House of birds: A historical ethnography of a Tibetan buddhist nunnery in Nepal
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Introducing a new Way of Life

The first Monks of Tashi Gomba

Introduction

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

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

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

Monastery or nunnery

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

Yes. Sherap Dorje (the Drugpa Rimpoché) already had built a gomba in Tsum for both thawaś [monks] and anis, and was already engaged with the founding of a gomba in Bakang [Yelmu] when the people

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1. See Ch.III, *The establishment of a lineage.*

2. In 1994, Tsum Gomba compiled nearly 120 monks and nuns in two separate buildings: the monastery with the main temple hall, and the living quarters of the nuns at about half an hour walking distance from the male centre.
Why is it an *ani* gomba now?, I asked.

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

When did your grandfather initiate this change?

After some years, may be three or so.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Harmonious and disharmonious time**

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

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

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5. See Ch.II, The Kharka family.

6. A complete separation between the renouncing realm and the renounced realm is, of course, not possible. Particularly when retreat takes on an institutional, communal form, the ideal of total renouncement can never be achieved in this-worlds practice, of which this historical ethnography on Tashi Gomba is exemplary. See also Spiro (1982), Thapar (1982), Tambiah (1982), Goldstein and Tsarong (1985), Ortner (1989), Gellner (1992), Van Spengen (1992) and Lopez (1996), among others, who have already shown the paradox of monastic life, of renouncing but simultaneously depending on the laity, especially in the context of economic support. Lay contributions and donations in return for rituals and religious merit are essential for a monastery’s existence.
memories of particular things are widely perceived to be distractions from soteriologically beneficial praxis; this is seen as early as the scriptural references to “remembrance and intention rooted in ordinary life” that need be abandoned in order to practice mindfulness. (Gyatso 1992:12).

Both memory and the above quoted term “mindfulness”, however, are derivatives from the same Sanskrit word, smrti (ibid.:4). It denotes “mindfulness” also as a kind of memory, a recognition; however, not the mundane kind of remembering of past events, but in the sense of “recognising” the ultimate truth of what is realised, and of gaining personal mastery and an internalised, thorough-going identification with it (ibid.:6).

Through the remembrance of the Buddha and his exemplary followers, and the identification with those teachers (tsawé lama) during meditational practice, the practitioner proceeds on his spiritual path. Ordinary memory of the past only disturbs the meditator’s concentration, but may also lead to “deleterious self-absorption”, especially when concerning one’s personal past (ibid.19; see also Griffiths 1992).

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

Please, don’t write only about the bad things, but also about the good things. Many anis left the gomba at that time [sic!], together with my sister. Write also about the first Rimpoche and his power and about that time when the paintings and the pillars started to cry, when he conducted namne puja [consecration ritual] for the gomba, and why this gomba is called Tashi, and about that time when the prayer wheel started to turn all by itself, in that time when the first Rimpoche was still here and also the Guru Lama. Ani Dorje and others, they heard the bell tingle. You can ask them to tell about it. The nuns were clearly not that advanced on the path of the Dharma to be able to control their dissatisfactions and discords every minute of the day, nor to exclude the “mundane recognition, which involves the identification of something perceived in the present with something perceived in the past” once and for all (Gyatso 1992:13; see also Wayman 1992). In my interest, it was merely a matter of time to get some clue of events that took place in the past, usually based on remarks of comparison between past and present. This means that my reconstruction of the history of Tashi Gomba is not only based on re-
creations of the past by willing recalleers (see also Lopez 1992), but that, foremost, I had to rely on dishar­monies taking place during our shared time that triggered off memories. In other words, my historical reconstruction depended on “timing” (Fabian 1983:53).

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

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

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

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

See Ch.I, Genesis and Historiography.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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14 One of them left with his wife for Darjeeling, never to return, the other couple settled at pari, the other side of the valley.
The problem of authority

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

Fürer-Haimendorf wrote

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

Following the ethnographer’s account, Tashi Gomba was still under construction, when the Kyirong lama was put in charge, in 1936. He obviously was to oversee the final touch of the temple hall for its consecration, as he seems to have left after this name was done. The Bhutanese lama, who the Drugpa Rimpoche appointed as head of Tashi Gomba thereafter, had already reached old age, as Fürer-Haimendorf notes he was not known by his name but simply as the Drugpa Même (“Bhutanese grandfather”; ibid.:i25). His task was probably only to last as long as the Drugpa Rimpoche’s nephew Kusho Pema was not able to run the monastery himself due to his young age. After eleven years, the Drugpa Même left (which must have been around 1948) because he “received an invitation from a monastery in Bhutan” (ibid.:i27). However, there could have been other reasons for his leaving as well. The Drugpa Même had, according to Fürer-Haimendorf’s information, not been very popular among the anis and the villagers, because he had been addicted to liquor “and used to beat the nuns if they talked during rites in the gompa” (ibid.:i26). His leaving seems to have been a relief to the anis, and I suppose much to his own relief as well. During his stay, Kusho Pema had taken over more and more responsibility of the accounts and business affairs of the gompa, “and held a position of considerable influence and power” (ibid.:i26). It is not inconceivable that conflicts arose between the young lama and the old Drugpa Même, a battle the latter would always lose against a nephew of, and the appointed abbot of the gompa by, its Rimpoche.

After the Drugpa Même’s departure, Kusho Pema (now twelve years older since his arrival at Bigu) took up his position as the abbot of Tashi Gomba; but not for long. It turned out that the young abbot “had no vocation for a celibate life and got involved with a nun” (ibid.:i26). After four years, in 1952, Kusho Pema’s first of three children was born (ibid.:i42). By then, he (and his wife) already had laid off the robe and had moved out of the gompa. They had settled at short distance from the gompa, until Kusho Pema died (around 1960), and his wife moved to Kathmandu with their children.
During my investigations in 1994-5, however, Kusho Pema’s term as abbot was omitted from Tashi Gomba’s oral tradition, as was the Drugpa Meme’s, for obvious reasons. The first had broken his vow of celibacy and the latter seemed to have been an arak-addicted and violent man, both not really fine examples of monastic discipline. Especially not in the light of a successor who did earn a reputation as a pious lama, a devoted teacher and head of Bigu’s religious community. This lama, not surprisingly remembered as the Guru Lama, was Tashi Gomba’s abbot until his death in 1986. The nuns set the date of his arrival, as well as the Meme Khepa (the old painter), during the Drugpa Rimpoche’s retreat, thus before his death in 1941. The Meme Khepa narrated

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

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

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

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

The abbot in charge of Tashi gompa at the time of my visit in 1974 had then held the position for 18 years [sic!]. He was referred to only as Guru Lama and no one revealed his name. But it was said that he had been born in Kham, and that for some years he had been a monk in the Sera monastery in
Tibet. When he came on a pilgrimage to Nepal, he heard of Ngawang Paldzen, and he was looking for a spiritual guide, he sought him out at Tashi gompa. Impressed by his personality he then settled at no great distance at Changdze Mendok [Jangchup Metok], a hermitage above the village of Bulugpa. When some years later the Drukpa lama [...][left], the villagers of Bigu suggested that the lama from Sera might be offered the headship of Tashi gompa. They had been impressed by his piety and seriousness of purpose, and approaching him with gifts of kata, ceremonial scarves, invited him to take charge of the gompa. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1984:127-8)

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

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

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

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

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

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

16 The distances between the gombas discouraged frequent visits. It takes at least three days on foot from Bigu to Bakang, sixteen from Bigu to Tsum, and some eight more to Kyirong.
and 1959, Tashi Gomba’s monastics were left without a guru lama. No wonder that the well-educated and decisive Tibetan lama, named Lobsang Zigme, who filled up the teaching and guiding vacuum, was to get a title after the task he took on the “Guru Lama”, and caused his two predecessors to be “forgotten”.

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

The problems of language, teaching and practice

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

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

At that time [when he returned from Bakang in 1938], there was only a mani house and the gomba [the temple hall], and they stayed here quite some time, the thawas and ansis. Although there were many thawas, I was the one from Bigu who got on friendly terms with the [Drugpa] Rimpoche. They [the lamas] had to know Nepali language, Sherpa and Tibetan, and had to know the village, but the Bhutanese, they didn’t. Those from Tibet, they couldn’t [speak the languages], and also not from Tsum. Though there were many thawas, some stayed, some became lay people. They didn’t obey the
discipline, and so the [Drugpa] Rimpoche started to trust me. I had many relatives in Laptang, in Sailung also, in Dhara, everywhere. I had become a thawa, and a thawa is also called a gelung [student of religion]. And, afterwards, the [Drugpa] Rimpoche - he was my guru lama - trusted me and said: “Now you do thödam.” Which means like porters have a sardar [trekking leader], a thödam can order and manage things. He has to buy rice and other grains, and sometimes they have to ask for sonyum [yeast]. And he had to speak Nepali and know the paths [the way through the valley] and know the village people. And he had to speak Sherpa language with Sherpas, Chetri language [i.e. Nepali. Sic!] with the Chetri. That's why. I also know Tibetan language, lama language, so the lama has made me thödam. At that time, I learned [reading] pecha. At that time, there was no school, also no lama school, and I learned pecha language, but after seven years, I got a family and went to live with them.

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

Although the Meme Lama only mentions his intermediary activities explicitly in relation to the Drugpa Rimpoche (until his death in 1941), Kusho Tsetsu, and the Guru Lama (after 1959), it is clear from his references to “the Bhutanese” and “those from Tibet” that he also worked for the Drugpa Meme. In addition, the Meme Lama only refers to his role in economic and financial affairs with the laity, not in situations of religious practice. I am sure he would have expounded on those issues too if they had occurred, for it would have enlarged his reputation he liked to cultivate, as a man of the Dharma. He may have assisted the Drugpa Rimpoche, the Kyirong lama and the Drugpa Meme, whenever lay people sought their advice and blessing. He may have taught other monastics to learn to read the pechas, just as the knowledgable nuns teach their novices nowadays. However, he does not mention lectures on the Dharma in general, or exegeses of specific texts (the path of sutra), of introductions to meditation retreats or individual guidance (the path of tantra), I am inclined to think that these kind of more elaborate instructions occurred very seldom, if ever; the lamas may have either tried to manage themselves in their restricted knowledge of the Sherpa colloquial, or bluntly lectured in classical Tibetan as the present abbot does nowadays.8 In any case the Bigu’s monastics only received minimal religious instructions.

Only Kusho Pema may have been an exception, as we may assume that, after having been in Bigu for already twelve years by the time he became Tashi Gomba’s abbot, he had learned to speak Sherpa and perhaps some Nepali too.9 His term as a guru lama, however, probably came too late, as we will see below, and too short to make a long-lasting impact on Tashi Gomba’s religious practice. His own breaking of celibacy brought the teaching and guiding of the young community to a temporary end.

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

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

9 Although even the Meme Khepa is still difficult to communicate with, because he speaks in a mixture of Tibetan, Bhutanese and Sherpa. Kusho Tsetsu never took the effort to learn Sherpa and talks with Bigu Sherpas in Nepali, as does Tashi Gomba’s present abbot, Lama Kelsang.
the nuns had complained to Füter-Haimendorf about the “little leisure to read books and meditate” during periods of building activity (ibid.:125), lack of time could hardly have been an obstacle for the young monastics to enhance their study and meditational practices, during the early years of Tashi Gomba’s development. Besides the long evenings at this latitude, there were months of winter’s snow and summer rains that made construction work impossible but offered plenty of time to practice retreats (in summer), and to study (in winter). What did hinder them were material conditions, mirrored in the slow process of construction itself and its cause, namely insufficient economic support.

Firstly, the monastics of Tashi Gomba must have suffered from a scarcity of religious texts. According to the Même Lama, the Drugpa Rinpoche had sent monks to Tibet, soon after he had given his consent to Nim Pasang to help him with the founding of the gomba, to purchase a building plan and statues, but also wooden printing blocks for religious texts too. Books, i.e. packages of hand-printed, oblong sheets tied up in cloth (pecha), such as the Bum books of 1,111 prayers, the Tibetan canon (Kangyur) and its commentary (Tengyur), which are objects of veneration in themselves as they consist the “Words of the Buddha” (Dharma), were too heavy and too expensive to bring along. The Drugpa Rinpoche’s couriers brought only the printing blocks of the Tibetan alphabet (generally called Ka-Kha, after its first two syllables) with them, the Digpa (“sin”; an exposition of the Eight Noble Truths and the monastic precepts), and two blocks with mantras to print prayer flags. A full-time study of the Ka-Kha and the Digpa would take about six months to learn to read them, to memorise them, and to understand the meaning of the words. After two or three winters, these textual sources of study must have been exhausted. New péchas were only recalled to have been purchased, and distributed, in the 1970s on initiative of the Guru Lama. Note that the expression “to learn to read the péchas”, as mentioned already several times, is used by Bigu Sherpa as a synonym for “practising the Dharma”. Not being able to enhance their study of texts can thus be interpreted as a feeling of not being engaged in the practice of the Dharma.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

20 Kusho Tendzen's daughter was to become one of Tashi Gomba's most impressive nuns, Sherap Omu (see Ch.VI).
When asked when these monks had come back to Bigu - together with the Drugpa Rinpoche, or later, for his funeral? Phulba replied,

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

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

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

In 1954, he and the ex-ani Tashi Ongdi had their only child, a daughter. Kusho Tssetsu would never have tried to lure away monks from Tashi Gomba to his monastery at Bakang, as long as his brother was its kempu. However, Kusho Pema's own liaison with an ani and his subsequent moving out, must have urged Kusho Tssetsu to turn Tashi Gomba into a nunnery, as an annex to his monastery in Bakang. The Même Khepa as probably one of the last monks in Bigu, however, refused. He seemed to have overestimated his religious determination, but he also mentioned that he knew already "many texts by heart", thus implying that he had no need for instructions fellow monks had sought in Bakang. In addition, he gives one more reason why he thought that Bakang would not make his religious life easier, a reason he may have realised from the same fellow monks that had come back: he needed support in his life sustenance.

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

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

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

Prestige was also an issue for the other Bigu monks, although not necessarily in the same way as for Kushi Lama. The older nuns had told Fürrer-Haimendorf about the arduous work they had to do during the early [...] development of the gompa. They point out that nuns had then little leisure to read books and to meditate, but had to carry heavy loads and give a hand to the workmen constructing the various buildings. (Fürrer-Haimendorf 1976:125)

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

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

The image this young Sherpa had of a monk’s life clearly did not correspond with reality; at least, not with the reality of monasteries still in the making. He expected a continuation of his scholarly education, he expected a life of dignity and respect, but, except for his red habit, he was to lead a life comparable to...
that of a poor layman. So he left as soon as he found a good excuse, that is, by implying that his parents needed his labour after his sister's marriage. It was an excuse, for he could have gone to another monastery, to Bakang Gomba for instance, like the monks of Tashi Gomba some forty years earlier. These monks, however, also found Bakang Gomba still in the middle of its construction process, with probably the same poor living conditions as at Tashi Gomba, the same restricted opportunities for study and meditation, and the additional problem of life sustenance. What their final solution was, we know from Phulba: "Many thawa came back ... married ... and left the gomba."

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

**Pushing and pulling Sherpa monks**

Tashi Gomba's "pull" factors to keep its monks, and to attract male novices, were weak, but the picture would remain incomplete if we were not also to consider social "push" factors that would have counterbalanced the gomba's weak pulling force. Ortner's study of the monastic developments in Khumbu offers a good entry to social factors, by comparing her analyses with my information on Bigu (Ortner 1989). Sherry Ortner counted a significant majority of middle sons of wealthier Sherpa families among the monks in Khumbu, and Solu. The motivation of either parents to send their sons to a monastery, or for the sons themselves to opt for a monastic life, she argues, derived from two developments that took place more or less synchronically: a growing social differentiation among Sherpas, based on land property and wealth, creating a distinction between "small" and "big" people; and the founding of monasteries in the region (from 1902 onwards). Traditionally, the Sherpas favoured the equal inheritance rule among their sons. The big families, who had come up during the late nineteenth and early twentieth Century, however, wanted to ensure their wealth, and the social status and prestige derived from it, by avoiding a splitting up of the family's estate as much as possible. In due time, they created two strategies. The first was to take refuge in polyandrous marriages. This marriage system seems to have been introduced with the development of "big" people, as Ortner argues that there was but one case of polyandry in early Sherpa genealogies, whereas "Fürer-Haimendorf reported that 8 percent of Khumbu marriages were polyandrous in the 1950s, and these were largely among the bigger families" (Ortner 1989; 175; Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:68-70). A second strategy arose from the founding of monasteries. By sending middle sons to the monasteries to become a monk, these would lose their rights to inherit their share of the family's land, thus reducing the parceling up of the estate. 

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

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

33 Bakang Gomba's complex was finished in 1959.

34 Cf. Aziz (1978), Goldstein (1971a), and Goldstein & Tsarong (1986), for similar developments in Tibet and Ladakh.
However, as I have tried to show in Chapter II, the first Bigu Sherpas very likely belonged to those poor Khumbu families, who had been victimised by the economic developments in Khumbu in its early stage in the middle of the last century, because of which they emigrated. Ever since, they had been preoccupied foremost with creating a place of their own among the other ethnic people already inhabiting the Bigu valley, and vis-à-vis the later arriving Kharka family. Particularly because of their competition with this latter Hindu high-caste family, no Sherpa family had been recorded for having managed to transcend their smallness. That is not to say that none had aspired to become “big” people - of whom Sukusing and his son, Nim Pasang, were exemplary. But none of them had ever acquired enough cultivated land, and the social status and prestige that goes with it, that would have urged them to take precautions against their estate becoming parcelled up. In addition, no instances had been recalled, nor presently exist, of polyandrous marriages. In comparison with Ortner’s findings, then, it is not surprising that there was no tendency, among the thirty-seven Bigu (ex-)monks, I was able to trace, of being merely middle sons.

Rather, the situation the Bigu Sherpas found themselves in, at the time of Tashi Gomba’s founding, shows more resemblance with the early history of the Sherpas who had migrated from Tibet to Khumbu. In the early years of settlement of the region, land was in plentiful supply, and this possibility was presumably widely available. It is also the case, however, that opening virgin land is a lot of work, and that people would rather have an already tilled field if they can get it (Ortner 1989:36).

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

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

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

[27] See Ch.II, and below.
[28] There had been, however, four cases of polygyny, in which a Sherpa man married a second wife when the first did not become pregnant.
[29] Fourteen were the oldest son, eight the second, five the third, and ten the youngest son.
serious obstacle, namely a complete dependence on the economic support of their natal families, while on the other hand life outside the gomba walls started to show some interesting, and promising, developments.

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

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

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

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

90 See Ch.II, Constructing a Sherpa identity.
three Kharkas on its board, under the chairmanship of, not a Sherpa, but of Hem Jagadhur Kharka (Kharka 1987:20).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Reflection**

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

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

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