Constructing a House of Dharma

The religious Soil of the Founding of Tashi Gomba

The Drugpa Rimpoche's arrival

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

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

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

The recognition of the valley’s sacredness

Nim Pasang, Bigu’s ambitious headman, must have been deeply impressed by the advent of the Drugpa Rimpoche. The people's awe for a high lama like him held promise for the growth of his own reputation among his fellow Sherpas, if he would get the lama to support his ideal of founding a gomba. The Drugpa Rimpoche had, however, already gone forth to his next destination. Nim Pasang went after him, and when he put his request, the high lama seems to have asked, “Where?”. Thereupon, the headman had handed the Rimpoche a handful of mud and described to him the place where he had taken it from. The Meme Lama, one of the first monks of Tashi Gomba, gave Nim Pasang much credit for his meritorious act. He called him inspired by the gods, and in turn able to inspire others to give for the Dharma:

The mizar’s grandfather, he thought to make a gomba. God went into his soul, so he got this idea. He donated his land and from all directions, north, south, east, west, gifts were donated. From east, where is Bhutan, and money from Tibet.
But when I asked the mizar's grandson - who was now living in the house where his grandfather had his dream - about Nim Pasang's religious act of donating the land for a gomba, a less dharma-devoted picture was given.

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

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

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

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

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1 Regmi notes three other economic reasons for donating land for religious purposes (guthi), namely (1) to insure "economic security for his descendants", (2) "to safeguard [the family's] landed property from arbitrary confiscation by the State", and (3) to convert sectors of land property into tax exempt land (Regmi 1978:644; cf. Stellgrove 1957:217; cf. Orter 1989:146). In Nim Pasang's case, the first reason sounds plausible when thinking of his risky trading expeditions. By donating land to temples and monasteries, namely, its surplus remained the donor's acquisition. Nim Pasang's endowed land, however, seemed to be too arid to expect much surplus out of it. The second reason would entail a personal strategy against the Kharka threat of snapping up Sherpa land, but, again, with the poorness of Nim Pasang's endowed land it seems very unlikely that the Kharkas would go for it. Only the third reason is very likely to have played a role in Nim Pasang's decision. See also the section below "The construction of the monastery".

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

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

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

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

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

4 The link between offering rituals and the founding of a house of dharma goes even further, as Ortner writes that “offering rituals are said to have originated in the context of the founding of a temple. Thus it is told in another tale, widely known among both Tibetans and Sherpas, that the ritual was initially taught to people when they were trying to build Samye, the very first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, in the eighth Century” (Ortner 1989:73).
high lama pointed towards an earlier visit of an important lama to this valley, long before the immigration of the Sherpas who never knew of the presence of these holy signs. Who were thought to have made them then?

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

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

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

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

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

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1. In comparing the Guru Rimpoche to an eagle who defeats the demons and creates places of refuge, he equates him with "the mythical cha-gyun, the *garuda* eagle, [...] a symbol widely found in Southern Asia, representing the triumph of the upper world, the sky, or spirit, over the underworld, earth, or matter" (R.Paul 1976:140).
2. See Ch.II, The Sherpa headman's ambition.
3. See Ch.IV and VI for the role the village gomba played in the history of Tashi Gomba.
4. The Kalachakra Tantra (see also Ch.VII) is said to have originated in this hidden realm called Shambhala during the last days of Indian Buddhism, "and contains clear references to the threat of Muslim invasion" (Samuel 1993:410 and 517).
which in the flyer text is confirmed by the resemblance between the “land of Zambala” (Shambhala) and Bigu (beyül). If this association between Zambala and Shambhala was intended to promote the image of beauty and peacefulness of Bigu, while at the same time adapting to the local oral tradition without blurring the distinctions between Nyingmapa (the village gomba) and Kargyudpa (the monastery), then it was a very creative one. Nevertheless, the association with Shambhala is not so far-fetched as it may sound from the above, as the name of the monastery also supports it - but let me first turn to another explanation of Zambala.

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

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

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

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

Jambhala was not unknown to the Bigu Sherpas I questioned, although his name was only recalled when I brought it up. In Bigu, the God of wealth and prosperity was first and foremost identified with a mountain which was - unlike the Drugpa Rinpoche’s association with Gauri Shankar mentioned earlier - Deodunga (God’s Rock). The shape of this rock and its relation to another mountain nearby, however, lead us away from Jambhala as the ancient Buddhist God, towards the Hindu pantheon. According to oral tradition, Deodunga was once married to Tseringma, the “goddess of long life” who resides on Ama Bamare mountain. They made a fine couple, combining wealth and prosperity with long life, until they started to quarrel. Deodunga blamed Tseringma for having caused their dispute and subsequently cursed her: her mountain was never again to be visited by human beings and thus no longer to be worshipped, while his would be the site of a yearly festival, the Deodunga Jatra. The Nepali name for Tseringma’s home mountain Ama Bamare (“Blessing Mother”) signifies her (former) Hindu identity, and thus of her Deodunga husband. For Ama Bamare is the Nepali Gauri Parbati, merging Tseringma’s identity with that of the Hindu goddess of long life and conjugal happiness Parbati; and the wife of Shiva, the Great Destroyer (of the Hindu triad Brahman-Vishnu-Shiva) but also worshipped as the God of fertility and procreation. As such, he is symbolised by the lingam, “a vertical stone-carved pillar or simple oblong rock representing the male genital organ” (Anderson 1988:24). Deodunga is such a lingam, rising erect about two hundred metres out of a ridge. Deodunga, then, is in fact Shiva, and Tseringma Parbati.
Not surprisingly, the multiple identity of Deodunga is a reflection of his multi-ethnic worshipping on the day of Deodunga jatra at the end of the monsoon. In fact, this jatra was led by, and celebrated as, the gathering of all shamans (jhankri) of the area, whether Sherpa, Thami, Magar or Tamang. We may assume that the worship of Deodunga as a Shiva lingam cult already existed before the advent of the Sherpas in the Bigu valley but, at a certain point in the past, a change in the offerings seems to have occurred, as a remark of a Sherpa man who was carrying a large trident up to Deodunga in 1994 suggests.

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

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

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

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

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

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9 See Ch.II, The Narak festival.
10 The suggestion that Bigu belongs to Rolwaling can be taken as a misconception. As I already indicated in Ch.II, there are no connections between the Sherpas of Rolwaling and the Sherpas of Bigu. Nor is Bigu administratively part of that region.
11 See the next two sections of this chapter, The village lamas and the village gomba and The shamans.
the entrance of the temple hall, the Drugpa Rimpoche himself had authorised the painting of a Song of Praise,¹ which celebrates the new monastery by the name he has given to it and the function he hoped it to fulfil. The last stanza goes as follows.

Thus [ends this] praise of the [holy] place [of Bkra-shis-'chi-med-dga'-tshal], [which came about] through the admonition by the wind of spiritual faith in [this] garden [?] where complete taming of the mind [was accomplished] by me, Shes-rab rdo-rje. May [by] the virtue [resulting from this praise] of [i.e.: which is like] a subtle fragrance spreading, happiness increase for all places and their inhabitants.

May the goals all be swiftly realised. Sarva-mangalam [i.e. a mantra, lit: “All-auspicious”]. (after the original)

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

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

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

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

The village lamas and the village gomba

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

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

¹² See Appendix I for a full rendering.

¹³ “The monastic disciplinary code, the Vinaya, is in Tibetan Dulwa” (Samuel 1993:319).
When my father was a little boy, his grandfather already told him about the Marmingko lama (ko meaning “from”). He came to live here and has built that small gomba. And he taught them how to do puja properly, with offering incense and chang and so on. He went to Solu and came back with pecha [religious texts]. He has been a lama here for the rest of his life. But when he died, again there was no lama.

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

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

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

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

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

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

15 See Ch.II, The Narak festival.
fight each other with black mantras [sic!] and after a couple of months Kushi Lama died. And Mangalsingh, he was so happy that his rival was dead that he even did not perform the funeral puja [sic! he being the village lama], but stayed at home and asked his wife to cook him a feast with meat and tongba [millet beer] and rice and raksi. That happy he was that the old man died. Mangalsingh, however, got what was coming to him. He used to beat his wife, and one day she ran out on him with their little son and a servant, to Dolakha. He went after them, but got killed by the servant who threw his body in the river to hide it. Mangalsingh's corpse was found only a year later. His wife identified him by his shoes. The storyteller concluded with ironic twinkle, “his soul had been jailed in his rotten body for over a year. But he defeated Kushi Lama once more: he got his funeral and gyewa at the same time!” Kushi Lama and Mangalsingh both contributed to the reputation of Nim Pasang's family, being his younger brother and his nephew, with their desire for power, their jealousy and ambition, and their subsequent violent deaths. Unfortunately, the storyteller could not tell where Mangalsingh had learned his trade as a religious specialist, nor when he had taken up the position of village lama. Mangalsingh died in the early 1930s and was succeeded by a man called Nim To, who had been one of Mangalsingh's ritual assistants. However, when the Drugpa Rinpoche appeared on the scene and founded the monastery, he became a celibate monk which yielded him the name of Kubre Lama. Then again, the village gomba remained untended for some years, until in 1942 a Sherpa who had recently returned from Darjeeling (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:140) took up the empty position of village lama. Two years later this Pem Tarke died and the Même Lama took over.

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

The history of the village gomba and its lamas reveals that the Bigu Sherpas were rather unfamiliar with an institutionalised kind of dharma practice. This held true for Nyingmapa practices focused on the village lama, but more so for celibate monasticism. Bigu Sherpas had no tradition of sending their sons...
and daughters to Tibetan monasteries, like the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu where these monastics played their part in the founding and inhabiting of monasteries and nunneries in their home area (cf. Ortner 1989). The Bigu Sherpas even had a much closer opportunity for monastic life than Tibet. At the east side of the valley, high up in the mountains and hidden in the forest, a monastery was known to exist, but, probably because of its reclusive, hermitage-like character, had never invited a Sherpa from Bigu to get in touch with its monks.

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

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

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

The shamans

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

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

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

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According to the Tulkus flyer, the name of this monastery, close to the village of Bulugpa, is called “Jangchup Metok Monastery (the flower of enlightened mind)”. I never came to ask him whether he knew where these monks originated from. Definitely not one of them had his roots in Bigu, as no Sherpa I questioned about it recalled having had any relative who had become a monk there.
numbers, the Bigu shamans still dedicated much of their daily routine to the performance of curing rituals, exorcisms, rain-making rites, etc., next to their annual festivals of worship. And some of these rituals seemed to contain indications to former times, when they, and not the village lamas, were in charge of Bigu's religious life, and when they were confronted with the Drugpa Rimpoché's efforts to replace them for the monastics. In order to finish my rough sketch of the religious soil on which Tashi Gomba was to be built, I will have to give some attention to these rituals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

21 Local Magars, Thamis, Tamangs and the Kami caste see Dasain as their New Year. Nepali New Year, in April, is only celebrated by Deb Bahadur Kharka and his family, who go to visit their relatives in Kathmandu for the occasion.
The point is that nobody seemed to have felt like learning the lyrics, but left it to the shaman who was considered to be trained in memorising. Even his brother, the storyteller, could not sing the song. “My grandfather taught me them once, but as Bulako Losar was my brother’s job, I forgot them.” The ritual, however, has much more to it - I will return to its practice in Chapter V, as it is primarily directed towards the mistress of the house. Here it suffices to state that again we find the shaman in charge of a seasonal ritual, which was not abandoned after - as we may assume - the Drugpa Rimpoche’s introduction of the clerical determined Gyalpo Losar.

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

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

The construction of the monastery

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

35 The Rana government appropriated private religious endowments (chhu guthi) into a state-controlled religious tenureship (amanatguthi), when the surplus incomes were interesting. In case a guthi operated at a deficit, however, private guthi tenureship was welcomed, as it would prevent the state to be responsible for the maintenance of the guthi buildings (e.g. temples, monasteries) (Regmi 1978:654-5). Tashi Gomba remained under a Chhu Guthi tenureship, for reasons evident.
You know what they said? They said: “We have no money. The gomba was made by your grandfather, it belongs to your family. Why don’t you take care of it?” You see, they want to harvest, but not to sow. It has always been like that.

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

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

The establishment of a lineage

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

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>The founding of Kyirong Gomba</td>
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<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>The founding of Tashi Gomba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>The founding of Tsum Gomba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>The founding of Bakang Gomba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936-7</td>
<td>The Drugpa Rimpoche resides in Tsum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>The consecration of Tashi Gomba (cf. ibid.:125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>The Drugpa Rimpoche goes into retreat at Phuma (cf. ibid.:126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>The Drugpa Rimpoche dies (cf. ibid.:126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>The Même Khepa returns to Bhutan to come back to Bigu before 1953</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

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

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

27 This monastery the Même Khepa does not mention by name. After having mentioned Kyirong, Bekung and Tsum, he just states "The Rimpoche has five gomba". Tsum, however, was followed by a monastery in Bakang (Yulmo or Helambu) in 1935, which was going to play a decisive role in the development of Tashi Gomba after the Drugpa Rimpoche's death (see Ch.IV). The fifth monastery, Sailung Gomba, was not founded by the Drugpa Rimpoche himself, but was going to belong to his lineage (see Ch.VII).
of the temple should not be read as a casual detail. This event was not only to assign the Drugpa Rimpoche with a spiritual power to make the paint moist again, but it also reflects the blessings of the gods painted in the frescoes for his newly established gomba, and lineage. For the latter, we have to look at the symbolical meaning of “pillars”.

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

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

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

Kyirong, with its long and famous religious past dating back to the introduction of Buddhism in Nepal19, was no doubt a perfect place to start one’s own lineage, but there was an additional reason to which I will return later. It is unknown how long the Drugpa Rimpoche stayed in Kyirong before he was going to make his final pilgrimage to Lapchi, accompanied by many of his monks and nuns.

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

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

28 And of the human body, see Stein (1972:126) and R.Paul (1976c).
29 Thus even before Buddhism got a hold on Tibet, see Snellgrove (1987:373).
From the four monasteries the Drugpa Rimpoche founded during his lifetime, only Tashi Gomba was not part of an already existing conglomeration of monasteries. Standing all by itself, in a remote valley, it also had to be allotted with a different purpose than the other gombas. While these seemed to serve the affirmation of his own spiritual lineage by the vicinity of monasteries of other orders and suborders, Tashi Gomba in the quietness of its environment was the perfect place to put his chosen path of the Dharma into practice. A year after its consecration, the Drugpa Rimpoche set the example by going into retreat in a cave in Phuma, a journey of two days north of Bigu, until his death in 1941, at the age of seventy-three. His expressed wish to have his funeral at Bigu seems to underline the importance this gomba had for him at the end of his life.

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

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

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

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

The flyer text of the Tulku contains the following passage.

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

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

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

Fürer-Haimendorf offers us also the Drugpa Rimpoche’s monk’s name, Ngawang Palzhen, while Sherap Dorje was his *gesé* name. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is common to get an other, additional, name at every important initiation.
His most important disciple, a monk called Gampopa (1079-1153), “combined the esoteric teachings transmitted to him by Mi-la Ras-pa with the monastic traditions and non-tantric teachings of the bKa’-gdams-pas” (Snellgrove 1987:493). Creating as such a new dharma (path) within the monastic structure, this disciple of Milarepa became the founder of a new lineage, which dissected itself from the Kadam-pa order from which it originated, to become known as the Kargyud-pa order. The Kargyud-pa order split up into six suborders, one of these being the Drugpa Kargyud-pa to the Drugpa Rimpoche adhered. The fact that a Sherpa headman had requested a gomba close to the cave where Milarepa, the proto-founder of the Kargyud-pa order, was said to have reached Enlightenment must have occurred to the Drugpa Rimpoche as yet another auspicious sign. Moreover, it inspired him to dedicate the last years of his life to following Milarepa’s example by going into retreat in a cave, not near Kyirong, Tsum or Helambu, but near Bigu.

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

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

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

31 i.e. the later Gelug-pa order, headed by the Dalai Lamas belong.
32 See above, and Appendix I.
33 To the right of the central altar piece, we find a wooden case containing a statue of Srungma Chundin (the protecting deity of the Three Precious Ones, i.e. Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; see R. Paul 1989:75), Opame (Skt. Amitabha), Tsepame (Skt. Amitayus), Chitin Drolma (Green Tara), and Milarepa. Separate to this row is also a closed shrine with Mahakala (the wrathful protector of the Dharma). To the left are statues of Temba Rimpoche (?), the Guru Rimpoche (Skt. Padmasambhava) and a smaller Pawa Chenrezig (Skt. Avalokitesvara), each in their separate alcoves (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:124).
34 Three times, this bodhisattva is mentioned in the text - namely as “the Holder of the Lotus” [Skt. Padmapani, i.e. Avalokiteswar] (see Appendix I, stanza 2.), as “the god of compassion” (9.), and by his famous mantra “Om mani-padme hum’ (10.).
35 “Of Lhasa’s three hills, Chakpo-ri is the soul mountain (bla-ri) of Vajrapani, Pongwa-ri that of Manjusri, and Marpo-ri, on which also the Potala stands, that of Avalokitesvar” (Stein 1972:228).
homage to the gurus of the Root lineage that fulfils the hopes of those who have been tamed by the results of the threefold [turning of] the wheel of the Dharma

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

From Pawa Chenrezig's prominent presence in the Song of Praise and on the altar, we may conclude that the Drugpa Rimpoche identified himself, and was identified by his followers, foremost with Pawa Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion. This also becomes obvious if we look at the specific Tantric practice to which he was said to have dedicated the last years of his life at that cave at Phuma. This meditation retreat called Nyungne is also Pawa Chenrezig as its central deity (Paul 1989:75; Ortner 1978). This meditational practice was to become the most important meditation practised at Tashi Gomba.⁶

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

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

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

⁶ A detailed description of Nyungne sam, and its differing character as compared to Ortner's accounts of the Nyungru lay festival in Khumbu (Ortner 1978; cf. Füeter-Haimendorf 1964; Funke 1969) will be given in Chapter VI.
It must have taken Kusho Tsetsu six months to bring Tsutsa Rimpoche from Kyirong to Bigu as the Drugpa Rimpoche’s funeral was, according to the Même Lama, six months later. After his cremation, a chörten was built in his memory in Tashi Gomba’s courtyard. It is interesting that they took the effort to bring his befriended Rimpoche from Kyirong to Bigu, and did not transfer his body to Kyirong to be buried there. Perhaps the reason was just a pragmatic one; perhaps he made an explicit choice for Bigu, when he asked his head to be turned in its direction, to become his “central pillar gomba”, rooted in the soil of Milarepa, despite Kyirong Gomba’s earlier founding. Bigu seemed to have been very precious to him.

His spiritual powers remained in Bigu. The salt that had absorbed the Drugpa Rimpoche’s bodily fluids - and his spiritual power transferred through these fluids - were put into two wooden boxes in the gomba kitchen next to the fireplace. They were still there during my fieldwork, and according to the kitchen nun was used as a medicine in case of an unidentifiable disease. When I asked her “unidentifiable by whom?”, she answered well, by the shaman, of course. But nowadays, people go to Kathmandu to see doctors, and they know all diseases, so we are using the salt seldom anymore. That’s why so much is still left. You can see, the boxes are all dirty, because we never open them. I will have to clean them one of these days.

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

Reflection

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

Already from the outset, however, the new monastery lacked the necessary economic resources to grow into that impressive religious centre Nim Pasang had had in mind. Moreover, its slow process of construction seemed to indicate a lack of support by the laity, in spite of the Drugpa Rimpoche’s collecting campaign. These aspects only emphasise Bigu’s state of a “small-scale preliterate society” that “[b]ly and large had and have a dominantly shamanic orientation” (ibid.:10). From a religious perspective, its shamanic orientation should have offered a fertile soil for a Tantric Buddhist monastery, as Samuel argues...
that in Tibet’s history “[m]onasticism survived through support from the general population, and the general population was concerned with the use of shamanic power [...] In this situation it was perhaps inevitable that shamanism would survive by becoming Buddhist, and Buddhist monasticism would survive by becoming shamanic” (ibid.:472). However, in Bigu this historical process was concentrated by the imposition of a monastery, shamanic Buddhist or not, into a realm that was dominated by shamanism without any practical experience with institutionalised dharma practice, let alone a celibate monastery. Also the Tibetans of the past “seem to have felt that the celibate career of a monk, however virtuous or desirable in its own right, was not entirely compatible with shamanic power. [...] The popular ideal of a Buddhist shaman was less the monk than the hermit-yogi, of whom the prototype is the eleventh-century teacher and poet Milarepa” (ibid.:473).

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

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