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The Birth of a Dream

The socio-political Context of Tashi Gomba's Founding

A Sherpa headman's dream

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

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

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

The initiator of the gomba’s establishment had been the Sherpa headman of Bigu, Nim Pasang. “One day, God went into his soul”, the only, already aged, monk living in Bigu began to tell me. The headman had been spending the night in his son’s house next to their fields on a mountain terrace up Bigu northern valley side, when he had a very auspicious dream of temples, and gods descending from the sky. Moved by this experience of beauty and harmony, the old lama went on, Nim Pasang decided to build a
Figure 1  Nepal and the sites of the Drugpa Rinpoché's gombas

Figure 2  Sherpa regions
temple in the same fields he saw when he woke up. This spot would indeed be the perfect location for a
gods' house, elevated above the houses dispersed all over the valley and the village temple half-way down
to the river.

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

The Sherpa headman's ambition

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

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

The narratives on Nim Pasang are an exception to this, since they do not include such a fraternal
rivalry, nor the need to seek refuge with a lama. What we learn from them is that his competitors were
not Sherpas, but a family of high-caste Hindus called Kharka. For the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, Ortner
states that they were never dominated economically by any other ethnic group, as happened, for example, to
the Limbu of eastern Nepal. [...] Either the Sherpas effectively kept out foreign groups, or foreign
groups were simply not interested in the high, cold, steep lands of Solu-Khumbu (Ortner 1989:154).
Since the Sherpas migrated from eastern Tibet into these regions south of the Himalayas during the sixteenth Century, they had developed towards “a relatively high standard of living compared to many other (non-high caste) groups in Nepal” (Ortner 1989:153-4). One reason may have been that they were never forced into a subordinate position within their own habitat, as stated above. Another reason, Ortner proposes, may have been that the poorest families among them tended to emigrate, leaving Solu Khumbu with an image of little poverty by taking it elsewhere.

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

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

Long, long time ago, the Sherpas came down from Tibet. At that time, Bigu was only inhabited by Thamis. One Sherpa king chased them away to Alampu [a hilltop at the eastern end of the valley] and made a border they were not allowed to trespass. He reigned over this mountain side, and his palace was where the village gomba is now. But this king - his name was Gyal Samthso - had enemies and once, when he was in Pari [at the other side of the valley across the river] somebody put a knife in his body. He dragged himself all the way up back to his house again, but his enemies besieged it. Then the king threw a rock out of a window, so that his enemies would think he was escaping from that side. But he run off from the other side and heeded himself at the water mill where they made those wooden cups. His wound, however, bleed heavily and coloured the water red. That is how his enemies found out where he was hiding. They found him and killed him. Then they had to flee, because the king’s soldiers sought revenge. They went after them, in the direction of Dolakha [the districts’ capital]. At night, they made dinner on three stones. And when some were already preparing themselves to go on, the water of one group was not even boiling yet. Only from the side of one stone the water didn’t want to boil. One of the soldiers became so angry that he started to stab into that stone. And the stone started bleeding. Then they took it with them to Dolakha, and there the stone said to them: “You are not taking care of me properly. I want to stay here and I want the Newaris to take care of me.” At that time there was one Newari family living in Dolakha. They gave the stone a home up in the village and they [i.e. the Sherpa soldiers] had to slaughter 15,000 cows and goats for that stone. They said the stone was Krishna, the god who had created men. Krishna is also a god in Tibet, but
then his name is Chenrezig [Skt. Avalokitesvara], I believe. And ever since, people had to offer cows and goats every year, and always the people from Bigu first, because they had found the stone. Only after them the other villages. That festival was called “Bimsengthang Jatra”, because the name of the stone was Bimseng. Later, they only asked for fifteen cows and goats. But this offering was stopped ten years ago or so. The government, however, built a big temple for Bimseng. Now, there are a lot of Newaris in Dolakha and even here in Bigu. When the king was dead, there was nobody any more to stop other jats from coming to live here. The Thamis nowadays even live up the next to the big gomba [thulo gomba (Nep.), i.e. Tashi Gomba; sanogomba is the village gomba downhill].

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

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

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

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

1 Dorje, the young Sherpa of Bigu Dawa married at the end of our one-year fieldwork, had started to write down the genealogies of the six Sherpa clans of Bigu.
which they worship”. The image of “innocence” seems to be primarily based on the Sherpas’ inability to categorise them as either Hindu or Buddhist, and underlines their roles as servants and tenants of Sherpa households, of lower, but not untouchable, Nepali caste.

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

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

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

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

The initial awkward shift from the Sherpa rivalry to Bimseng now becomes comprehensible when taking wealth accumulated by agriculture and by trade as its covering theme. The pari king had pursued the control over land revenues and tollage in the Bigu valley, but he failed as the plot of Bimseng and the crucial role given to the Newaris suggests. Although the Bigu valley was aside major trade routes between Tibet and Kathmandu, it must have been a passage for, among others, the Newaris of Dolakha—a village with a presumably long history—who traded with the Tibetan border place now known as Khasa, east of the Lapchi Khang range, and beyond (cf. van Spengen 199). This route, however, entered the Bigu valley at the north, that is the wari side of the deceased king. It is not unlikely that after Gyal Samthso’s death
the Newaris were unwilling to pay toll to his rival, the pari king. The latter may have tried to sort out this conflict with the Newaris in Dolakha, but they clearly did not come to an agreement. Bimseng, the Newaris' guardian god of trade, accuses the Bigu Sherpas of not taking care of him, and those he protects, properly.

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

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

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

Jang Bahadur made use of the framework offered by Dasain which paralleled the Muluki Ain as the hierarchical structure he imposed on the emerging Nepal society. At its apex stood the king of Nepal, held to be an incarnation of Vishnu, who acted as the religious symbol of state power. Instead of the animal provisions the local landlords received from their tenants at Dasain, however, the landlords them-
selves had to pay land taxes of which the king was said to be the benefactor. As such, these revenues became interpreted in a political-religious way characteristic of the history of Nepal's state formation (see also Höfer 1979; and Burghart 1984). The festival itself was turned by Jang Bahadur Rana into an elaborate state ritual, to stress the military power and overlordship over economic resources of the rulers (i.e., the Rana family) and, simultaneously, legitimating the Muluki Ain, Jang Bahadur Rana turned Dasain into an elaborate state ritual (ibid.:271-2). Through much pomp and parades, and public display of the killing of the animals as a ritual purification of the kingdom, Dasain was to promote Nepal as a pure Hindu state.

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

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

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

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

The Kharka family

According to the genealogy of the Bigu Kharkas (mendap), written by Chandra Bahadur Kharka (1987), their history starts with the settling of their ancestor in Chilanka, a cluster of villages in the adjacent valley south-east of Bigu, around 1700. The direct descendants of this man, Him Kharka - also known as Chilanki Kharka -, established their households between Chilanka and Dolakha, back the way their ancestor had come from. Until, in 1823 - as the mendap states - Chattra Singh Kharka (1799-1850) chooses to move west by building a house in Bharang, at the eastern exit of the Bigu valley. For the Sherpas of Bigu, this house marks their shared history with the Kharkas. Built high into a cliff where Bigu’s river flows into the Sangawa Khola, the house is referred to as jogiktuli, after the temple adjacent to it, and functions as a memory trace in the Sherpas’ narratives on their conflicts with this family of high Hindu caste. From this house, three of Chattra Singh’s sons actually moved into the Bigu valley, right into its heart, to Pegu, a cluster of houses just below Gyalbasingh, the murdered Sherpa king’s fields.
This specific place and the approximate synchrony of the Kharka's first settlement in Bigu with the Sherpa narrative of their kings' rivalry and the Bimseng event triggers off a relatedness between the two. Waris-side Bigu no longer had no authority to stop other groups from settling on what they took to be their land. Chattrra Singh died, according to the mendap, in 1850, suggesting the splitting up of his extended family around that date. The mendap does not offer such detailed information. Written in honour and glory of the author's ancestry in Bigu, it does give a few lines of biography on each of the forefathers which focus on their professional activities. Only from these biographies, then, can we elicit some clues as to the part they played in the history of Bigu, particularly from the Sherpas' perspective.

In the context of the political vacuum that occurred after Gyal Samthso's death, the short biography of Chattrra Singh is very suggestive. It says that he travelled to China [sic!] regularly to pay revenues for the usage of pastures on Tibetan property. When the leader of the tax collection party died, he took over (Kharka 1987:18; cf. Füerer-Haimendorf 1975; Fisher 1986).

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

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

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

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

2 "For knowledge to Benares, and to Gorkha for justice" had become a widespread adage in the late 18th and early 19th Century in Nepal, before the Ranas took over (Bista 1992:46). The custom to send their children to India for education was also common among the Chetri Kharkas. This is probably also why the Sherpas assume the Kharkas to originate in India, while their mendap states they came from the Gorkha district, East Nepal.
You know that house built in the rock on the way to Sangba? There one such a Kharka lived, Himkarna [sic!] was his name. Once a Sherpa had been shitting on the path and had cleaned himself with twigs from an incense tree. That Kharka had seen that and demanded four bags of seeds as a kind of fee. I don't know what gave him the right to do that. But he threatened to call the police, and the Sherpa got so scared that he gave him all his land to put him off the idea of going to the police.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The people here were afraid to stand up for themselves, very afraid of the police. But my grandfather wasn't. His parents [Sukusing and his wife] had come to live here much later than the other Sherpa families. He was a Tibetan from Pharak and his wife a Sherpani, who had worked in the King's palace. That is why they were much more mature than the others. Because my mother had worked at the palace, they knew people and finally won the position of mizar and the land that went with that position.
Sukusing had managed to become a member of the tax collecting party by taking care of the revenues to be paid by the Kambadzen clan. His wife had been Kambadzen, but whether he had been a Tibetan is unknown. Other Sherpas hold that his family only made up their Tibetan origin to enlarge their status and to veil their history in Pharak. Equally, his wife may have served in the king's palace - one of the first nuns of Tashi Gomba also stated to have worked in the palace - but whether this position had rendered them useful connections remains doubtful. In any case, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth Century, Ortner asserts that "the Sherpas were apparently squeezed by Rana exactions" (Ortner 1989:117), as the Ranas "became progressively revenue oriented" (Regmi 1978:226; see also Pfaff-Czernacka 1993). In the Dolakha district, a revenue office was established in 1879. This "increasing intrusion of the Nepal state and [...] the Sherpas ethnic (construed as "caste") smallness vis-a-vis the Hindu Ranas, that was operating at the time", Ortner records for Solu Khumbu (Ortner 1989:165; cf. Hofer 1979) were personified in Bigu in the Kharkas. Their mendap recalls Bhauraba Singh (1831-1919), Chandra Singh (1870-1933), and Amrit Bahadur (1911-1980) as shukbar, local administrators with the responsibility over tax extractions. From Dal Bahadur (1925-1974) onwards, three Kharkas are said to have held the position of Panchayat administrator, stationed in Laduk. This post was created after 1926, when "the government decided to establish Panchayats at the village level with the power to exercise judicial authority in certain local matters" (Regmi 1978:572). A village panchayat in the hill districts had to comprise a population of one thousand. The Bigu valley, however, consisted in 1994 of only about 1400 people, which in the 1920s must have been half this size. As the Kharkas as Pradhan Panchayat (head of the village council) were stationed in Laduk, we may conclude that Bigu had become incorporated into Laduk panchayat.

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

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

Similarly, his initiating the founding of a monastery can also be interpreted as a sociopolitical act, aiming to protect the endangered Sherpa-ness of the Bigu valley. Nim Pasang's political position as mizar did not safeguard the cultural Sherpa identity of the valley. The expanding network of the Rana government had not only led the Kharkas into the Bigu valley, but opened up the mountain areas also for the immigration of groups like the untouchable blacksmith caste (Kami), Magars, and Hindu-oriented Newaris and Tamangs. And if Ortner in the far-northern regions of Solu Khumbu already detects
evidence from oral history interviews that certain Nepali religious customs made their way into the region during this period (Ortner 1989:97-8). The more so in a middle hill region like Bigu where, because of its greater accessibility, Jang Bahadur Rana's migration policy became particularly successful (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993:281). According to Pfaff-Czarnecka, local ethnic elites were ready to accept cultural innovations, such as Dasain, as well as the language of power it communicated in terms of caste (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993:282). She did not detect "resistance on large scale", revealed in ethno-historical material (ibid.:281). However, the scale of resistance in face-to-face societies, which the Ranas sought to unify into a Nepal state, could only be as large as the boundaries of its society allowed. In the long run, ethnic groups seem to have lost their battle against Hindu domination, but that does not imply they simply accepted its political language which rendered them a tribal stigma, nor the cultural forms in which they were presented from the very beginning. The foundings of village temples and monasteries in the northern Sherpa regions, for instance, can be understood as such an act of resisting "the policy of pushing Hindu values, and despising the "dirtiness" of ethnically Tibetan peoples like the Sherpas, partly acted to unite the Sherpas around their common Buddhist religion and Sherpa identity" (Ortner 1989:98). As in the Solu Khumbu region, in Bigu too this development was put in a religious frame. Although the founding of the village temple as such is not remembered as a conscious act against Hindu values by present-day Bigu Sherpas, a festival that must have occurred with or after the founding of the village temple, on the other hand, does imply that efforts have been made towards a manifestation of a Sherpa identity vis-à-vis the immigrated Hindu groups: the Sherpa counter-ritual of Dasain.

The Narak festival

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

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

4 I restrict myself to the Narak celebrations I witnessed in October 1994, with some references to the one I observed in 1995. Fürer-Haimendorf, however, mentions also participation of the monastics of Tashi Gomba in the Narak rituals (1976:130), which was confirmed to me by the nuns. Their present abstinence from participation forms part of reforms initiated by the abbot the Guru Lama, in the 1960s and 1970s, and will be discussed in Chapter VI.
It is the only seasonal ritual in which the whole Sherpa community partakes, sponsored by laymen (jindak), and lasting from three to six days. Its highlight are the mask dances (cham) on the second or third day, during which village lamas display the gods and demons to whom the ritual is dedicated, as well as figures which express the rite's fertility purpose in terms of sexual joking. Next to fertility, of both soil and its people, Dumje also entails a ritual to honour descendancy, in the form of offerings to the “lord of respectful bone(s)” (R.Paul 1979:278), i.e. the clan-protecting deities.

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

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

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

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

5 According to women originating from Dolangsa, a Sherpa village just over the Tinsang Pass, and from Helambu, a region west of the Kathmandu-China motor road, Dasain is celebrated also there in the village temple, but without the mask dances. While the village lama recites mantras, the laity is primarily enjoying itself with eating and drinking and singing. These celebrations, however, were not known by the name of Narak, which the women called typical for Bigu. It must be stated too, that also Dumje was not known to them.
the valley. Along with the sponsors, the village lama and his students also remained. They recited mantras, while the sponsors offered butter lamps, and performed prostrations in front of the statues on the temple’s shrine. At about ten o’clock, the inauguration ceremony was over, and also the village lama retired. His assistants and the sponsors shifted to the outhouse again and resumed their drinking and singing till late at night.

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

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

At noon the next and last day, the Sherpas who had participated so far, were joined by many others, including people of other castes such as Thamis, Tamangs, and Kamis; however, no Chetris. All were gathered in the temple yard and were provided with food and drinks. It was commonly known throughout the valley, that this was the day the dance performance with the masks and costumes was going to take place. After the meal, a purification fire was lit at a corner of the courtyard, a sign for the audience to create space, like the day before, for the dancers. This day, however, the village lama remained out of sight. The drums started and three dancers dressed up as Kingly gods appeared, in blue, red and green costumes, wearing roughly painted, wooden masks and crowns. Having been somewhat spoiled, I guess, I expected a drama to be played out between the three, but the action consisted of the same simple
spinning and turning as the day before. The three gods were followed up by three dancers dressed up as the Grim Reaper, skeletons painted on a black suit. Also their movements were only a turning around on the drone of a drum; no songs, no words, no acting. They left to make way for the same gods as before again, who after their rounds were chased away by three monkeys.

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

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

The above description has to display Narak's importance as a communal festival of the Bigu Sherpas. Neither the amount of participation, nor its elaborateness, were to be compared with any other celebration in Bigu I witnessed. Additionally, no other celebration had been restricted to Sherpas only. Other castes, however, were much welcomed as spectators of the mask dances, the highlight of the Sherpa festival. Furthermore, Narak as a statement of Bigu's Sherpa community vis-à-vis outsiders, as we may conclude from the above, also involved internal discussions on reputation and membership. These disparities centred around the privilege of being one of Narak's sponsors, jindak, besides the family's economic ability to come up with a one-seventh share of the necessary amounts of arak and chang, rice and vegetables, for hosting the participants for three days. To gain the right of becoming a jindak, a family has to approach a sponsor of the coming Narak. As the coming jindak will usually receive more than one request, he will have to select one family. As I indicated above, the transference of sponsorship from one family to another was explicitly played out on the last evening of the festival. This event can not only be interpreted as the public acceptance of the duties by next year's sponsors, but also as a show of trust by the present jindak families in their successors. The displayed relationship between the two families superseded, however, a confidence in economic capacity.
On the day after the Narak celebrations in the village gomba, yesterday’s sponsoring families visited each other, led by the village lama. In the company of their relatives and immediate neighbours, each of them was invited to take a seat behind an offering table constructed in their respective courtyards. During the ceremony that followed, the jindak family was honoured for its generosity, and the hope for its future prosperity was expressed in a song, while they were offered khata (ceremonial scarves), arak, and fruits. From this celebration of the sponsoring families, as honorous members of the Sherpa community, it becomes clear why the role of Narak’s jindak was considered to be a privilege by a family, who was finally accepted as next year’s sponsors, after already applying for it for five years. It turned out that the father had left his wife and three children twenty-four years earlier, to run away with another woman. When they and their children returned to Bigu after thirteen years, they were debarred from community life. In course of time, relationships with the father’s and his ex-wife’s relatives, and neighbouring families, softened, until the man and his ex-wife were also on speaking terms again. A full rehabilitation, however, was only proven by the acceptance of the family as a Narak jindak, which finally occurred in 1994 as their succeeding no less than the chairman of the VDC.

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

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

The second aspect deals with the central role the sadhus - as the people of Bigu call them - play in the mask dances, and the way they are played out. Although in Dumje celebrations in Tibet acrobats with exaggerated Indian yogi-like faces usually take the stage, there they only act as interludes (Funke 1969:126). In Bigu, however, the sadhus form, together with the monkeys, the major act of the dance; the hilarious scene the audience is really waiting for. The Meme Lama attempted to lecture on the play, the day before when all were awaiting their meal in the temple, explaining the meaning of the danced deities, but his words were lost in the buzz of the crowd. To them also, Narak seemed first and foremost a communal festival, and the next day’s performance merely entertainment.
The similarity between the masks worn by the Tibetan acrobats, as described by Funke (1969), and those of the Bigu sadhus, suggest existing long-term anti-Hindu sentiments enacted by ridiculing its holy men. Variations in performances, however, must be considered to render local interpretations of relationships between Hindus and Buddhists. In Bigu, then, not the physical preoccupations of the yogis were played out, but the greediness, the money-grubbing of some sort of Brahman priests. It may be obvious that these characters represent the Sherpas’ opinion of the Kharka family, I presented earlier. Being the main and most powerful Hindu representatives in the Bigu Sherpas’ habitat, their display of power and greediness were put into religious terms, in opposition to the most basic Buddhist notion of generosity and compassion - as we will also see in a speech offered to me by the Meme Lama (see below).\footnote{In 1994, the sadhu performers were also wearing the ochre, cotton bags as belonging to the outfit of the monks and nuns, to stuff their banknotes in. The dancers, clearly, wanted to make a political statement, in the course of the national elections to be held one month later. Being members of the communist party, they equated the Buddhist monastics with the Hindu sadhus, displaying their anti-religious feelings. Their monastic bags did not remain unnoticed and triggered off political discussions among the groups of Sherpa men, after the mask dances.}

Buddhism, as such, offered the Bigu Sherpas a framework to uphold their self-esteem, as being morally better human beings than Hindus, in the light of the social oppression suffered by them. Reference to a Buddhist identity, however, requested a display of their religion.

**Constructing a Sherpa identity**

As the context of Narak (in opposing Dasain) suggests, the Bigu Sherpas constructed their identity vis-à-vis the Hindu Kharkas. Narak, however, needed a location and a religious specialist to be performed in the first place, that is, a village temple and a village lama. Before elaborating on these, however, I would first like to render the speech the Meme Lama volunteered. This speech focused on the construction of religious buildings, as the most obvious manifestation of Buddhist faith and its ideology of generosity and compassion. As such, it had to counter the sheer fact that the Hindu population of Bigu had not constructed one single Hindu temple in the valley,\footnote{Jogikhuti was a hermit place, not a temple as a centre of rituals. From the old Kharka still living in Bigu I came to understand that, as far as he could remember, deceased members of his family were taken to Laduk, or even to Pashupathinath in Kathmandu. The first Hindu temple in the Bigu valley itself was founded in 1993 on the school compound, dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge.} which signalled the selfishness and greediness of Hindu priests, i.e. as a characteristic of Hindu religion as a whole. Although he does not mention the Kharkas explicitly - which would be similar to “gossip behind someone’s back” - his reference to them as the Hindu, and Nepali, representatives in the valley, should be evident. Moreover, he starts off with stating a “religious victory” over a people I introduced as the Bigu Sherpas’ first powerful adversaries, the Newaris. Jumping from them to Dasain, to continue with Bahun priests and the moral issues of generosity and greediness, he then makes a political statement by comparing faith in gods to dealing with the police and bribes. As such, his speech acts like a summary of the themes addressed in this chapter.

Marga [New. “path to salvation”; Gellner 1992:5], they call it [instead of karma]. They are born in it, they do gyewa too, they bury their dead, and they know they will be reborn. So that’s why they are doing bare [life-cycle rites; see Gellner 1992], a Hindu ritual that is. And if they are not reborn, so why should they offer to their pitha [shrine]? But yes, there is a next life. For that they are doing prayers, for that they do pitha for dead people, and offer during Dasain. But, they are not doing so much rituals as lamas do. We, lamas, live the Dharma and give more. But they are only doing a job, finish it, and they never try to understand and think about the Dharma. Since two or three years, there are conferences in Kathmandu with Newaris, and we are also invited. And the students are abusing their [Newari] lamas. “They don’t know anything, so we think of Devi as our god and Madei [?] as our god. Our lama is a Newari lama. But only if you tell us, than we know [about the dharma]”. And since then
the lamas have to teach, and they go east and south, and explain. And then they know about the Dharma. Dhatma will arrive to all people. But to the Bahuns, if they do extensive puja, people pay a lot, to gain puja [merit] afterwards. And when the people offer, whatever they offer, they [the Bahuns] keep to themselves. For the lama, whatever he is given, he will collect all. And if we got one rupee, or five, ten, twenty, one hundred, we would collect all. And when I would have 10,000 rupees, I would make a new thing. That mani [prayer wheel] I have made. And if I think of making something, it will help all people a little bit. If people are not thinking and talking about making things, than nothing will be accomplished. That mani I have made. We put it there, and it will spread the Dharma. And all of us, we need the dharma. When we express it that way, then we accomplish it for all. And for them [the Bahuns], they are not making even one kuthi, a Brahman's temple house. But to Bahuns, people also give for those who die, cows, a house, a golden ring. Yes, rich people even give a golden ring, a cow or a horse to a Bahun. And they, they bring it to their own house and eat [the offerings]. They are not making anything, not even a kuthi. They do not go on pilgrimage or make something to promote the Dharma. To lamas, people give a lot. If they give them a lot, they can make a gomba. In Bouddha [Kathmandu], there are many, many gomba, and all are given by people. It's not lamas' money, it's the people's. (...) Now, they are building here a samkhbang [retreat house], and, after you stay for one year, four nuns will live there and they will get more knowledge. And you are going back and you tell the people that in Bigu we have this and more people will come. That is how the Dharma will grow. Now there is a lot of prosperity here. When people give to Bahuns, these all collect it for their own house, and they collect it for their son, and later on it all will be finished in that way. Even if they are rich, Bahuns are not making anything. You can go and ask in the village: “What did the Bahuns make?”. Nothing they accomplished. They eat it all themselves. And if I eat all myself, others don't have enough. If we have ten families, and I am eating alone, than there is not enough. We have to give as well, we have to think that way. (...) They respect Devi, and do puja in Pashupati. If you are going to another village and a big house to ask if you can stay there, they will give you food and a blanket. Even if it's a poorer family, you get what you need if you pay a little. [But] if you go to them, you get nothing. In this world, nowadays, Lord Buddha is big. If you follow his path, then you get knowledge, but if you follow Mahadevi, then you become a shrindi [ghost]. They will be like that and they will not get into sange, heaven. What to do? They do prostration and puja, but accomplish nothing. Our Buddha, we follow him and we do not do like that. They are not respecting. If we do not follow Buddha and we die, nothing will happen [after death] if we did not do dharma puja. To them, gossip behind someone's back does not matter, but for Buddha we should not do like that. It is as if the police came: if we give them bribes, still they do not make a decision. But if we talk to the officer, then the decision is made. Buddha is the officer. With the police, again and again we give them tea and have to negotiate. The same happens with Devi.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reflection

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

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

Sarki Shetpa remained pradhan in 1980, when the governmental appointment of village panchayat councils was displaced by local elections. In 1985, he was reelected, but stepped back in 1990, when the panchayat councils made place for the Village Development Cooperations (VDC’s).
Khumbu at the time as well, which reached Bigu through trading contacts of, primarily, Nim Pasang.

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

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