western Buddhist practitioners who came to Tashi Gomba for retreat were soon confronted with the down-to-earth realities of Tashi Gomba's everyday life. Their initial excitement of being in the "mystical" Himalayas for meditation practice in succession of Buddhist heroes like Milarepa, the beauty and peacefulness of the place, and about the anis as "embodiments of the Dharma" with an "innate" capacity to meditate, was soon overtaken by emotional responses to the silence, the remoteness, the dullness of daily life at the gomba, and the hygienic inconveniences and monotonous diet. While they had planned to stay for at least two months, to perform the *Dorje Sempa tsam* (Skt. *Vajrasattva*, a purification practice which takes four months but had to be shortened because of their visa validity), some only managed a few days, others could cope with "mystical and pure" life at the nunnery for only a little more than two weeks before they ran off, back to Kathmandu.

These flights were preceded by days of discussions with me and Dawa about the anis' working on the fields and handling money, about their little religious practice and knowledge, days of complaints and faces showing their disgust with the human excrement between the trees and the simple meals they got from the kitchen ani, outbursts of anger about their lack of privacy, and of frustration about the difficulty to communicate with the anis and the absence of the lama. The anis saw their dissatisfaction growing, and sensed the accusations made behind their backs of them being "stupid" and "totally unfit" to guide these Western practitioners in their retreats. Most of them refrained from any reaction to these practitioners' behaviour, as silent witnesses. Only a few expressed their wonder about their *inji* guests' lack of self-control and their inability to concentrate on what they had come for in the first place, meditation. Many a young nun, however, took the Westerners' complaints and accusations seriously.

> Yes, this is a poor place. We have no toilets, and no proper food to offer. It must have been hard for them. It's true, isn't it? We don't know much. We do only chant *pecha*, but we don't know what we are reciting. Speaking *dharma* out loud gives us merit, but it would be better if we also understood everything we read. But the *kempu* has not time to teach us, and the Rimpoche [i.e.the Tulku] says there is no money to have other lama staying with us to teach us here.

In her impressive and intriguing analysis (1996), Vincanne Adams shows how the Sherpas of Khumbu have become aware of the images Westerners cherish of them (as being "born" mountaineers and "authentic" Buddhists), and how they are engaged in a process of mimicry for decades already, that is, in

attempting to come up to this Western imagery. The Bigu anis, however, seem to be in a phase of internalising Western disappointment of them falling short of the expectations, by subjecting themselves as "ignorant, uneducated village anis from backward and poor Nepal".[45] This difference with Khumbu Sherpas can be explained by the fact that Bigu, unlike Khumbu, has only recently become entangled into a transnational flow of tourism and urban migration, which has left most anis still unaware of the "myths" that surround their "Sherpaness". Yet, in their abbot's promotion activities for Tashi Gomba to Western Buddhist practitioners as the perfect place for retreat, we can already read a similar process of mimicry having taken off, for similar reasons as in Khumbu: to assure Western sponsorship. Because both Lama Kelsang and the Tulku have come to see Western support as indispensable for Tashi Gomba's future. The two leading lamas, however, do not seem to agree about the form this support has to take as each of them has different ideas on the path the nunnery has to take.

*Lama Kelsang and his scheme*

Lama Kelsang had been Kusho Tsetsu's assistant already for many years, and had taken over the supervision of the latter's monastery (Bakang Gomba) in 1980, when he was appointed as Tashi Gomba's abbot in 1986 after the Guru Lama's death. Like the Guru Lama since the founding of Sailung Gomba, however, he has been spending little time at his nunnery, but not only because he also was *kempu* of the Yelmu monastery. In 1987, Kusho Tsetsu was invited to visit to Europe for the first time. Ever since he has travelled extensively throughout Western and Eastern Europe, North and South America and Australia teaching and giving initiations. And Lama Kelsang as his right-hand man accompanied him. His home base became Swayambunath, Kathmandu, with Kusho Tsetsu.

Dividing his time between Kusho Tsetsu and his two gomba, he spent about a month a year at Bigu, usually in May when the offices were to be handed over. He would subsequently also preside over a *Nyungne*, taking the opportunity to give teachings. Observing such an occasion in 1994, his teachings entailed an explanation of the *Nyungne pecha*, emphasising the necessity of purifying oneself of sins committed in former lives and this life and of "looking inside yourself". Particularly interesting to me, however, were his associations with daily affairs in the gomba, his pointing at specific anis as exemplary of right *dharma* discipline, and moreover the interpretation he offered of an "outside" life compared to a monastic life at Tashi Gomba.[46]

In emphasising the importance of meditation, Lama Kelsang set "looking inside yourself", that is, scrutiny of one's thoughts and actions, against "watching television and movies". In a lengthy monologue he agitated against these corrupting inventions which distract the mind of concentration on the Dharma, from "mindfulness", by forgetting oneself completely while watching. In addition, he argued that all the programmes and films deal with violence and/or love, both very unsuitable themes for a monastic. Subsequently, he ventilated his opinions about "city life" in a way that reminded me of a discussion I had with him on the migration tendency of young Bigu Sherpas. He said,

> People go away from here, to India, to Kathmandu. Especially young people. Already for twenty years they go. They go to school, they learn many things, and then they feel too good for farming. They go to the city and leave the fields empty. But [in the city] they are poor, no job. And then they steal, and kill, and rob. And they become greedy.

[45] On the collisions of imageries of the West and *inji* by anis, and imageries of the Himalaya and its people by Westerners, and the construction and restructuring of both their self-images, see Van Ede (n.d.b.). For imageries and fantasies in golbal cultural economy, see Appadurai 1990.

[46] It should be noted that the abbot spoke in Tibetan which I do not master, and in a very low voice which made taping impossible. As such I can not quote, but can only render Dawa's summary and some anis' comments.

With similar remarks during his *Nyungne* teaching, he tried to convince the nuns that they had to accept their fate, their *karma* of being born in Bigu, and that they should consider themselves fortunate to be anis who devote their life to *dharma*. No doubt, his warning against the immoralities of "city life" were inspired by the two anis who had left the nunnery in the previous year (1993).[47] The abbot clearly feared, with good reason, that others as dissatisfied with the situation at Tashi Gomba would follow. He avoided mentioning these two anis and their leaving, but he did make examples of anis who did their duties without complaint, lived soberly and silently, and devoted much of their time to meditational practices. As such, his disciplining efforts entailed the message that they should be content with their life as it is, and with Tashi Gomba as it is, also concerning its educational opportunities. Because for the abbot, the core of the problem of young people leaving to the city (as quoted above) as well as the young anis' leaving, was consisted by the school. In the following statement, he pours out comparisons between Europe and Nepal, and between secular education and religious education, and his view on the needs of Bigu anis.

> Now, there is democracy in Nepal. But a democracy based on India. That's not good. Too many parties fighting each other. European democracy is better. In Tibet, the monasteries were the only schools. Only in Lhasa there were governmental schools. But in Nepal, education is not good. Also Bigu has a school. **But for anis from the village, *pecha* are enough. When they get too much knowledge, they run away**. They want to go to the city, they want to have a big life.

Obviously, however, this did not count for his monks at Bakang Gomba. Many of them spent much of their time with their abbot in Swayambunath, and some even accompanied him on his travels to Europe and the United States. Not that they received special attention from their abbot in Swayambu, but they did get opportunities to learn English and to explore personal talents,[48] to meet monastics from other gomba (and to watch movies), and to participate in teachings Kusho Tsetsu and Lama Kelsang offered to Western Buddhists whom they had met during their travels and who had come to visit them in Nepal. Knowledge and city life were clearly not as seductive to his monks as they were to his anis.[49] Needless to say that ani requests for secular education were turned down, and that none of them was ever invited on the lama's travels abroad. On the contrary, when Ani Karma Sangmo had found a sponsor to organise (and pay) medical treatment of her "stomach problem" in his home country, it turned out that Lama Kelsang kept her passport. To travel abroad then his consent was needed, and I wondered whether she would have gotten it. Lama Kelsang was away, in Hong Kong, and when he returned it was too late.

Lama Kelsang's disciplinary advice to the Bigu anis to accept their *karma* of being Nepalese nuns from a rural gomba who should devote their life particularly to meditation and retreat definitely has a misogynic feel to it. On the other hand, his monks and his gomba at Yelmu also did not seem to receive much of his attention either. What ruled his, and Kusho Tsetsu's, interest were the Western Buddhists. They were from "developed" countries the abbot admired for (among other things) their political stability and education systems. Compared to their countries Nepal was a lost cause; as were his rural gomba, so it seemed. When discussing with me a large donation made by a Swiss doctor for new housing quarters in Bigu (in May 1992), he remarked,

[47] See below, *Voting with their feet*.

[48] Like Sange Lama, who had been an apprentice of the Meme Khepa, and showed interest in construction design. He accompanied Kusho Tsetsu and Lama Kelsang to Malaga, Spain, to build a *Kalachakra* stupa there in summer 1994.

[49] Although it was one of his monks, actually, who had fallen in love with an Western woman practitioner who had stayed in Swayambu for some time. She was sent home, and the monk to Yelmu for retreat. "To clear my mind and my heart", as he confided to me at his farewell.

But we need no rooms any more. Now there is a school in Bigu. There they [i.e. girls] learn, then they go to Kathmandu and marry,

implying that the popularity of nunhood in Bigu was dwindling anyway. That was definitely the case with his monastery in Yelmu, that only counted sixteen monks in 1994.

From my meetings with Lama Kelsang, at Tashi Gomba as well as at his office in Swayambu, I got the impression that he preferred to concentrate his time and energy on Western Buddhists who, having passed the stage of seeking "development" in the secular realm, were more dedicated to the Dharma, that is more directed by religious motivations, than his monks and nuns. As such, he seemed to see the future of the monastic communities in Yelmu and Bigu merely as instrumental to the growing interest of Westerners in Buddhist practice.

In 1994, a new and impressive gomba was under construction just behind Kusho Tsetsu's home at Swayambunath. The temple hall and its guesthouse were sponsored by *Karma Kargyud Pa* centres in Eastern and Western Europe and the United States (it cost an estimated $ 7,000,000) to accommodate its students seeking spiritual guidance and teachings of Kusho Tsetsu. Obviously, it also had to personify his reputation as a spiritual leader in a way his former gomba in Yelmu never could. Bakang Gomba was too far out of Kathmandu, and it was a too small and shabby place. Besides, most of its monks were staying with their lamas in Swayambunath for years already, and it was they who were to populate the new religious centre annex monastery, to become the stable factor in a fluctuating community of *inji* practitioners. Bakang Gomba was left to the few who wanted to dedicate the rest of their lives in retreat, and - as I initially assumed - left to die out like Sailung Gomba. However, at my farewell visit in April 1995, I heard that two male students were leaving for Yelmu, for retreat. In addition, Lama Kelsang showed me a flyer he had distributed in Germany the year before with the request for donations to replace Bakang Gomba's wooden roof. Clearly, the gomba had to be saved and, in due time, was probably to serve the same goal as I already knew Tashi Gomba was to, if the abbot got his way.

In May 1994, Lama Kelsang gave me a tour of the gomba compound, to show me the changes that had taken place since my first stay in 1992. He showed me the new sleeping quarter of the Tulku and its separate kitchen house, toilet and storeroom, all extensions to the old *simsung*. Then he took me up the mountain slope, and pointed out the place where he planned a new row of ani rooms. His pride, however, was formed by the retreat house (*tsam khang*), a square building under construction containing four meditation rooms with kitchen and bathroom. From there, we had a beautiful view over the whole gomba compound, the *duang* (temple hall) and the ani quarters. Then he said,

I want to build a four-metre high wall around it. For protection. Tashi Gomba has to become a place of retreat. What do you think? You can help me with measuring.

His plan was to extend the *tsam khang* in the future, or even to purchase the meadow next to the gomba too to build separate retreat houses, specifically for Western Buddhists.

They come to Nepal for meditation. Here, it is very peaceful, very quiet. And it's very close to where Milarepa stayed - you know? - and also very close to where the [Drugpa] Rimpoche did meditation. This is a perfect place for *dharma*.

"And what about the anis?", I asked him.

They will never have sorrow about food and money any more. They can be, you know, *tsam* assistants of the people from Europe and America who come here for retreat. You know, cooking and cleaning.

"And what about their education?", meaning their opportunities for religious guidance.

They can come to Kathmandu in winter to listen to teachings. But it is no good for them to stay in the city too long. They will get spoiled by movies and television. Foreign people have already learnt that

television is no good. That's why they come here, to do retreat and meditation, to look into themselves instead of looking at the bad world.
As we walked back down to the nunnery, a cuckoo sang in the surrounding trees.
Do you have this bird in your country?
Yes, it's a cuckoo. It throws the eggs out of other birds' nests to lay his own egg instead.
Yes? I didn't know.

Lama Kelsang seemed to entertain a main interest in Western Buddhists at the expense of his Nepalese/Sherpa monastics' hopes and expectations. However, the choices he was making have to be understood also as part of a loyalty game he must have found himself entangled in. Being the assistant of Kusho Tsetsu and, at the same time, the abbot of gombas under the overall supervision of the Tulku, he literally oscillated between the global and the local. On one hand, he was supposed to take care of Kusho Tsetsu and his affairs, and to accompany him on his travels (which in itself he did not find unpleasant at all); on the other hand, he had to take care of the Tulku's rural gombas. Since Kusho Tsetsu was the Tulku's elder, his first *guru lama*, and his predecessor in heading the Drugpa Rimpoche's lineage, Lama Kelsang owed more reverence to Kusho Tsetsu. His position as abbot of Bakang Gomba and Tashi Gomba (and Sailung Gomba) then had to be subjected to his position next to Kusho Tsetsu. The best he could do was to involve the monastic communities in Kusho Tsetsu's global ambitions. For, to secure any future for these rural gombas, financial support from outsiders was needed; money that the Tulku lacked for his hopes that were more locally focused and more in accordance with Bigu anis' desires.

*The Tulku and his dream*

Contrary to Kusho Tsetsu and Lama Kelsang, the Tulku has not been participating in the larger transnational network of Buddhists. His travels and reputation as a *guru lama* are limited to Nepal, Bhutan and India, and subsequently his contacts with Western Buddhists was confined. His ambition centres on his heritage as the Drugpa Rimpoche's reincarnation, the monasteries and nunneries of his lineage. Eliciting from statements made by Bigu anis, as well as from my own encounters with him, I can conclude that his ideas of Tashi Gomba's future development differ substantially from Lama Kelsang's plans for the nunnery.

Unlike his abbot Lama Kelsang, the Tulku acknowledged his young anis' desire for education. Moreover, he saw their development in both religious and secular subjects as an improvement of their spiritual practice and understanding. In 1988, he invited a lama from Tsum Gomba to Bigu to improve the anis' competence in playing the two main musical instruments used in religious performances, the *sangdung* (an alpine horn-like instrument) and the *geling* (very similar to a oboe). When Ani Thupten Sangmo desired additional coaching on the *geling*, the Tulku addressed Kusho Tsetsu Rimpoche's sister, herself an expert on the *geling*. The Bigu ani stayed at Swayambu for three months to study with an American student of Kusho Tsetsu's sister.

During my first stay at Tashi Gomba in 1992, Ani Sange Dolma (then sixteen year old) told me she had discussed the possibility of studying Tibetan medicine at a Buddhist university in India with her aunt, Ani Karma Sangmo, who was in a Kathmandu hospital at the time. However, neither the subsequent *umses* nor the lamas, Lama Kelsang and the Tulku, were willing to give her permission to leave the nunnery. Nevertheless, the Tulku arranged that she could take part in Tibetan handwriting courses given at Kopan monastery just north of Kathmandu. She was expected to teach the Bigu anis on her return, but somehow that never happened.

In 1991, a Nyingma *geshé* from Jiri, the uncle of Ani Tsering Dolma, issued an exercise book of Tibetan of which the Tulku bought copies for each of his Bigu anis. Many nuns worked through the school book, filling pages with Tibetan characters but, without proper teaching, their efforts remained restricted to mere copying. Except for Ani Karma Sangmo, who managed to write her own thoughts in Tibetan and

often turned to Dawa for help and correction. She was the real autodidact among them, managed even to get a Tibetan-English instruction, with English pronunciation in Tibetan script, to learn a little English. She could have been the perfect *loben* (teacher), but either her health was too bad or she was too busy with the gomba's administrative affairs in her function of *nierpa* (accountant).

Then, in 1993, the Tulku's brother, a United States citizen, came to visit Tashi Gomba. He started to teach the anis English, but unfortunately he had to leave for business soon after. However, he left a flyer, probably written on instigation by the Tulku, saying that Tashi Gomba

> is facing a big problem without proper teachers to guide all the nuns. The monastery now requires a few well qualified teachers, with the knowledge of Tibetan, English and Nepalese language.
>
> The reason for the required of these languages are as:-
>
> 1. The Tibetan language is the most important language to teach the nuns, since all the religious scripts are in the Tibetan language.
>
> 2. The importance of Nepalese language is that since the monastery is located in the region of Nepal, it becomes a prime language to communicate with the locals.
>
> 3. It is even important for them to have a basic knowledge of the English language to communicate with the travellers and monastery visitors.
>
> May the precious Dharma continue, increase and may all be auspicious (duly stamped by the Tulku, "Drukpa Rimpoche", once with his Kathmandu address and once with Tashi Gomba's address).

Not surprisingly then, the Tulku asked Dawa and me to teach the anis English and Nepali. After his first initial shock of having - after Fürer-Haimendorf - again a foreigner nosing around at his nunnery, he rejected my offer of a large donation.

> Knowledge of languages lasts longer than money.

Dawa and I took up this duty happily. With the financial help of the American Peace Corps,[50] we bought school books, copies, pencils, sharpeners, etc., which arrived in January 1995. After the dissensions about Lumbini had ebbed away,[51] our teaching activities extended from one hour of class a day to a full-time business from 6 a.m. till midnight, as anis would come at all times for coaching in their homework, rehearsing pronunciation and so on. We worked through two exercise books - which would have taken two years at school - in two months. I am sure many a school teacher would have envied us for our students' enthusiasm and fervour.

Calling Dawa and me in for tea after one class, the Tulku suddenly forwarded the idea that he would like to send his anis to school. He was worried about the many stomach complaints local people came to ask him medicine and amulets for. He thought it would be good if some of the anis would have some medical education. But then they needed to go for SLC. He fell silent. There was an organisational and a financial problem. He could not send his anis to the local school, and certainly not to a boarding school in Brabise or Laduk for the advanced classes and the examinations. In Kathmandu, the anis could go

[50] I thank Jim Schellenger on behalf of the anis of Bekung Gomba for his efforts.

[51] See Ch.VII, *The Dharamsala conflict*.

from a religious centre to a school, but he had no centre, no space to accommodate them there. Nor did he have the financial means to support the anis in Kathmandu or to appoint teachers at the nunnery. As implied in the flyer, he had to rely on volunteers to organise and teach, and since his request was only put in English (with neither a Tibetan nor a Nepali translation), pinned up in the kitchen and next to the *duang* entrance, all his hopes seem to be placed in *inji* visitors; Westerners he did not know, who came to his nunnery as tourists, as students, or as Buddhist practitioners sent by Kusho Tsetsu and Lama Kelsang.

*Voting with their feet*

Once when I told an ani about my visit to Kusho Tsetsu, she asked me,

> Which Rimpoche do you like better, Tsetsu Rimpoche or Drugpa Rimpoche?

I was surprised. She was one of the most withdrawn, and devoted, anis, and about the last I expected to ask such a question. Though she must have posed this question to herself also, but refrained from sharing her thoughts with me after my answering "both, each Rimpoche in his own way." No doubt, there has been much discussion going on behind the doors of the anis' little rooms, among friends, on issues of loyalty and respect towards the Tulku, towards Kusho Tsetsu and Lama Kelsang, towards their community, discussing options and strategies to fulfil their hopes and dreams. There was little they could do, except for fighting the older nuns who they accused of refraining them from going away on pilgrimage, to Dharamsala, to Lumbini. Or to leave Tashi Gomba forever.

I had only seen young Ani Sange Dolma for two weeks before Losar in 1992, but we had some intensive talks about education. It was during one of these sessions that she told me she wanted to become a Tibetan medical doctor, but instead was allowed to learn writing at Kopan. I remember I urged her to talk to the Tulku again, and to Lama Kelsang who sounded very reasonable to me. I told her she had a right to develop herself, and that her knowledge might be for the well-being of the whole gomba. Upon my return in 1994, I was anxious to see her again. But then I was told that she, and Ani Tsering Chöden, had not returned from a pilgrimage to Bodhgaia three months earlier. As it turned out from letters they had written to two other Bigu anis, they had gone for a *Nyingma Pa* university in Mysore, in the company of Ani Tsering's *geshé* uncle. The news had spread through the whole valley, and all the nuns and their relatives acknowledged they had not run away for marriage, but for studies. The *umse* called them "fools".

The two ani friends, Ani Juden Dolma and Ani Thupten Dolma, who received their letters, were anxious to show me how they renounced their leaving, to tell me they would never be allowed to come back and that all their possessions were to be confiscated by the gomba. And that the two runaways had written about their troubles of being admitted to the monastery without a recommendation by their Rimpoche, the Tulku. Nevertheless, Ani Juden was willing to give me their address.

Two months later, in August 1994, I received the answer to my letter to Ani Sange Dolma - written in English, but probably not by herself - with which I started this book.[52]

> Yes, we two decided to come down in South India monastery because we felt so unhappy that we could not study, we heard that there in a South Indian monastery, especially in Nyingmapa sect, we will get nice education. So, we thought that man without education is like a bird without wings, so, we decided to leave from Bigu and to come here. [...] We two are feeling so happy over here, we are not regretting leaving [Tashi Gomba] because here climatic condition, food condition and the most important is education [are much better] over here. [...] One thing left to tell you that we asked permission of Rimpoche and canpos [i.e. *kempu*, abbot], but we didn't get permission from them. So, we came down casually, meaning, without asking others.

[52] See Ch.I.

Ani Sange Dolma must have discussed her wish to study with the Tulku, and Lama Kelsang, in the summer of 1993 when the Tulku was there to reorganise the community, when his brother taught English and wrote the flyer. And when the Tulku, according to Ani Karma Sangmo, also tried to install a full day's programme of religious practices. Ani Karma Sangmo, who was Ani Sange Dolma's aunt, had replied to the Tulku's programme that such was only possible if he would also supplied them with food; since it was impossible to do *puja* full-time if they also had to work on the fields, fetch firewood and gather the harvest, and to go to their families to ask for supplies. Ani Karma Sangmo also told us that her family wanted her to move to Kathmandu, to a larger gomba, but that it made her sad to think of leaving the gomba she had seen growing and developing. That obviously had not held her back from stimulating her young niece, Ani Sange Dolma, to seek her destiny elsewhere. The company and safety of the *Nyingma geshé* then offered an acceptable solution.

Ani Sange Dolma's and Ani Tsering Chöden's leaving must have made a strong impression on their Tulku in particular, because a year later he repeated Ani Sange Dolma's argument (which I had brought up myself in 1992) that it would be good for the anis to have some expertise in Tibetan medicine. But he saw no way out than to have patience, but time was pressing.

Over my farewell dinner with Lama Kelsang in March 1995, he told me that three other anis had left for Mysore: the two who had kept a correspondence with Ani Sange Dolma and Ani Tsering Chöden, and one of their neighbouring sisters. They had gone to Lumbini and then to Bodhgaia with the other anis, when suddenly they had disappeared. Only a few days ago, a letter had been delivered to Tashi Gomba stating that they had followed in Ani Sange's footsteps. Only then, I remembered how Ani Juden had asked me to make photographs of all four corners of her little room at Tashi Gomba. I had not suspected that she was preparing her departure, since she had been so convincing in rejecting Ani Sange Dolma's leaving. I decided to send her photographs to the same address in Mysore.

Lama Kelsang's face did not show any emotion. After long minutes of silence, I suggested in a faint voice that perhaps it was all my fault, that my presence at Tashi Gomba had given them wrong ideas. But he waved this notion aside. "You needed experience."

Later that night back in his office, he said,

> You have to write a book for examination, yes? Then you write how poor Bigu is. In Tibet, monasteries lived from donations of the people, but here that is not possible. Monasteries have to organise themselves. It would be nice if the monastery could also offer food to the anis. Robes are not important. They last for two, three years. But they have to eat everyday. That is more important, and even that the monastery can not give.

*Reflection*

During the late 1980s and the 1990, Tashi Gomba became entangled in a global cultural and economic network through tourism and Western Buddhist visitors, through their lamas' invitations for teachings and initiations all over the world and the anis's own increasing travelling experiences, and through their relatives' migration to Kathmandu and India. In other words, to use one of Appadurai's concepts (1990), the transnational network in which Bigu became involved was mainly constituted by "ethnoscape", the flow of people. These people, each in their own way, fostered images, imaginings, imageries of another world, the world of the city, the world in the West, the world of monastics in urban areas, the mythical world in the Himalayas, the world of the anis. By their moving they turned, in the words of Appadurai the imagination into

> a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people) and no longer mere contempla-

tion (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organised field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labour and of culturally organised practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ("individuals") and globally defined fields of possibility. (...) The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (Appadurai 1990:4)

In order to take part in this "ethnoscape", however, - to escape from their peripheral world, Bigu Sherpas began to feel a need, and necessity, to participate in the "ideoscape", to mention another of Appaduria's concepts in an attempt to analyze distinct global flows; the "ideoscape" as a flow of knowledge and ideas, through education.

Those who had the least access to education, as well as the freedom of mobility, were the Sherpa women. The only way for escape they saw, particularly during the 1980s, was nunhood. The anis of Tashi Gomba had constructed an image of their gomba as a centre of learning, and their pilgrimages around Nepal and to India, suggested their being a kind of women of the world. As such, their community grew explosively.

Once an ani at Tashi Gomba, however, they stopped comparing themselves to their lay mothers and sisters, but with urban monastics, monks and Western Buddhists instead. Consequently, their self-image became one of "village anis", deprived of educational opportunities, restricted by poverty.

Their lamas have sensed, and experienced, the anis' growing dissatisfaction and have been trying to find solutions in its cause, its flow of people. Since Buddhist practitioners from Western, developed countries seemed to have the means and the interest in their religion, all the hopes have been placed upon them. However, the two lamas in charge, the Tulku and Lama Kelsang, had different opinions on the kind of support had to be requested from the *inji*. The well-educated and well-travelled abbot had experienced the global world, and assumed its dangers for his uneducated anis from a rural gomba. In this larger world, he had also encountered Buddhists who sought an escape of their world into retreat. Lama Kelsang's solution thus was an emphasis on the path of *tantra* - that is, emphasising meditation and retreat - for the Bigu anis as well as their gomba. In his view, Tashi Gomba had to turn its remoteness and peacefulness into an advantage, by developing into a place of retreat for Western Buddhists. As such, these Westerners were to provide the money to keep the nunnery going. In his view, education for the anis occupied a secondary place. The Tulku, however, saw the future of Tashi Gomba not as separated from a larger world, but as part of it. In that sense, his perspective, not of " a man of the world", but of a local Rimpoche, devoted to his gomba in Nepal's hill regions, resembled more those of his anis, and of the young Sherpas of Bigu anxious to know, to explore, and to experience. Although he personally was more devoted to meditation practices, he understood that without more profound religious and scholarly education, participation into a larger network was blocked and, as such, endangered the future of his nunnery. What he has been asking from Westerners, then, was not financial support in the first place, but the sharing of their knowledge. His meagre contact with Westerners, however, gives his hopes little chance of become fulfilled.

In my opinion, Lama Kelsang and the Tulku should work out their plans for the nunnery together, since the ideas of one do not exclude those of the other. For instance, since the involvement of Western Buddhists seems to be unavoidable in Tashi Gomba's future development, they should be told to spend half their time at the nunnery working on their own spiritual development, and the other half on teaching the anis. Or they may organise the anis to devote half of the year to assisting Western Buddhists in their retreats and the other six months to religious and, with the money earned, secular education in Kathmandu.

Whatever solution they come up with, they have to think of one quickly before the ani community is turned into a service station for Western "Enlightenment". That is, if it is not already abandoned by all its young members searching for their own opportunities and development.

# IX
# A Bird's-eye View
## *Epilogue*

*Even in my native town,*
*O birds of passage,*
*It is but the sleep*
*of a traveller!*
(Kyorai)[1]

"You write down everything", the storyteller said, "because my sons are leaving Bigu to work in Kathmandu. They will forget the past of the Sherpas of Bigu, and not telling their children about it. Now, they go to Kathmandu, and they go to school. Then they can read your book." I was happy with his attitude and cooperation, then, during my fieldwork. But a year later, in the process of writing, I felt worried about his words; especially when I read Vincanne Adams' experience among the Sherpas in Khumbu.

> As I interviewed villagers about various events, I was told repeatedly that if I wanted the correct answer to questions about Sherpa culture I should consult Fürer-Haimendorf's 1964 book (Adams 1996:65).

The storyteller obviously expected my book to contain the **History** of the Sherpas of Bigu, similarly to Fürer-Haimendorf's work. But how was I supposed to write down "everything" he had told me; which definitely was not yet "everything" he had to tell anyway?

"Write whatever you like", the Tulku said, "As long as you write *dharma*, it is good. Don't lie, but write the truth." The truth. But whose truth?

We all had our own agenda. The storyteller asked for preservation of the oral history of his people as he would have liked his grandchildren and great grandchildren to know it and to pass it on. The Tulku, as well as Lama Kelsang, wanted me to spread word about the nunnery in in that way further the nunnery's ability to collect donations, to secure its existence in the way he thought best. All others who shared their memories and daily life with me, villagers and anis alike, had their own reasons to "construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:27). If, as Dirks argues, history can be seen as "a Sign of the Modern" (Dirks 1990), then the storyteller, the Tulku, the abbot and the other people of Bigu have become "modern" in their want for a historiography of their people, of their nunnery. And they saw me as instrumental to this task, turned me into "a sign of the modern" in my own right.

These men, each of them powerful in their own realm, tried to take advantage of my presence and my work, but also to the anis I was kind of instrumental. I did not remain a role model in some abstract ideational sense, but I had triggered their imagination towards action (cf.Appadurai 1990). I had done so not only by my mere presence, who I was and where I came from, but also actively through my questions, my constantly writing in my notebooks, my teaching them English, and - last but not least - my explicit

[1] In: Lemaire (1970:83).

encouraging them to pursue their desire for education. During my Masters' fieldwork, I actually had told Ani Sange Dolma to keep looking for a way to accomplish her wish to study because - I said - it was her right to seek for self-development, although I had not been prepared to see her leaving Bigu, the nunnery, and her family for it. On my return in 1994, I at first felt responsible for her departure, but soon heard that her teacher, Ani Karma Sangmo, had stimulated her and her friend to leave for Mysore. Ani Karma Sangmo might have gone herself as well if she could have made herself to leave her home valley - and would have been in good health. Knowing this comforted my conscience, not only in my plea of the importance of education that had eventually made five anis leaving their nunnery and their lamas, but also in my emphasis on the quest for knowledge as the thread in my historiography of Tashi Gomba. As the subject of knowledge and education popped up in nearly every conversation, I realized their quest was not only part of my imagination (and practice), but also of theirs. Hence this historiography is a creation, not only mine, but a shared project, the outcome of our shared time and place; a "historical imagination - the imagination, that is, of both those who make history and those who write it" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:xi).

This book, then, is neither the history the storyteller hoped for - and never could have been - since my focus on Tashi Gomba, as any other focus - imposes restrictions; nor is it the truth as the Tulku may have wanted me to write. Will I ever be able to explain to him that "ethnography personifies, in its methods and its models, the inescapable dialectic of fact and value" (ibid.:9)? Perhaps it would be better to emphasize his request to "write *dharma*" and to refer to Adams where she compares the representation of reality in ethnography and Buddhist views on reality, turning ethnography in itself into "something of an exercise in Buddhist practice" (Adams 1996:169). The visualisations of *gurus*, Gods and demons in meditation practice, to reflect the practitioner's inner state to eventually transcend it would resemble the virtuality she recognizes to go on between Westerners and Sherpas - not to see the Other for what he/she is, but what you like him/her, and yourself, to be - and to make this process transparent through ethnography. "Impermanence and emptiness" (ibid.:169), two other important notions of Buddhist perception of reality, would equally match. Impermanence could be translated into the ethnographic necessity of taking social change, and thus history, into its analysis. The acceptance and realization that there are no such things as (social) stability, fixed (social) structures, or unchanging universal values. There may be repetition, though, recurring themes, repeated strategies, similar motivations, but these always designate a process, a development[2] because the differing contexts in which they occur, are chosen. The "emptiness" - or "voidness", as Buddhologists prefer to translate the Sanskrit *sunyata* - of an ethnography, I believe, can be understood by its relativity. It holds no truth, can never represent **Reality** , although its words may have practical purposes and thus be meaningful. What counts is, as I see it, to have the intention at least to offer an empathy, compassion, for the Other, that in fact should transcend this representation of these anis and monks, of the Bigu Sherpa women and men, of their memories and histories.

Since gaining knowledge and insight, cutting through ignorance and reaching wisdom, are the goal of the path of *dharma*, the theme of knowledge and education was not only an outcome of my ethnographic practice, but in a sense unavoidable when studying a religious community. Nevertheless, as I argued in the introductory chapter, the connection between Buddhist nuns and knowledge did not seem to be an obvious theme to those few who had written about these religious women before I went to the field in 1992. Nor might I have chosen knowledge and education as the main theme of my dissertation if the lay founder of Tashi Gomba, Nim Pasang, would not have stated that he had wanted to initiate "a religious centre of learning and arts". One might suspect that if Tashi Gomba would have been a nunnery, meant only for women, right from the start, its quality as "a place of refuge for divorced and widowed women" would have be given an emphasis; and as such might have led me eventually to concentrate on the position of lay women in Bigu Sherpa society, marriage customs, motherhood, and household responsi-

[2] I do not imply a teleology when using the word development (cf.Foucault 1984).

bilities more than I have done here. One could argue then, additionally, that it was the history of Tashi Gomba in itself, the reason of its founding and its later shift from a mixed-sex monastery into a nunnery, that had directed the path of my research. Besides, Nim Pasang's initial aim with Tashi Gomba and its importance to the Drugpa Rimpoche[3] may also have governed the Guru Lama's attempts to turn Tashi Gomba into a flourishing garden of the Dharma, since his efforts suggested that he had been ordered by the Drugpa Rimpoche to take responsibility for Tashi Gomba's development. He did so, or at least did his utmost, despite the fact that the monastery had already been turned into a female community by the time of his return around 1959. He gave Tashi Gomba its image of a place of spiritual and educational development, and as such inspired young lay women and the (especially younger) anis' quest for knowledge.

The theme of education and knowledge may have been obvious against the socio-political background of education in Nepal since the 1950s, but contrary to the anis of Tashi Gomba I did not find any suggestions that education had become a major motivation for women to become a nun in other Buddhist and/or Sherpa regions. In response to a changing world that was given the connotation of being "modern", not nunhood but school education, participation in a kind of Buddhist "Sunday schools" led by a village lama,[4] employment in the tourist and mountaineering business (see Adams 1996), and migration (with their husbands) to Kathmandu were the general trajectories to seek advantages of the new opportunities. As a consequence, nunneries in those regions seem to die out, with the exception of nunneries in Tibetan refugee areas like Dharamsala (see Havnevik 1990) which have been places of refuge in a way Tashi Gomba has never been.

In addition, it also was the specific location of Bigu and its economic base, that stimulated the popularity of nunhood. The valley remained marginal as a touristic attraction, and thus also employment in this sector was not an obvious step. Its growing shortage of land, however, did force young Sherpa men to seek jobs, particularly in Kathmandu. Its short distance from Bigu, particularly after the paved road and the bus connection was established, turned the capital city into their main labour market. This same short distance, however, also kept Sherpa women at home to take care of the few plots their family still possessed. They had to function in a socio-economic sense as a home base, for their temporarily migrated men to return to, the place that still represented the husbands' identity and reputation; and in a cultural sense as "guardians of tradition" in a rapidly changing world. Bigu had shifted, following Samuel's regional categorization (1993:115-6), from a remote agricultural village to an area peripheral to Nepal's urban centre, Kathmandu. But its Sherpa women were held back from taking part in this development until the 1990s, and told to conserve the past.

Based on the above, the thesis which Haddad and Banks Findly propose, namely that women take a more active part in religious and public life in times of social crisis (Haddad and Banks Findly 1985:xii), can also be accepted in the case of Tashi Gomba. The questions following their thesis, whether women's more important roles are

> because their traditional roles as maintainers and transmitters of values are threatened, or is it because traditional roles for both sexes have been abandoned altogether and, as a result, women no longer have to act like women at all? (ibid.:xii)

[3] The Drugpa Rimpoche's remains were put in a *chörten* on the courtyard of Tashi Gomba, and not brought to one of his other monasteries. To me, this designates the importance he had given to particularly this gomba. In addition, the Tulku was said to be recognised as the Drugpa Rimpoche's reincarnation because of his "memories" of Tashi Gomba, miles away from his place of birth near Kyirong.

[4] Personal communication with Tshering Sherpa and Inge Bracke Sherpa.

however, have both to be denied. In my view, young Bigu Sherpa women refused their traditional roles by turning to the monastic alternative, exactly because these roles were enforced - and not abandoned - by the social changes that took place. As I have tried to show, nunhood was definitely not seen as one of women's traditional roles, but rather as a way to "modernity". One might argue that anis do "no longer have to act like women", that is by taking up their traditional roles as wife and mother, but this was not because the roles of both sexes were abandoned.

On the other hand, one might argue that many parents did come to see nunhood as an acceptable, traditional alternative for their daughters, based on religious values that had become part of their Sherpa identity since Tashi Gomba's founding. Nim Pasang's attempt to give their Sherpa-ness an institutional base with Tashi Gomba to counter the political domination of the valley by the Kharka family, then, was continued by parents in favouring their daughters to become anis, instead of becoming "modern" city girls; in other words, in attempting to counter the ongoing Nepalisation of their valley through their daughters as representatives of their "traditional" Sherpa identity. As such, Tashi Gomba and its anis became a weapon in a struggle fought during the last two decades that went beyond the valley and the local Hindu threat, to a national plane. Lama Kelsang even brought the nunnery on a transnational plane, again by attaching to both Tashi Gomba and its nuns a "traditional" role: to the gomba, in a still distant and "peaceful" enough environment to be compatible to Westerners' longing to meditate in a Himalayan, Shangri La-like place; and, to the anis to take up women's traditional role of caretakers, now of Western Buddhist practitioners. However, these are perception of others, not of the anis themselves. As a consequence, the restraints that were put upon them to participate actively in a rapidly changing and growing world led to discussions and rebellious activities within the religious community. Because, more than lay women, the anis encountered this larger world through people and travels, and thus saw opportunities their lay mothers and sisters did not have.

Following many a young woman's motivation for nunhood, and their subsequent experiences as an ani at Tashi Gomba, it is not surprising that the younger anis - and others who refused to submit themselves to the doctrine of "preparation to death" - favoured the path of *sutra* above the path of *tantra*. Their curiosity, to explore the world, to learn, and to seek for a better life already in the here-and-now world - and not in a next - ran against the emphasis the path of *tantra* puts on retreat and solitude. These two emphases in gaining religious knowledge were, until the day I left Nepal in 1995, still an issue of discrepancies not only between the anis, but also between their two ruling lamas, the Tulku and Lama Kelsang. The path of *tantra* as the ideal of Tashi Gomba's religious founder, the Drugpa Rimpoche, was already subject to change, due to the social and politico-geographical changes that have taken place in the valley since his arrival. If his successor, the Tulku, will get his way, Tashi Gomba will make another move towards the path of *sutra*, where the anis eventually may have become well-educated women, not only on a religious but also on a social plane. If the abbot Lama Kelsang gets his way, Tashi Gomba will turn into the retreat annex of the new Drugpa Kagyupa monastery on Chipondole hill, next to Swayambu.

Most likely, the outcome will be a little of both. Tashi Gomba will probably become an retreat gomba, mainly for Western Buddhists but also for the older anis. The donations given by these foreigners in return for the anis' hospitality and support, which become more and more indispensable to the nunnery's existence, however, may be used according to the Tulku's wish to educate his young anis. It would certainly have taken this direction with Ani Karma Sangmo as a *nierpa*, the responsible person of the gomba's financial affairs, if her untimely death had not taken her away. I do not know whether young Ani Thupten Dickey has the strength and charisma to come up for the younger anis as her predecessor was. Her role as *nierpa* seemed to me to be crucial. Nevertheless, as I have shown so far, history can be whimsical, turned into a completely different direction by the action of one single individual. Thus, it is hard to tell what the near future of Tashi Gomba will look like. It will depend, not only of the lamas-in-charge, and the possible but not yet enacted cooperation between them, but also of the anis; whether more of them will choose to follow the example of the five anis to "vote with their feet", or to stay and to take part in the development of their gomba.

Whatever is going to happen, this ethnography will inevitably play its part too. I have written a "cause", but cannot take full responsibility for predating its "effects". I can only hope that I did my work with the right intentions.

May by the virtue resulting from this book,
a subtle fragrance spreading,
happiness increase for Tashi Chime Ghatsal and its inhabitants.[5]

[5] After the last stanza of the charter of Tashi Gomba (see Appendix I).

APPENDIX I

# The Chayik of Tashi Gomba

## *Translation Dr P.C. Verhagen*

The praise of the [holy] place of *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal* [i.e. "Heavenly Garden of Deathless Good Fortune"; name of the monastery] is contained [herein].

I pay homage to the guru[s?] of the Root-lineage that fulfills the hopes
of those who have been tamed by the results of the threefold [turning of] the wheel of the Dharma,
[whose] powers of merit and wisdom are immeasurable [even] for the gods,
[who] move[s?] in all regions, [like] branches of [positive] activity of four types.

I pray for welfare in all aspects [established] by the Holder of the Lotus [Sanskrit Padmapani, i.e. the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara],
the unique medicine to cure the fever of suffering
in the domain of living beings, [namely] through a drop of immortality-nectar of [his] blessing,
who has reached perfection in [all] aspects, [like?] a jewel of the night [?; i.e. moon?] of compassion.

[mantra: *a [?] -ho*; untranslatable.]

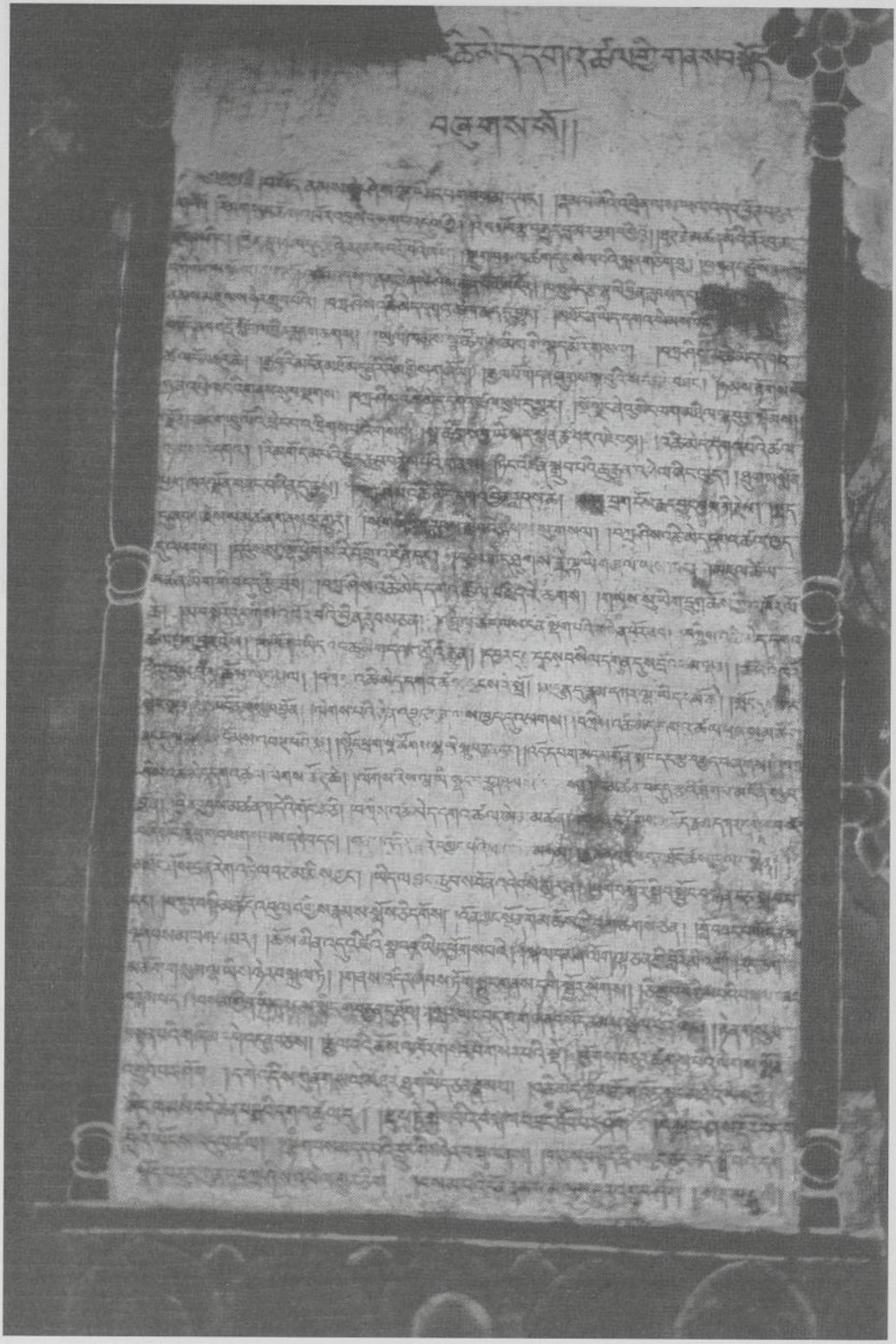
Treasure of great wisdom which is omniscience with regard to *Samsara* and *Nirvana*,
established through the force of the merit of ... [?]
and the grace of the root-gods that know no deceit,
marvellous is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

When one sees it, it is pleasing to the mind [and?] ... ... ...
when one stays there, it is pleasant and becomes a blessing to the heart;
showing [itself] as a spectacle to the eye in various regions [? aspects?],
a great wonder is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

The mountain behind is high, the mountain in front is gradualy sloping,
the region's characteristics as excellent as [those of] the residence of a king,
praised as a place where the virtues of understanding grow,
outstanding is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

Green meadows, flat like the palm of the hand,
in the midst of excellent trees set together [like a] string of turquoise [... ?]
the sweet songs of various birds pleasing to the ear,
a joy to every soul is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

[1] The dots mean that at this spot the fresco is damaged and thus the text was illegible.



The top [lit. head] of the mountain is a place for those who have achieved excellent Enlightenment,
the waterstreams of [their] accomplishments in meditation growing and overflowing,
the house [?] of their prayers stretching out wide like an excellent tree,
rich in blessings is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*
In the middle [of the mountain] on the rockface [there are] miraculous imprints of hands,
[and] at the foot [of the mountain] imprints of feet, which have made a wonderous place;
clear marks of a region of great blessing,
particularly noble is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

In the middle the immeasurable [i.e. incomparable?] house of the god of compassion, which is indistinguishable from the southern mountain Potala [i.e. the residence of Avalokitesvara],
if one makes a pilgrimage to it one acquires a wonderous nectar for the eye,
truly magnificent is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

To the right the great [prayer-]wheel of the Dharma of the six-syllable [*mantra*; i.e. *Om mani-padme hum*],
spinning by itself, without being turned, rich in blessing,
[here] one acquires the antidote to every sinful misdeed one is associated with,
[a place] worth of veneration is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

To the left streams gently flowing from the beautiful springs,
in summertime clear and cool, in winter mild and warm,
with the bell[s?] of the Dharma wheel, the mind ... on Dharma ... [?],
a truly pure joy is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

In front there is a great prayer flag for the wholly pure gods,
at the time of raising [the flag] one comes face to face with [or: one sees] the form[s?] of the god[s] on top of the house [i.e. temple];
auspicious signs [emend *rten-'byung* > *rten-'brel*] most exalted of all,
perfect is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

If one looks inside, ... ... ... ... [?]
statues of a thousand different gods,
and one thousand and [twenty] eight [depictions, statues of] Amithaba are there,
a great collection of the beneficient is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

From the wall-paintings [displaying?] all pleasant appearances of the gods
one achieves the direct experience of a drop of wonderous nectar,
what sign of blessing can be higher than that?
Carrying the mark of *e-ma[-ho?]* is *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal.*

In general [?] the virtue resulting from the accumulation of 14.000 [i.e. innumerable?] offerings, such as *Rnam-dkar-dga'-ba* [?],
is similar to the ... [?] good resulting from the performance of a single kind [of offering] in this place;
an extensive karmic result will be seen and will come to full fruition [as a result of this].

When one merely sees, hears, thinks of, touches, or ... [this place],
the seed of Enlightenment will be sown in the mind;
the more so for those who practice veneration and make offerings [in this place],
[such as] prostrating and circambulating, [acts] that cleanse mental obscuration, [involving] the paying of respect and [the development of] realization.

Well, for those who have a propensity for the Dharma [on account of] previous steps [i.e. deeds]
[this place] is the most important/principal [lit. mother] as it is endowed with wisdom and virtue,
but for those who listen and pay attention to the noise of non-Dharma,
the unfortunate who hold incorrect views, [this place] holds no attraction.

If we perform to the best of our abilities, acts of service,
retreats, practices of virtue [?] etc., for the three Jewels,
at the instigation of the gods, in this place, we may acquire a state of good fortune,
and we may acquire joy of mind as an ornament of the heart.

Moreover, may, in the domains where the virtues of myself and the others grow,
for this new monastic community, constituting a new turning of the wheel of the Buddha's Dharma,
endowed with the three 'foundations'[2] the basis of the doctrine, [and] the community of monks,
the prayers for the good, pointed in all directions, be fulfilled.

May those whose minds have reached perfection in total clarity by this virtue,
attain the good fortune of being born and ... [?]
in the **Paradise**[3] [lit. garden of joy] of the lotus of great bliss in the sphere of the highest **Immortal** gods of limitness shining light.

Thus [ends this] praise of the [holy] place [of *Bkra-shis 'Chi-med-dga'-tshal*], [which came about] through the admonition by the wind of the spiritual faith
in [this] garden [?] where complete taming of the mind [was attained] by me, Shes-rab Rdo-rje.
May [by] the virtue [resulting from this praise] of [i.e.: which is like] a subtle fragrance spreading, happiness increase for all places and their inhabitants.

May the goals all be swiftly realized.

[2] I.e. "the three things that symbolize the Buddha's body, speech and mind: statue, scriptures, stupa" (Goldstein 1975:488).

[3] Words in bold type constitute puns on the name of the monastery.

## APPENDIX II

# The Flyer Text

*The flyer, after the original as written by the Tulku's brother, presumably meant for English speaking guests of Tashi Gomba with the request for educational support.*

Tashi Chime Ghatsal, the joyful grove of fortune and immortality, is the name of the place where the Begu monastery is located. In 1932 the devoted dharma practitioner Nyima pasang sherpa requested Sherab Dorjee to build a monastery and he offered the land where it is now standing. In response to the request, Sherab Dorjee performed a special ritual offering (Torma) in the meditation cave(Drupok) - and later on when he clapped, at the same time a spring arose from the ground which is even seen today. After drinking that water from the spring, he soon went to sleep, and that evening in his dream he had signs of a hand print above and the foot print below a span of mountain area which were imprinted on the stone. The span of mountain land which is the land of Zambala, and its surrounding range is the body of Zambala (Yidam deity of wealth). The dream professed that in this area it is good to build the monastery. When he awoke, he sent out a messenger to see if there was a hand and foot print as in his dream. The messenger returned with positive reply, he noticed that by looking from a far distance. This mountain ranges resemble Zambala and then he called it as Gowri Shankar. Thus, Sherab dorjee built Begu monastery, where later on jewels and riches ceaselessly pour from Zambala's hand.

Many auspicious and evidences are found in the history of Gowri Shankar. In two days walk from Begu to Lapchi, where we find two caves in which Milarepa did his meditation. Towards the northern side if we walk for another two days we find another mountain calls Gowri Parbath mountain, where Sherab Dorjee did his ten years solitary retreat in an area of the snow mountains. On the other side of Begu Monastery we find Jangchup Metok Monastery )the flower of enlightened mind) where many lamas come for retreat. At present Dukpa Rinpoche (Ven Ngawang Khendap) the reincarnation of Sherab Dorjee presides over Begu monastery and four other monastery which were all built by Sherab Dorjee.

Tashi Chime Ghatsal Monastery contains one thousand small statues of the one thousand arm Chenrezig (Avolkateshwar) Bodhisattua of great compassion. An elaborate statue of Chenrezig is surrounded by five other statues at the alter. To the right of this main Lhakang (Monastery) is the mani Lhakang (wheel containing of one million texts of Chenrezig) - to the front and to the right is the Ka-gyarlkakang (which contains a library of one hundred and eight teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni. Below the main temple towards the left side we find the kitchen that welcomes all the communities and travellers. The nun quarters lays directly across and below the monastery. There are sixty one nuns in the monastery - they practice and perform all the ritual ceremonies together. The guest room is underneath the Ka-gyurlhakang. In an hours walk up to the hill one is able to see the vast snow mountains of Tibet, forest, many flowers in the spring season, and many wild animals especially the white monkey. Beside the monastery ground there is a spring water for all to drink. This is how the Begu monastery is situated.

The Buddhist Community of Rolbaling is quite friendly with Begy monastery From 1932 under the influence of Sherab Dorjee and Dukpa Rinpoche. The killings of animals both for ritual and daily living have been completely stopped.

At Begu, since the Buddhist tradition is strengthening, and every year the number of nuns is increasing - with this now the monastery is facing big problem without proper teachers to guide all the nuns. The Monastery now requires a few well qualified teachers, with the knowledge of Tibetan, English and Nepalese language.
The reason for the required of these three languages are as:-

1 The Tibetan language is the most important language to teach the nuns, since all the religious scripts are in the tibetan language.

2 The importance of nepalese language is that since the monastery is located in the region of Nepal, it becomes a prime language to communicate with the locals.

3 Its even important for them to have a basic knowledge of english language to communicate with the travellers and monastery visitors.

May the precious Dharma continue, increase and may all be auspicious.

# Glossary

*N. = Nepali* *S. = Sanskrit*
*P. = Pali* *T. = Tibetan*
*New. = Newari* *Sh. = Sherpa*

| | |
|---|---|
| ahimsa (S.) | non-violence, abstaining from killing |
| ajyi (Sh.) | elder brother's wife |
| Ama Bamare (N.) | "Blessing Mother", name of a mountain; also known as Gauri Parbati (5325 m) |
| ani | (T. a-ni) father's sister, nun |
| arak (Sh.) | liquor |
| arak (Sh.) | liquor |
| aunu (N.) | to come, to understand |
| bahun (N.) | (S. brahman) Hindu priest caste |
| bardö | (T. bar-do) intermediate state after death and before rebirth |
| beyül | (T. sbas-yul) hidden valley |
| bhiksuni (S.) | (P. bhikkuni) nun |
| bikasi (N.) | developed |
| Bimseng | deity worshipped for his strength and courage |
| bodhi (S.) | the pursuit of Enlightenment |
| bodhisattva (S.) | Enlightened being |
| bujhnu (N.) | to understand |
| Bulako Losar | Call for Losar |
| Bum | (S. Prajnaparamita Sutra) Book of 11.111 Prayers, Book of 100.000 Lines |
| Bumi puja | fertility rite led by a shaman |
| cham (T. 'cham) | mask dances |
| chang | (T. chang) beer |
| chaunri | cow-yak crossbreed |
| chayik | (T. chad-yig) founding charter |
| chhuwa, chowa | traditionale woman's dress |
| chöben | nun with priestly functions |
| cholo (N.) | full sleeve blouse, Nepalese style |
| chörten | (T. mchod rten; S. stupa) Buddhist monument often containing sacral relics |
| chos-skad (T.) | religious Tibetan language |
| churpi (Sh.) | hard cheese candy |
| daanlh (N.) | mountain peacock |
| Dasain | Hindu festival in honour of Durga at which thousands of animals are sacrificed |
| demchang (Sh.) | first marriage ceremony |
| Deodunga (N.) | "God's Rock", name of a mountain (4418 m) |
| desh (N.) | country, land |
| devi (N.) | goddess |
| dharma (S.) | (P. dhamma; T. chos) religion, the Buddha's Words |
| digpa | (T. sdig-pa) sin, demerit |
| doko (N.) | basket |

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|---|---|
| domang | (T. mdo-dmangs) one of the sutra texts used commonly in kurims (in Bigu in particular in relation to the home) |
| dorje | (T. rdo-rje; S. vajra) "thunderbolt" |
| Dorje Sempa | Vajrasattva (S.) |
| Drugpa (Sh.) | (T. 'brug-pa) man from Bhutan |
| duang (Sh.) | (T. sgrub-khang) temple hall |
| duk (N.) | jail |
| dulwa (T. 'dul-ba) | to tame, to cultivate, to subdue, to convert, to civilise; also the monastic disciplinary rules (S. Vinaya) |
| Dumje (Sh.) | Sherpa fertility festival in Solu Khumbu |
| dzo (Sh.) | cow-yak crossbreed |
| dzomu (Sh.) | female yak-cow crossbreed |
| garuda | the mythological bird-god |
| Gauri Shankar | name of a mountain (7146 m) |
| geling | oboe-like instrument |
| Gelugpa | (T. dge lugs pa) the most clericalized of the Tibetan buddhist traditions/orders, also known as the reformed sect, headed by the Dalai Lama |
| gelung | (T. dge-slong) a fully ordained monk |
| genchu | (T. rgan-chos) older person dedicating their life to the Dharma outside of a monastic context |
| geshé | (T. dge bshes) a monk with advanced training, roughly equivalent to a Ph.D. |
| ghanta | bell |
| gomba, gompa | (T. dgon-pa) buddhist temple, monastery |
| Gombo Dodin (Sh.) | collectivity of eight protective deities |
| guru (S.) | teacher, religious guide |
| gurudhammas (P.) | the eight additional rules which the Buddha is said to have created especially for nuns, which subordinate them to any monk |
| guthi (N.) | gomba loan system |
| gyal | (T. rgyal) king |
| Gyalbashing (Sh.) | (T. rgyal-po 'i-zhing) King's fields |
| Gyalpo Losar | (T. rgyal-po lo-sar) King's New Year |
| gyewa | (T. dge-ba) funeral, memorial rite, act of virtue |
| hamba (Sh.) | female spirit |
| hangdzu (Sh.) | traditional blouse |
| inji (N.) | "English", foreigner |
| jagir (N.) | land tax collecting system |
| Jambhala | (T. ser-po gtso rkyang) Buddhist god of wealth |
| 'Jam-dpal-dbyangs (T.) | (S. Manjushri) bodhisattva of wisdom |
| janma (Sh.) | kind of grass, fodder |
| jat (N.) | caste, ethnic group |
| jatra (N.) | market, festival |
| jhankri (N.) | shaman |
| jindak (N.) | sponsor of a ritual or religious festival |
| Jogikuthi (N.) | "temple of the yogi", place in the Bigu valley |
| Kalachakra | tantric initiation ritual |
| Kambadzen (Sh.) | name of a Sherpa clan |
| Kami (N.) | blacksmith |
| Kangyur | (T. bka' 'gyur) buddhist canonical book |

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|---|---|
| Kargyudpa | (T.bka'krgyud pa, dkar brgyud pa) one of the Tibetan buddhist traditions/orders |
| karma (S.) | the law of cause and effect |
| kempu | (T. mkhan-po) abbot |
| kenam (N.) | petticoat-like skirt |
| kha kad nangba (T.) | those who share the same speech |
| Kharka | high-caste Hindu family |
| khata | (T. bka' gtags) ceremonial scarve |
| khepa, khapa | painter |
| kipat (N.) | land tax collecting system |
| -ko (N.) | suffix of location, "from" |
| Kon-Chug-Sum | (T. Konch'og Sum) the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha |
| konier | caretaker of a gomba |
| korchang (Sh.) | commemoration ritual for the dead |
| kot (N.) | the fixed share of the owner who let out his land |
| kura (N.) | thing, word |
| kurim | (T. sku-rims) a curing or excorcism ritual |
| kurta (N.) | Indian dress and trouser |
| kuthi (N.) | temple |
| kutum | disciplinarian |
| lakh (N.) | 100.000 rupees |
| lama | (T. bla-ma) religious specialist; the term is applicable to both married village "priests" and heads of celibate monastic communities |
| larra tongup (Sh.) | final marriage ritual |
| lingam (S.) | phallus symbol , symbol of Shiva |
| loben | religious teacher |
| losar | (T. lo-sar) New Year |
| lü (S.naga) | local spirits |
| lukuni (Sh.) | blanket |
| Magar (N.) | a Hindu-oriented ethnic group |
| Mahadev | Shiva |
| Mahakala | protective, ferocious deity |
| manche (N.) | man |
| mangse | atonement ritual |
| mani | (T. ma-ni) as a short-cut of the well-known "Om Mani Pad Me Hum" to be translated as prayer, like in mani walls, mani wheels, etc. |
| mantra (S.) | spell, prayer |
| marga (New.) | path to salvation |
| mati (N.) | up there |
| matwali (nep.) | liquor drinker |
| meme (Sh.) | grandfather |
| mendap (Sh.) | genealogy |
| mit (N.) | ceremonial friend (male) |
| mitini (N.) | ceremonial friend (female) |
| mizar (N.) | tax collector |
| mola (N.) | turnips |
| monlam (T.) | Great Wish ritual |
| nama (Sh.) | bride |

| | |
|---|---|
| napi (N.) | land surveyor |
| Narak (Sh.) | Buddhist contra-Dasain festival in Bigu |
| narka (N.) | (Sh. njewa) hel |
| niermu | kitchen nun |
| nierpa | treasurer |
| Nyingmapa | (T. rnying ma pa) one of the Tibetan buddhist traditions/orders, also known as the old or unreformed sect |
| Nyungne | purification ritual |
| ongchermu (Sh.) | (T. dbang chen-po) powerful in the sense of domineering |
| panchayat (N.) | village council |
| pani nachalne (N.) | water unacceptables |
| pap (N.) | sin |
| pari (N.) | the other side of the river, the other side of the valley |
| parna tirne (N.) | extracting help, mutual aid (Sh. tsenga tsali) |
| path of sutra (S.) | mode of spiritual development with an emphasis on scholarship |
| path of tantra (S.) | mode of spiritual development with an emphasis on meditation |
| paune (N.) | student |
| pecha | shortcut for a text containing words of the Dharma (T. dpe-cha chos ma-red) |
| pembu | (T. dpon po) headman, head of the clan |
| phal-skad (T.) | colloquial Tibetan language |
| phun-sum tshogs-pa (T.) | perfect |
| phurtsa | coffin |
| Phyag-na-rdo-rje (T.) | (S.Vajrapani) ferocious protector of the Dharma |
| pitha (S.) | shrine, "power-place" |
| pradhan panchayat (N.) | head of the village council |
| puja (N.) | ritual, sermon |
| punya (S.) | religious merit |
| rabzhung | (T. rab-byung) ordination, formal acceptance as a novice |
| raikar (N.) | land tax collecting system |
| raj (N.) | king |
| raksi (N.) | liquor |
| ramne | (T. rab gnas) consecration ritual |
| rimpoche | (T. rin-po-che) "precious", term of both address and reference for a reincarnate lama |
| sadhu (N.) | Hindu holy man |
| sallang | initiation ritual |
| samsara (S.) | the cycle of rebirth |
| sangdung | alphorn-like instrument |
| sange (Sh.) | (T. sangs rgyas) heaven |
| sangha (S.) | Buddhist community, one of the Three Jewels |
| sano (N.) | small, short |
| sems (T.) | "soul" |
| Shambhala | hidden paradisaical land |
| shrindi (Sh.) | ghost |
| shukbar (N.) | local administrator |
| simsum | the Rimpoche's living quarters |
| sinmo | (T. srin mo) wild mountain-demoness |
| sirdar (N.) | trekking leader |

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|---|---|
| smrti (S.) | mindfulness, memory |
| sodane (Sh.) | second marital "asking" ceremony |
| sodé (Sh.) | luck |
| sonam | (T. bsod-nams; S. punya) religious merit |
| srung ma | protective deity |
| Sur (Sh.) | ritual against wandering ghosts |
| surba | "lay sister" |
| Tengyur | (T. bstan 'gyur) buddhist canonical commentary |
| tenma (Sh.) | see guthi |
| Thami (N.) | a Nepali ethnic group with religious practices based on ancestor worship |
| thanka | (T. thang-ka) religious painting |
| thawa | (T. grwa-pa) monk |
| thiba | fully-fletched nun |
| thödam (Sh.) | retreat assistant |
| thola (N.) | 11 grams of pure gold |
| Thoongchö (Sh.) | Ritual of 1000 offerings |
| thulo (N.) | big, tall |
| Thupten Rig 'dzin (Sh.) | (T. rigs-gsum-mgon-po) Three Protectors of Tibet: Pawa Chenrezig (S.Avalokiteshvara), 'Jam-dpal-dbyangs (S. Manjushri), Phyag-na-rdo-rje (S.Vajrapani). |
| tilbu | nun ringing the bell |
| torma | (T. gtor-ma) dough effigy, offering cake |
| Tormathoong (Sh.) | ritual against wandering ghosts |
| torsil | (T. gtor-sil) small torma balls |
| trisul (N.) | trident |
| tsam | (T. mtshams) meditation retreat |
| tsam | (T. mtshams) retreat, meditation |
| tsam khang | (T. mtshams-khang) retreathouse |
| tsampa | (T. rtsam-pa) mixed-grain flower |
| tsapani (Sh.) | torn cap |
| tsawé lama | (T. rtsa-ba-'i bla-ma) "root lama", personal religious teacher |
| tshogs (T.) | communion ritual |
| tulku | (T. sprul sku) reincarnate lama |
| umse | headnun, chanting leader |
| videshi (N.) | foreigner |
| wari (N.) | this side of the river, this side of the valley |
| wong | (T. dbang) sermon |
| yidam | (T. yi-dam; S. ishthadevata) |
| yogi (S.) | male meditation specialist |
| yogini (S.) | female meditation specialist |
| Zambala | (unknown; see Shambhala or Jambhala) |

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## NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING/DUTCH SUMMARY

# Het Vogelhuis

## *Een historische ethnografie van een Tibetaans boeddhistisch nonnenklooster in Nepal*

De uitdaging om de historische ontwikkeling te achterhalen van Tashi Gomba, een Tibetaans boeddhistisch nonnenklooster in de Nepalese Himalaya, kwam voort uit twee opmerkelijke feiten. Het eerste betrof de motivaties van een ambitieuze Sherpa uit de Bigu vallei die hij voor de stichting van dit klooster in 1933 opvoerde. Het tweede
feit dat om een verklaring vroeg was de plotselinge, ongekende populariteit van het nonnenbestaan bij jonge Sherpa vrouwen gedurende de jaren tachtig. In een paar jaar tijds verdubbelde de gemeenschap zich van ongeveer dertig naar ruim zestig nonnen.

De Bigu Sherpa's deelden hun vallei vanaf omstreeks 1870 met een hoge Hindu-familie, de Kharka's. Na een politieke machtsstrijd tussen deze twee groepen, stelde een Sherpa leider voor een klooster te stichten, dat hun Tibetaanse wortels in religie en cultuur moest benadrukken en hun politieke dominantie over de vallei moest legitimeren. Hem stond een groots religieus centrum voor ogen, een bolwerk van studie en kunst. Tegelijkertijd beweerde hij, in 1974, dat hij een toevluchtsoord voor weduwen en andere alleenstaande vrouwen, en andere vrouwen die hun leven aan de religie, *dharma*, wilde wijden, had willen creëren. Deze twee motivaties staan echter haaks op elkaar. Boeddhistisch nonnen, ook de Tibetaans boeddhistisch, staan onderaan de clericale ladder. Volgens de overlevering schijnt de Boeddha nonnen alleen te hebben geaccepteerd na instelling van acht extra regels volgens welke zij geïnitieerd, beschermd, geleid en geïnstrueerd dienden en nog steeds dienen te worden door monniken. In de loop van de geschiedenis heeft met name deze paternalistische houding ertoe geleid dat de volledige ordinatie van vrouwelijke kloosterlingen in Tibet verdween. Daarmee werden nonnen ook buitengesloten van opleidingen in retoriek, astronomie, logica, Tibetaanse medicijnen en dergelijke. Deze opleidingen hebben van de grote kloosters in Tibet ware universiteiten gemaakt. De positie van boeddhistisch nonnen verslechterde navenant, evenals hun status bij de leken. De stichting van een nonnenklooster dat tevens een prestigieus religieus centrum moest worden kon gevoeglijk worden uitgesloten.

In 1932 passeerde een Bhutanese Rimpoche op pelgrimstocht de Bigu vallei. Hij werd door de Sherpa hoofdman gevraagd de geestelijk leider en stichter van Tashi Gomba te worden. Mijn onderzoek heeft uitgewezen, dat het zijn idee was om een gemengd klooster met aparte mannen- en vrouwenverblijven rondom een tempel te stichten. Maar de invoering van het celibataire kloosterleven, waar de Bigu Sherpa's geen traditie in kenden, leverde al snel de nodige problemen op. Daarnaast nam de bouw van het tempelcomplex zoveel jaren in beslag, dat de jonge monniken en nonnen amper aan religieuze studie en meditatie toekwamen. Vooral de monniken waren zwaar teleurgesteld en met de jaren gaven ook diegenen, die niet met een non waren weggelopen hun kloosterbestaan op. Zo ontwikkelde de kloostergemeenschap zich tijdens de eerste twintig jaar van zijn bestaan tot een nonnenklooster; inderdaad een toevluchtsoord van vooral alleenstaande vrouwen.

In 1959-60 kreeg het klooster een nieuwe abt in de persoon van een Tibetaanse banneling. De overlevering wil dat hij ooit een belofte had gedaan aan de religieuze stichter om zich voor de Bigu kloostergemeenschap in te zetten. Hij heeft woord gehouden ondanks dat het klooster tot een vrouwengemeenschap was 'verworden'. Hij introduceerde religieuze teksten, gaf lezingen en instrueerde de nonnen in rituelen voor de lekengemeenschap. Het prestige van het klooster en de status van nonnen groeiden. Dit had ondermeer tot gevolg dat Sherpa-meisjes eerder toestemming kregen van hun ouders om toe te

treden en, eenmaal non, op meer financiële ondersteuning konden rekenen. Desalniettemin bleven leken de keuze voor een nonnenbestaan zien als een extravagantie. De traditionele vrouwenrol was (en is) die van echtgenote en moeder; afwijzing van die 'natuurlijke' taak door te kiezen voor een celibatair leven werd met argwaan bekeken. De novicen onder deze abt hebben dan ook een gevecht moeten leveren tegen hun familie en de publieke opinie.

*Dharma* (religie) is het pad van inzicht, bevrijding en onthechting, en deze spirituele ontwikkeling had ook zijn onmiddellijke sociale effect. Het celibatair leven bevrijdde Sherpa vrouwen van de zware verantwoordelijkheden voor het huishouden, het land en de kinderen, terwijl de mannen met het vee op de weidegronden rondzwierven, of zich in het dorp vermaakten met drank en gokspelen. Dit sexe-verschil nam alleen maar toe met de sociale veranderingen die ook in de Bigu vallei plaatsvonden, sinds Nepal, na 150 jaar dictatoriaal regime, zijn deuren voor de wereld opende in 1951. In 1954 werd in Bigu een school gesticht. In 1967 werd de reistijd van Bigu naar Kathmandu gehalveerd door de aanleg van een autoweg en een busverbinding van Kathmandu naar de Tibetaans/Chinese grens. Westerse toeristen begonnen in de tachtiger jaren de vallei te ontdekken. Door de plaatselijke bevolkingsgroei ontstond een tekort aan land, waardoor jonge mannen hun heil in Kathmandu in de toeristensector, de horeca en de tapijtfabrieken zochten. Aanvankelijk stonden de Sherpa's sceptisch tegenover de school, die door een Kharka was opgericht. Maar al gauw zagen ze de noodzaak ervan in. Sherpa-jongens werden met het oog op de toekomst naar school gestuurd; hun zusters echter niet. De hulp van dochters kon thuis en op de velden namelijk niet gemist worden en toen de zonen hele dagen naar school gingen, kregen ze ook nog de zorg over de kuddes erbij. Bovendien behoefde hun toekomst als moeder en vrouw in een gearrangeerd huwelijk geen scholing. Pas nu begint men zich te realiseren, dat een jongen met een leven in Kathmandu niet op een 'achterlijk' dorpsmeisje zit te wachten.

Met de komst van een nieuwe abt in 1986 begon ook Bigu Gomba aan een transformatie. Zijn connecties met kloosters elders in Nepal en westerse boeddhisten bracht de Bigu nonnen in contact met westerlingen die de abt voor retraite naar Bigu stuurde, als ook met kloosterlingen en andere boeddhisten elders in Nepal en in India. Onder zijn toezicht kregen de Bigu nonnen zelf meer en meer kansen om te reizen, op pelgrimstocht te gaan. In de ogen van met name de lekenvrouwen en -meisjes waren de nonnen benijdenswaardig. Terwijl zij ongeletterde plattelandsvrouwen bleven, gekluisterd aan huis en haard, studeerden nonnen en zagen wat van de wereld. In hun ogen waren nonnen 'moderne' vrouwen, ontwikkeld en onafhankelijk. De verhoogde instroom van novicen was nauwelijks met de bouw van nieuwe verblijven bij te houden.

Eenmaal ingetreden toonden zich echter ook de tekortkomingen van een nonnenbestaan in Tashi Gomba. In vergelijking met westerse boeddhisten en kloosterlingen uit Kathmandu voelden zij zich net zo minderwaardig en achterlijk, als de lekenvrouwen zich ten opzichte van de nonnen voelden. Ze misten de boekenwijsheid en de vele initiaties en meditatieve ervaring die anderen uit kloosters in de steden en uit het westen hadden ondergaan. De jonge nonnen drongen bij hun abt aan op meer begeleiding, maar door zijn frequente bezoeken aan het buitenland kon hij daarin niet tegemoet komen. Ze drongen aan om in andere kloosters cursussen te mogen volgen. Maar omdat deze van andere orden waren, werd dit niet toegestaan. Uiteindelijk zijn in 1992 twee nonnen weggelopen naar een boeddhistisch centrum in Zuid-India. In een brief schreven ze: "We besloten om naar dit klooster in te gaan, omdat we ons in Bigu zo ongelukkig voelden, omdat we er niet konden studeren. We hoorden dat je hier een goede educatie kon krijgen. (...) Een mens zonder educatie is als een vogel zonder vleugels, dus besloten we weg te gaan uit Bigu en naar hier te komen." Een jaar later werd hun voorbeeld door nog drie nonnen gevolgd.

Deze 'exodus' dekt nog maar net de huidige instroom van twee nonnen per jaar. De interne ontevredenheid lijkt toe te nemen, maar ook het aantal lekenmeisjes dat wel naar school mag gaan. Het zal van de huidige abt en de Rimpoche, hun reactie op sociale ontwikkelingen als toerisme en arbeidsmigratie, en de impact die dit heeft op de Sherpa-vrouwen van Bigu afhangen of het klooster over twintig jaar nog bestaat.

Zowel de motivatie voor de stichting van het klooster als de motivatie van de nonnen die in de jaren 90 wegliepen op zoek naar meer educatie hebben me ertoe verleid mijn geschiedschrijving van dit klooster te structureren aan de hand van de twee ideale paden van spirituele ontwikkeling binnen het boeddhisme, in navolging van Geoffrey Samuel, het pad van de tantra en het pad van de sutra. Het pad van de tantra legt de nadruk op meditatie en retraite, het pad van de sutra op tekststudie. Afhankelijk van geografische, sociale, en politiek-economische omstandigheden zal een kloostergemeenschap, los van de voorkeur van de orde waartoe zij behoort en haar leidinggevende lama's, meer neigen naar een nadruk op hetzij meditatie hetzij studie. Deze ethnografie laat zien hoe Tashi Gomba in de loop der jaren heeft geschommeld tussen beide paden.