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

van Ede, Y.M.

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When the iron Bird flies¹*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 Hishi'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 Furer-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 Lama⁷ 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 Chucky 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 Furer-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^o 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 withdrew 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 farms¹¹ - 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 rite¹²).

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 tea-houses 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 son¹⁵ - 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 husbands 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).

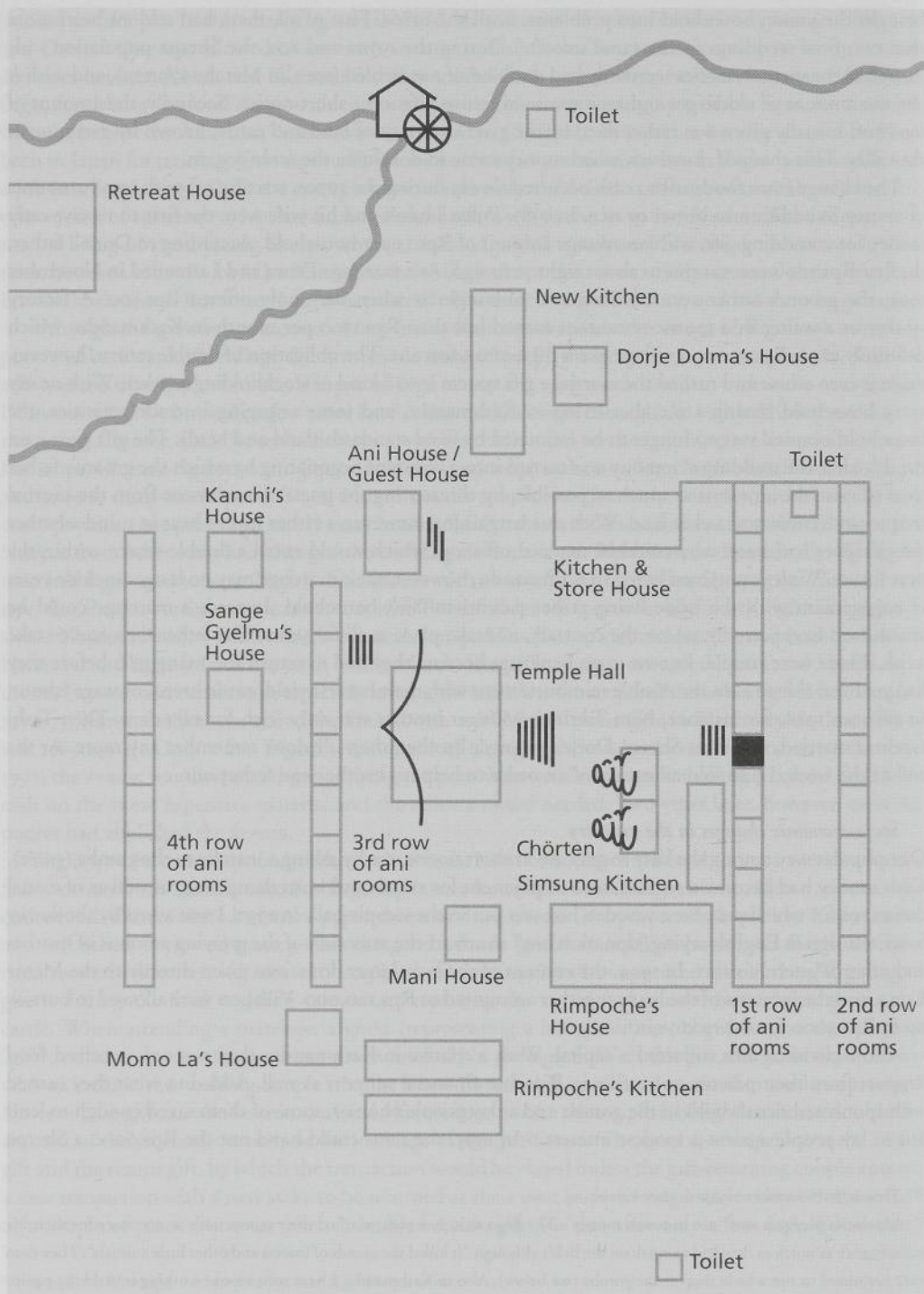


Figure 6 Plan of Tashi Gomba in 1995

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 electoral 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 electoral 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 nuns 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 nuns 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 nun 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 also 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 meet 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 *liis* (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 threaten 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 *chawni* 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 Tsetso 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 Tsetso 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 *dharmā*

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 an 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 received 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 honorary 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 *dharm*a work.

What do you mean by *dharm*a 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 *dharmā* 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 Tsetu’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 Tsetu 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 Tsetu.

Dividing his time between Kusho Tsetu 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 global 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 *dharmā*. 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 Tsetso 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 Tsetso’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 Tsetso 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 *dharmā*.

"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 Furer-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 Bodhgaya 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 Bodhgaiia 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 Appadurai'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.