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

Paths to Dharma, Paths of Dharma

Introduction

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

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

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

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

My path to Tashi Gomba

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

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

In Mullin (1991:9).
which the laity favoured monks above nuns for sponsored rituals, which left nuns with insufficient
economic means. I began to wonder whether the situation would be different in a nunnery inhabited by
nuns with its own socio-cultural environment, where religious daughters and sisters might rely much
more on the support of their family ties. How naive this economic perspective may sound now, it never­
theless set my path towards Nepal and Tashi Gomba.

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

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

In his essay, Füer-Haimendorf stated that the Sherpa village headman had visited numerous monas­
teries and convents in Tibet. “Greatly impressed by their role as centres of religious artistic activities, [the
headman] conceived the idea of promoting in his own village the foundation of a gompa similar to those
of Tibet” (Füer-Haimendorf 1976:123). By the end of the same paragraph, however, Füer-Haimendorf
also renders the headman’s intention
to establish a gompa for nuns, where women anxious to lead a religious life, and widows and deserted
wives in need of a place of refuge, could find shelter and inspiration (Füer-Haimendorf 1976:123).

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

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

In April 1994, I returned to Tashi Gomba for one year of fieldwork to investigate its history, and the
valuations of nunhood among monastics and laity, male and female, that had guided its genesis. The
outcome of my investigations and the insights I gained from them, however, turned out to be different from
what I expected.
The discussion of the marginal position of nuns in Tibetan Buddhism starts with the ambivalent statements on female religious practitioners as ascribed to the Buddha (Horner 1930; D.Paul 1979; Gross 1993). On the one hand, he never denied women's ability to follow the path. When Ananda asked

Lord, are women, having gone forth from home into homelessness in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, able to realise the fruit of stream-attainment or the fruit of once-returning or the fruit of non-returning or perfection [i.e. the accomplishment of wisdom and insight, of a bodhisattva, and of Buddhahood, respectively]? The Buddha replied they would be able to realise all these goals (Cullavagga x1.3, in Gross 1992:32).

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

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

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

The ambiguity concerning religious women, thus, signified a discrepancy between the Buddhist ideology of all sentient beings being able to attain Enlightenment, including women, and a social world in which spiritual advancement was largely denied to the female sex. This denial of female spirituality became particularly effectuated in, notably Theravada Buddhist, societies where monasticism became interminently linked to centralised state power (Samuel 1993). In Tibet, however, where pre-Buddhist Bon Po, Buddhism and Tantrism had become unfathomably intertwined into what we know now as Tibetan Buddhism, the discrepancy resulted, so far as present literature can attest, in basically two kinds of female religious practitioners: nuns and yogini.
Tantric yogini were individual women who managed by their personal strength to break away from the patriarchal structure of their society, and to devote their life to a wandering existence of meditation and retreat. It may not be surprising that, because of the personal strength and the obstructions they had to suffer, many of these women gained a high religious reputation among the laity; sometimes as a consort of a famous yogi, sometimes as religious specialists and important teachers in their own right (see Allione 1984; Gross 1993).

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

"the eight special rules presented no inherent barrier to women’s spiritual development. They mandated institutional subordination, not spiritual subordination (Gross 1993:37),"

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

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

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

2 Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who herself is a bhikshuni, finds particularly the term ani, “auntie”, derogatory. She holds that the current, more polite term of address are cbolka (“she who is dedicated to the Dharma”, cbol) or tsunma. Like Havnevik, however, I did not come across these terms in my fieldwork (Havnevik 1989:210 n.32). Ani was the common word, and “aunties” were as highly respected as “mothers” and “sisters” (common terms of address of catholic nuns), so I saw no reason to avoid the term. I use “ani” as well as “nun”, although the nuns of Tashi Gomba are not fully ordained.
to improve their current position as religious specialists. However, investigation into the role Western Tibetan Buddhists and, especially, Western anis took in this recent development could be very interesting, as it opens up a discussion between the religious and social assumed necessity of a full ordination for women by Western and Tibetan anis (cf. Gross 1993), and the growing Western appropriation of Tibetan Buddhism.

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

Women and religion in Tibetan studies

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

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

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

3 Bartholomeuss in her pioneering study on the history of the Srilankan nuns’ order (1994), shows eloquently how its reinstall-ment at the end of the last century was largely the work of Theosophists to be picked up by Sri Lankan nationalist movements. Contrary to the Sri Lankan case, the major impact of Westerners in the Tibetan buddhist field came only after 1959, with the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the following Tibetan diaspora. I imagine that the already existing institution of nunhood must have been very disappointing to those who had come for gender equality they had perceived by booklore on Buddhism. Instead, they found themselves entangled in a subordinated position to monks, to be protected by them, led by them, and taught by them. And foremost, to find their religious careers obstructed by their rejection from the Tibetan buddhist universities in India.
and dedicated than men" (Allione 1984:viii; Willis 1987). On the other hand, they took the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the books of the monastic rules) and the eight *gurudhammas* as their starting point of analysis, i.e. the *bhikkuni*, to stress the misogynous tendencies in Buddhism. In Makley’s words, referring to the essentialist attitude towards Tibetan women in general, “she is in the end either extraordinarily liberated or shockingly oppressed” (Makley 1997:6-7).

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

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

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

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

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

**Women and religion in Himalayan anthropology**

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

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

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4. See also for a growing interest in women in the Theravada tradition, for instance Bartholomeusz (1994), Salgado (1996), and Kawanami (1990).
Shangri-La, which had already intrigued Westerners for centuries but had been hard to enter and investi­gate (see also Bishop 1989; Korom 1997). As such, Tibetan peoples outside Tibet's geopolitical bounda­ries, such as the Sherpas, Tamangs, Limbus and Rais of Nepal, came not only to be representatives of the Tibetan Buddhist culture, but were also seen as isolated and functionally integrated groups which had remained unchanged and unattached by, for instance, the Nepal state, contacts with local Hindu groups and the influence of the British in India. Restricting myself to the literature on Sherpas, one of the most exten­sively studied people of the Himalayas and also the main subjects of this study, anthropologists such as MacDonald (1979,1983-87), Funke (1967), Oppitz (1973), and Goldstein (1985), have studied Sherpas in the Tibetanists' fashion of reliance on Buddhist texts as found in Sherpa culture, as if these literary sources could "provide more-accurate 'truths' about Sherpa society" (Adams 1996:29). Among those who were more ethnographically oriented, Fürer-Haimendorf (1964) most clearly takes a functional­ist stance. But also in Robert Paul's work, and Sherry Ortner's earlier publications, the sociogenesis of the Sherpas received little, if any, attention, preoccupied as they were with the latter's religious ideology, whether from a psycho-analytical perspective (Paul 1976,1979,1982) or with a Geertzian approach of religion (Ortner 1978a,b,c).

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

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

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

This attitude towards the anis is shared by Fürer-Haimendorf in his essay "A Nunnery in Nepal" (1976). Apart from the motivations he listed, as given in the first section, expressions like "a discipline which imposes stringent sanctions on lapses from the chosen path of celibacy" and "the girls really enjoy
life in the gompa community and do not pine for the even freer life in their home villages” (Fürethaimendorf 1976:147), left me with an aftertaste of his disbelief of and discomfort with young women willing to give up marriage life for the rest of their lives.

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

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

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

As already indicated above, Sherry Ortner’s essay, “The Founding of the First Sherpa Nunnery, and the Problem of ‘Women’ as an Analytic Category” (1983) was the one trying to deal with the triad of women, religion, and social change. But even Ortner, famous for her theoretical work on gender, acknowledges that although I have been systematically concerned with the cultural construction of gender categories, I have done very little on women as social actors. For another, I have never attempted to explore issues pertaining to gender (or women) among the Sherpas, the people among whom I have done all my primary ethnographic research. (Ortner 1983:98)

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

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

9 Grimshaw’s stay and research in this Ladakhi convent was prematurely broken off (1992:2).
ity, and reproductivity" (ibid.:127). Her new perspective provides a much more nuanced rendering of religious women's personal motivations, than the previously mentioned authors did. Ortner concludes, that

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

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

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

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

Gender and the Theory of Practice

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

10 Ortner concentrates in "High Religion" (1989) on Solu Khumbu, the main Sherpa regions. The Bigu valley, where Tashi Gomba is situated, however, lies in the Dolakha district, south-west of Solu Khumbu.
assumed spiritual and/or intellectual incompetence, the threats evoked by their sexuality, and their “natural” social roles. Additionally, to accept only nuns’ “social motivations” tends in a similar way to over-emphasise their “marginal and trivial” role as religious specialists. Grimshaw’s Ladakhi nuns (1992), for instance, as intermediaries between the monks and the laity are given more credit in the social and in the religious field than any of the other authors have done.

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

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

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

(Alcoff 1994:117; emphasis in original)

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

Alcoff’s approach of women as social actors, acting and reacting in a constantly changing world, without, however, denying gender relations by which women are restricted in their actions, corresponds with Pierre Bourdieu’s “Theory of Practice” (1977 and 1979). His outline of a practice- and actor-oriented approach was not innovative or unique (see Ortner 1984), but most illuminating to me. Bourdieu sees the individual (the actor), and his identity, as a constantly developing entity in the practice of everyday life. The notion of structuring principles, such as gender relations, which structure but simultaneously create space for individual actions, is captured by his concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977:72). The assets individuals have at their disposal, to utilise their positions, to enhance their reputations, to create better or more opportunities, to act out trajectories and strategies - i.e. structure and restructure principles -, Bourdieu divides into economic, symbolic and cultural capital. With this emphasis on individual actors and their practice, Bourdieu likens the sociocultural field in which they operate to a game (a site of struggle and strategy), the *habitus* being the rules of the game (dispositions, but never fixed; for instance, gender relations) and the capital being the trump cards.
In order to understand the habitus of a specific sociocultural field, we thus have to look at the genesis of its practices (de Certeau 1984:58), since it is shaped over time. To use Ortner's words,

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

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

**Genesis and historiography**

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

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

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

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

12 The preoccupation with texts and dialogues (see Fabian 1996:9,33) has been, as I have shown above, the main reason why anis received so little attention of Western scholars. As such, the nuns were not only muted by their lamas and, as women, by the laity, but also by anthropologists and Tibetans, who, whether men or women, were trained in a male-biased discipline in which men were accepted to be the main "informants", whether literally or orally, thus equating "man" with "society" (Ardener 1975:24-3).
narratives, which allocates merely reaction to the dominated, and no initiating, active part in culture and history (Fabian 1998:24). Moreover, the exercise of a female counter-narrative sets out from an undifferentiated category of women. As I already suggested, we can also expect a plurality of narratives based on renounced and secular life, thus between nuns and laywomen, but this differentiation can be expanded on basis of age and personal experiences, social positions, and economic resources; in other words, in differences of capital (see Moore 1988, on “differences within and differences between gender”).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14 See Ch.II.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1 Fabian's "moments of freedom" and genres as expressions of norms and order (distinctions, classifications; Fabian 1996:24), and Appadurai's debatability of the past based on "sets of norms" shared with the mythical and durational forms of the past (Appadurai 1983) both resonate, in my opinion, Bourdieu's concept of habitus as "dispositions", structuring structures of practice (Bourdieu 1977).
res, tending to become charters, and the moments of freedom possible to be taken, urged for, created, the impact and speed of cultural transformation can vary. It is from this insight that we also can understand Haddad and Falk's thesis, namely that "women take a more active part in public life, and in the establishment of new religious structures, during periods of social crisis when the normal functioning of society breaks down" (Haddad & Falk 1985:xiii). By interpreting their rather static conception of "normal functioning of society" as authoritative genres at work, and their "periods of social crisis" as breakdowns of the dominating, structuring principles, women might indeed increase their impact on social and religious change."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Tibetan Buddhism, the spiritual path towards wisdom can take two, conceptually distinguishable, modes. The one mode takes knowledge and understanding of the Buddhist texts (sutra) as its focus, consequently being the path of scholarship, philosophical analysis, and monastic discipline (ibid.:10). Samuel renders this mode as “Clerical Buddhism”. The other mode is based on tantra, a system of yogic processes, that aims at insight and understanding through visualisation of, and identification with, tantric deities and those who are more advanced on the spiritual path than oneself. This mode can be summarised as the path of meditation and retreat. The identification with deities and religious heroes is believed to generate a spiritual power equal to these beings; the further one advances on the spiritual path, the higher and more complex the deities one identifies with will be. This Bodhi Orientation, however, can also serve the Pragmatic Orientation in that it can be used for this-worldly benefit of the laity. Although lamas see this use of tantric practice as a by-product of their path towards Buddhahood, its techniques “function in practical terms as a means of training shamanic practitioners” (ibid.:9). Therefore, Samuel refers to this mode as “Shamanic Buddhism” (ibid.:8).
In Tibetan Buddhism, these two paths of learning and meditation, characterising the two modes of Clerical and Shamanic Buddhism, constitute a complementary set. The whole range of schools (or orders) within Tibetan Buddhism recognise the importance of practising both exegesis of the *sutra* as *tantric* practices in the attainment of wisdom - hence its alternative name of Vajrayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism. It is generally held that the study of texts generates “simply knowledge of the words, where what really matters is internalising and realising the meaning of the words” (ibid.:228); they can only be understood in an intellectualistic, rationalist sense. On the other hand, without knowledge of the texts, tantric practice cannot evoke insight, ensure progress, but instead might even lead to madness through a lack of control over the powers it generates. It is this balance between rationalism needed to control, to “tame” emotions and attachments, through the taming of demons and hostile forces (ibid.:220), that makes of its practitioners “Civilized Shamans” - the title Samuel gave his book.

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

Samuel's analysis is based on the premise that small-scale preliteracy societies had and have a dominantly shamanic orientation, while premodem states with developed literacy and centralisation, bureaucratic government have been predominantly clerical with shamanic elements present in subordinate contexts (ibid.:10; see also Samuel 1990:93-133).

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

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

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

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

For as much as the above elicits the acceptance and necessity of Tibetan Buddhism's shamanic mode, it also shows the other side of the coin, namely that the clerical aspects of Tibetan Buddhism were stronger where it coincided more with political power. In this respect, one could make a classification of regions, based on their political and economic organisation, to measure the extent to which its religious practice shifted more towards the clerical, or towards the shamanic mode, of Buddhism. Samuel does so by distinguishing four kinds of communities: centralised agricultural communities and urban communities, where a strong political centralisation could be found, and remote agricultural communities and pastoral communities, where little or no effective presence of a centralised political authority was to be found (Ibid.:115-38). What he shows, is that in the former communities large monastic complexes could come into existence, supported by and, often grown into large estates themselves, in control of economic surplus. The population density in these areas, in addition, offered a large base for recruitment of monastics. Here, monasteries could turn into powerful institutions "closely integrated with the structures of secular power" (Ibid.:233) and, as they requested a strict organisation and a thorough training of its monastic community, into a kind of universities as well, in which besides exegesis of the religious texts also logic, rhetoric, epistemology, Tibetan medicine, astrology, mathematics, and philosophy made up its curriculum.

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

What I intend to show with this short exposition of the Gelugpa is how the path of learning, as Clerical Buddhism, is intermittently linked to political power, based on economic and demographic resources. The crux, from a cultural point of view, is literacy. Centralised, bureaucratic governments need a developed literacy. Accordingly, religious practice in these societies will be "predominantly clerical with shamanic elements present in subordinate contexts" (Ibid.:10; see also Goody 1986,1987). In contrast, societies with a dominantly shamanic orientation are small-scale, face-to-face, and preliterate. This distinction is mirrored in the more clerical and academic tradition of the Gelugpa compared to the other schools which rely, in their strong tantric emphasis, on oral tradition. This reliance on the oral transmission of tantric teachings is not a feature of the absence of texts, but how these texts are used. Tantra texts "are primarily liturgical [...] subsidiary in importance to the experience, or rather the state of being, ideally brought about when the invocation [of deities] succeeds" (Ibid.:19). In tantric practice, the lama, teacher (guru), is vital. He acts as the personification of a deity, a bodhisattva, or some great lama from the
past, on whoever his student meditates, as the lama has the appropriate skill to contact these figures and to make use of them. These figures, however, must not be viewed as merely historical personae, but as “hypostatisations of human potentialities” (ibid.:20). Dealing with the spiritual and emotional powers that can be evoked through meditation upon such deities or “cultural heroes” without a personal lama’s mediation, is bound to become a dangerous affair, with the risk of madness or even death. Tantric practice, thus - even when using texts - requests a face-to-face contact with a lama who instructs and guides his pupil.

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

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

The setting

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

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

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21 In 1994, I counted 161 Sherpa households out of a total of 362.
at two-days walking distance, labour migration, and a modestly growing amount of tourists belonged to its social implications.

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

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

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

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

These encounters changed the perception especially the younger anis held of themselves as religious specialists, and of the prestige of their gomba, from a relative contentment into feelings of backwardness and underdevelopment. This realisation, however, was preceded by the anis’ turn from a primarily prag-
matic orientation towards a karma orientation instigated by their former abbot. As I hope to show in Chapter VI and VII, this lama, significantly known as the Guru Lama, not only offered them more profound teachings and ritual practices, but also reorganised the community of Tashi Gomba and tightened its monastic discipline. The implications of these changes intensified the relationship between the anis as religious specialists with the laity, and, with their growing knowledge, also their prestige among the laity. In addition, a shift in motivations for their opting for a religious life, as rendered by different generations of anis, came to the fore.

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

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

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

In the following chapters, we will envision the strategies the Bigu anis applied for augmenting their religious knowledge and expertise and the ways particularly their lamas reacted on their pleas and acts. Above all, we will see how these strategies were based upon, and part of, a larger social and religious context. As asserted above, the encounters with urban and foreign monastics, and with Westerners outside and inside the boundaries of their valley proved to be a decisive factor in their changing self-assertion. This turned out to be particularly the case when individuals came to share their everyday life for a longer period. As these developments are but a recent phenomenon, and the number of guests the gumba
entertained for longer periods of time remained small. Their impact in this small, face-to-face community, however, should not be underestimated. Having been one of these few, the anthropologist herself has become a participant, an actor in this process.

**Reflexivity and coevalness in ethnography**

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

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

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

How embarrassing these confessions may feel now, the necessity of their rendering supersedes the autobiographical tone of secret expectations and feelings of insecurity. They not only represent the ethnographer's active part in the production of ethnographical knowledge - which made a call for a reflexive analysis of the research outcome - but they also serve to take account of the ethnographer's presence and conduct within the culture under study, and as such becoming part of its history. For this sharing of time with the people under study, I adopted Fabian's notion of coevalness (Fabian 1983:30-2). When acknowledging the Theory of Practice (see Adams 1996:396, where she refers to both Fabian and Bourdieu), we can not deny that the ethnographer has become an actor in the field of interest and a part of its history, both through his presence and his writing. In the ethnographical writing, thus, the active side of "participant-observation" has to replace the hiding - particularly in the process of writing - behind the latter part of the anthropological credo for the illusion of objectivity. This attitude of distancing can only result in
the denial of contemporaneity to the people under study, and consequently to a distancing of a culture in time by redirecting it to the past (Fabian 1983).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Outline

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

Religious symbols - whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion - cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial. My argument, I must stress, is not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. (Asad 1993:53-4)
Chapter II describes the narratives around the sociopolitical context of the founding of Tashi Gomba, in which the initiator of the founding, the tax collector-to-be of Bigu, plays the leading role. Chapter III is devoted to the Drugpa Rimpoche, who assisted him in this project, and left his mark on the early years of the gomba’s existence as its religious leader. In Chapter IV, the effects on the young monastic community of the different views of these two men on what the practice of the Dharma was to accomplish (socially and spiritually) will be explored. Gender distinctions which, in my view, have played a significant role in that unintended competition will be elaborated in Chapter V. The motivations of the first generation of anis in Tashi Gomba will be interpreted from the social roles Sherpa women had to fulfil. In Chapter VI, I will focus on the religious practice of these early anis, with its emphasis on Shamanic Buddhism, and the changes that were introduced by the new abbot, the Guru Lama, since 1959. Chapter VII will show how these new developments and the growing contact with Bigu’s outside world between 1970 and 1980 has created a generation gap between the anis who joined the community before 1960 and those after 1960. Chapter VIII is dedicated to recent developments in both the secular and religious sphere which created a tension between tantric practice and study among both the anis and their lamas. In Chapter IX, then, I hope to be able to give some conclusive remarks on the role of gender in the religious development within a sociohistorical context.