House of birds: A historical ethnography of a Tibetan buddhist nunnery in Nepal
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Of long Braids and shaven Heads

The first Nuns of Tashi Gomba

Introduction

In the late summer of 1994, a man clad in rags and with a strange smile on his face walked into the courtyard of Tashi Gomba. The anis had just finished a collective puja. Coming out of the temple hall, they stepped down the stairs to the courtyard. The man stood as if pinned to the ground and his face showed total bewilderment. Suddenly he burst out in hysterical laughter, and pointed wildly around at the human figures that came down to him and passed him by while he was rubbing with his other hand over his head, as if he wanted to say: “Your hair! What have you all done to your hair? I see women without hair!” He clearly had never seen anis before. The anis felt embarrassed and moved out of his sight. Only the kitchen nun, who recognized him as a mentally retarded begging wanderer - “his mind is shaken” - approached him and asked him whether he was hungry by rubbing her belly and making an eating gesture. He nodded and a minute later he was sitting at the kitchen doorstep with a bowl of rice porridge on his lap, still giggling, gazing spellbound at the kitchen nun who resumed her work.

During that event, I remembered my own first encounter with women with shaven heads and dressed in white robes, in Bangkok. I soon found out they were called maecchis, women who devoted their life to the Dharma (path) of Theravada Buddhism. I had never realized that next to the orange-robed Buddhist monks I knew from pictures and documentaries, Buddhist “nuns” also existed. The memory of my own ignorant surprise, and the observation of this Nepali man’s amazement, made me wonder whether the Sherpas of Bigu had been familiar with the phenomenon “ani” before the advent of the Drugpa Rinpoche and his retinue of monks and nuns. They may have heard of mythical and legendary religious women, like Gelungma Palmo or Machig Laprön, but had they actually encountered, ever realized to have encountered, an ani, may be in Kathmandu or on their trade expeditions to Tibet? And what about the non-Buddhist people of Bigu, the Kharkas, the Thamis, the Magars? For Tibetan Buddhist nuns are practically indistinguishable from their male counterparts, as their same short cropped hair and their same red robes blurres every gender distinction at first sight. Only a close, and conscious, look reveals the female features in the nuns’ faces, the roundings of their female body which also the many layers of blouse, smock, thick often woollen patched skirts, and big shawls, cannot fully hide their smoother movements and when talking, their usually higher pitched voices. How did the Kharkas react to these genderless women? How did the Sherpas react? They may have felt reverence for the nuns in the Drugpa Rinpoche’s retinue, but how did they feel about their own daughters and sisters becoming an ani? The Mme Lama’s reply to a question I posed him on why he thought nunhood had become popular in Bigu since the 1980s suggests that both the Sherpas and members of the other jats in Bigu had needed time to get accustomed to nuns and their genderless appearance. He said

In the past, Nepalis didn’t allow women to become ani. Today, others’ daughters become ani and again are an example to other daughters. But before, they were not allowed to cut their hair. People

1 Many a tourist, even some westerners converted to Tibetan Buddhism, whom I told about my research, were surprised to hear of the existence of Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Doubtless, they had passed by many an ani in the streets of Kathmandu, but in their ignorance, and because of the nuns’ and monks’ similar outlooks, had assumed all red robes and shaven heads had been monks. In Theravada, monks and nuns are at least distinguishable by the colour of their robes, respectively orange and white.
didn't know, and were gossiping and caused shame and inconvenience. In this world, there are many people, but not all know about dharma.

Obviously, there had been a time when in Bigu anis with their short cropped hair had been a focus of ridicule in much the same way as the anis we saw laughed at by the retarded visitor. Hindu people of Bigu must have found it difficult to appreciate and respect women who, with their shaven heads and celibate but communal life style - although outside their familial sphere - contradicted everything they thought a woman had to be. Especially the Kharkas, who had been trying to thwart the project of the monastery already from the onset, very likely did seize every chance to make bad jokes about these unwomanly women. They may have threatened to make laws against what they probably conceived as a threat to their own women, as it might give them ideas; but, contrary to the Meme Lama's suggestion, the Kharkas were not to allow or dismiss this new religious phenomenon. Their only weapon was gossip. However, Phillimore has shown how strong this kind of social control can be in his essay on a Buddhist group that had migrated from the hills to the plains of Himchal Pradesh, India. The women of these Buddhist people saw themselves forced to invent a religious identity in order to legitimate the option of spinsterhood, which was a common feature among them, but a nuisance to the Hindu people they had to come to share their habitat with (Phillimore 1991). In Bigu, spinsterhood did not lead to a religious identity, but - rather the other way around - the option of a religious life for women lead to “spinsterhood”, that is the leading of an unmarried, celibate life, separate from their family. The Meme Lama's attempt to blame particularly the “Nepalis” for embarrassing anis and not allowing them to cut their hair may have been rooted in the influence their gossip had on those whose daughters became nuns and examples to others, that is the Sherpas. To show reverence to the female monastics of the Drugpa Rimpoche's retinue is one thing, but to see one's own daughter cutting off what should be her pride, her long black braid, thickened and lengthened with black yak tail hair, is quite another thing. A Sherpa woman's braid was the symbol of her femininity, and the cutting of her hair meant a break with the socially and culturally accepted roles of Sherpa women as wives and mothers.

With the founding of Tashi Gomba, then, nunhood became an alternative way of life mainly theoretically, for in practice - as will become also clear from the chapters to follow - the Meme Lama had reason to belief that it took the Sherpas until the 1980s to find their daughters' choice for monastic life acceptable. Here, I will approach the Bigu Sherpas' uneasiness with female monasticism, not by merely anticipating its much later booming number, but by offering an explanation as to why Tashi Gomba's community consisted of only a dozen anis in 1952. Why did these nuns remain at Tashi Gomba, despite the gomba's internal problems I have outlined in Chapter IV? Did the anis simply outnumber the monks available to start a relationship with? Were they, for some reason, more prone to a religious vocation than the monks and nuns who had left? Why had they not followed their lama to Bakang or Tsum, like so many monks, to leave a desolated Tashi Gomba in ruins?

The answer, I will argue, lies in the particular family circumstances from which these nuns had opted for a monastic life. Although these family situations were not exclusive to women, they did affect these women's chance to live up to the socially accepted image of womanhood as wives and mothers in a way that left men, in their pursuit of starting their own family, untouched. Before exploring what we know about these remaining nuns, however, I have to say something on oral history and women.

Two former anis and their silence

Two women, now in their sixties and seventies, could have been my major informants about Tashi Gomba's entire history, for they had belonged to its first cohort of anis, had however also disrobed together with the monks they got involved with to marry them and start a family. Both settled within a stone's throw of the gomba, and had become witnesses to the religious community's development over the years. During my stays, they could be found at least twice a week in the gomba kitchen having a chat
and a cup of butter tea, and I anxiously waited for the right opportunity to lure their life histories and their memories concerning Tashi Gomba's past from them. However, as the accounts of my attempts below will make clear, their unwillingness to talk about the past showed a fortress hard to capture. Let me first describe my encounters with Tashi Ongdi, then offering some suggestions to explain their silence.

*Tashi Ongdi* has been the wife of the Même Khepa, the old painter, since they had had an affair in the early 1950s when she was his caretaker during his *tsam.* They settled in a small house with a shed and four poor plots, at a fifteen minutes walking distance from the gomba. They only had one child, a daughter who lives with them, together with her sixteen year old son. The daughter, in 1994 forty-two years old, had been married to a man of poor family who eventually was to inherit his parents-in-law's property. Within a year, however, the man left his pregnant wife and disappeared.

In June 1994, Dawa and I went uninvited to see Tashi Ongdi at her house in the hope that she might tell us about her years as an ani, and the developments at Tashi Gomba thereafter. Tashi Ongdi and her daughter assumed we wanted to talk to the Même Khepa, as strangers always came for him, so we were taken upstairs to his room. While we chatted with the old painter, his wife only appeared to serve us tea. After a while, we went down to the cooking place in the shed next door, to seek her out. She thought we were leaving already, and begged us to stay. We sat down on the low wall bordering their courtyard, together with her daughter, whom we asked prudently how she thought her mother would react to questions about the past. The daughter said she would ask her in Sherpa first. When the old woman came outside, she offered us the most precious food she had, boiled eggs, and seemed delighted with our presence. But when her daughter asked her to tell something about those years in the gomba, she reacted as if snake-bitten: “I don't remember anything, I don't know anything, I have forgotten everything.” She ran into the store room, the ground floor of their house, and slammed the door. We all sat struck dumb watching the closed door. The old lady had made her point alright. When we stood up to leave, her daughter apologized for her mother's reaction, the fierceness of which she did not understand herself. She promised to try to talk to her and to call us if her mother changed her mind. I said only I was to blame, and so we left, convinced that the door would be closed forever.

I had assumed that the cups of butter tea and plates of popcorn we had shared in the gomba kitchen had created enough familiarity between us to jump into an interview with her, but I miscalculated the importance of the location of our meetings on her perception of me. The gomba kitchen was a place to socialize, and the small talk we had there belonged to its relaxed atmosphere. Once Dawa and I came to her house, uninvited by her, however, she assumed I had come to see the Même Khepa, and most probably in my propensity of “an inger woman who had come to write a book about Tashi Gomba” - as the ains had explained to her. Her role as the Même Khepa's wife was merely to be a good hostess, but when we came down, to her territory, and made clear I wanted to know something from her, something clearly related to my “work”, she panicked. I thought I had acted cautious by asking her daughter to mediate, but this preparation only seems to have stressed the “official-ness”, the public quality of my visit. Like many women, in Bigu or elsewhere whose traditional roles kept them outside the public sphere, she was not used to be asked any questions and shied away.

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1. See Ch.IV on his life history.
2. When a father has no sons, he may leave his property to his younger brother or his younger brother's sons, in order to keep the land within his clan. In case a father has also no brothers or nephews, or has other reasons for not leaving them his property - like the Même Khepa, whose family is back in Bhutan - the father may appoint his son-in-law as his heir, provided the latter comes to live at his wife's parents' home (Oppitz 1969:91; Furer-Haimendorf 1964:88; Ortner 1978a:21). The inheriting son-in-law is called a maksu.
3. See for women and oral history for instance E. Ardener (1975); Gilligan (1982); Moore (1988); and Anderson and Jack (1991). See also Chapter I.
Also the personal entry I had chosen to learn something about Tashi Gomba's history from Tashi Ongdi - a strategy that worked quite well with laywomen who would have referred me to their husbands or grown-up sons, had not worked with Tashi Ongdi whenever I bothered them with questions that transcended their personal experiences - had not informalized the situation. For that question was not as personal as I had realized it to be, and besides it raised obstacles to speak out.

In Chapter IV, I have tried to explain the monastic perception of memories of the past as disturbing the personal and communal equilibrium necessary to concentrate on the path of dharma. In that context, I also referred to an ani who left religious life in 1976, and who was told by the abbot to leave her memories behind at the gomba in order to protect the harmony of its religious community from external disturbing meddling. Like this younger former ani, also Tashi Ongdi and Nim Dolma (who I will introduce below) must have been aware of this principle of silence. They may not have been told explicitly at the time of their leaving the community - considering the absence of an authoritative lama during the 1940s - but they too may have gotten the message when the Tulku rebuked the anis for having given Furer-Haimendorf too much of the community's "dirty laundry" for his 1976 essay. The Tulku may not have exposed the two former nuns to the Mahakala vow, as he allegedly had done with the anis of 1976, but he may have addressed the issue in a private interview. For also they had talked quite frankly with the ethnographer; especially Nim Dolma, whose monastic past was not merely a personal affair since she had been the nun Kusho Pema, the Drugpa Rimpoche's nephew and Tashi Gomba's appointed abbot, had left his robe and his position for. Her reaction, when I confronted her with Furer-Haimendorf's writing about her after her initial attempts to avoid my questions, only confirms that the ethnographer's publication had made a difference. And a very unfortunate one for me too.

Also Nim Dolma we had already met several times in the gomba kitchen, before we got to talk with her in private. Having learned my lesson with Tashi Ongdi, I waited until she invited us to her home. I was not sure she ever would, taking into account that Tashi Ongdi may have warned her for my nosiness. But she did, some weeks after our visit to her friend, to have a look at some coral beads she offered for sale. Her little house was next to the retreat house under construction (in 1994), and after this initial visit we were called in for a cup of buttertea every time we went up to have a look at the construction site. With every visit, I tried to shift our subject of conversation to her past, carefully, but her replies remained curt. At first she even denied she had ever been an ani, until I confronted her with Furer-Haimendorf and what he had written about her. She remembered the man had visited her with his wife and a Nepali interpreter, but had forgotten what she had told him. Reluctantly she admitted she had been an ani but later married "a monk". When I asked her whether this monk's name was by any chance Kusho Pema, the Drugpa Rimpoche's nephew and appointed abbot of Tashi Gomba, she left us with our tea at her doorstep and disappeared. When she was still not back after half an hour, we had to assume we were not welcome anymore. We went down to the gomba, and found her sitting in the gomba kitchen, sipping buttertea with the niermu, the ani in charge of the kitchen.

Both Nim Dolma's and Tashi Ongdi's past in Tashi Gomba, then, were intermittently linked with their monk-husbands of high esteem, respectively Kusho Pema and the Meme Khepa. As such, they had to be careful what they were to reveal, because any reference to their (late) husbands would undermine Tashi Gomba's "official" history, favoured by the Tulku; that is, Tashi Gomba having been a nunnery right from its founding.7 Kusho Pema already past away in the early 1960s, so Nim Dolma could easily deny their relationship. The Meme Khepa, however, was still alive. And as he always had done all the talking with ethnographers like Furer-Haimendorf and me, for instance - Tashi Ongdi could also leave the

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5 See Ch.IV and VII.
6 See Ch.IV, Monastery or nunnery.
responsibility of any revelations that would anger the Tulku up to her husband. The moment I approached her personally, however, she panicked. She probably did not know what, and how much, her husband had exposed, and I wanted to share his information with her in the hope it would make her feel less responsible and more communicative. I would have loved to have her counter-narrative, her comments, her views.

Months past since our first visit. Tashi Ongdi, her daughter, Dawa and I met in the gomba kitchen regularly and talked about the weather as if nothing ever happened. Once, I tried to provoke a conversation about “the time when there were also monks living in Tashi Gomba, as the Même Khepa had told me”. The young anis present immediately took it as an opportunity to talk about the Tulku’s last years’ visit (in 1993), and how many monks had come with him, and how beautiful and impressive the procession all the way from Tingsang La had been. I was glad it triggered off these memories, but also hoped Tashi Ongdi understood that the Même Khepa had already confided me in their shared past. Perhaps this tactic did help. At the end of January 1995, Tashi Ongdi’s daughter came to invite us for a meal the next day. We were invited at eight o’clock in the morning, but when we arrived mother and daughter were distilling raksi. The pot stood on a log fire in the shed, and had two chalk lines, meaning that they still had to change the boiling water another three times. While the mother kept a silent eye on the raksi, her daughter made us buttertea. We started to ask her to tell us about the distilling techniques, and she gladly explained us the whole process. She obviously also enjoyed the opportunity to talk about herself and her own life as well. If she were an ani, she pondered, she would have had a much better life than she had now. Perhaps if she would have had any sisters, she could have gone to the gomba, but now she was the only one to take care of her parents. Both her parents drink a lot, so her main occupation is to make them their liquor. Tashi Ongdi sat next to her daughter, checking the water temperature now and again, but did not react in any way to her daughter’s indirect accusations, as if she had not heard a word of what was spoken. The daughter went on talking. Her father has been drinking all his life. They could have had a house in Bodnath (Kathmandu) where her father spent some years working as a thanka painter. But he had finished all his money in “hotels” on drinking. Her mother started drinking after her marriage, after her time in the gomba. “How old was your mother when she became an ani?”, I asked, taking my chance while watching the old woman at the fire. The daughter answered. Her mother must have been about twenty or twenty-two. She had come to Bigu with her family to visit the first Rimpoche. She is from Charikot. When they were back home again, she decided to join Bigu’s religious community. She and her sister hired a porter and left in secret. When the porter returned to Charikot, her parents threatened him with calling the police if he would not bring back their daughters. The porter came to fetch them, but only her mother’s sister went back home with him. Her mother stayed and remained a nun for about eight years, until she was thirty-two and her only child was born.

While Tashi Ongdi’s daughter talked about her mother, the old woman did not give a slightest reaction; as if she had not understood a single word of what had been said. It felt awkward, but I decided she wanted our communication to be this way herself. “Does she feel ashamed for having left the nunner? Why doesn’t she want to talk about it?” The daughter looked at her mother and said: “No, I don’t think she feels ashamed because of her leaving. I think she feels ashamed because of her drinking”. The arrival of one of the Même Khepa’s students who joined us in the cooking shed - something he never would have done if Dawa and I had not been sitting there - brought an end to our conversation. We never managed to return to the subject again.

Tashi Ongdi had used her daughter as a mouthpiece; obviously for safety’s sake. Nobody could blame her for what her daughter, who did not have to feel hampered by the lamas’ rules and regulations, told about her. And I am sure that if it would not have been for that unexpected, curious, male visitor, we could have gone into a lot more details. This strategy, by the way, of using another person as a mouthpiece to
circumvent their own “mutedness” was also applied by the ex-ani who explained why she could not tell me about her life as an ani by referring to the Mahakala vow. One week after our first visit to her in her Kathmandu apartment, she invited us for dinner. It turned out she also had invited her elder brother under the pretext that he could practice his English with me. He did, by talking about the Dharamsala event which caused his sister to leave Tashi Gomba and eventually her robe as well.

A last word has to be said about Tashi Ongdi’s and Nim Dolma’s silence as it also appeared in my conversation with Tashi Ongdi’s daughter. Did they feel ashamed to talk about their past as an ani because they had disrobed? The answer must be “no”. Ideologically, the breaking of one’s monastic vows is considered to be digpa or pap, a sinful act which “inevitably results in a painful fate in one’s next reincarnation” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:148), but since the Sherpas believe that the effects of one’s deeds lie in the hands of the gods, they refrain from social or legal action against of people having committed a sin or crime. Neither Fürer-Haimendorf nor I saw the two ex-nuns suffer from any resentment by the present anis, with whom both have been “on excellent terms with” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:148), their monastic past was simply “forgotten”. Nor did the laity. On the contrary, former monastics, anis and monks alike, were never blamed for having left religious life, but many parents did use it as a motivation to refuse their sons and daughters becoming a monk or nun. “They run away anyway”. Tashi Gomba’s early history, as well as the Dharamsala event and the founding of Sailung monastery in the 1970s, had left their marks, and certainly did not promote monasticism as an alternative way of life in a world unfamiliar with it in the first place.

Which takes us finally away from what we have not learned from Tashi Ongdi and Nim Dolma to what they did tell, and that is the way they were recruited.

According to her daughter, Tashi Ongdi was inspired by the Drugpa Rimpoche on a visit by her and her family, which must have taken place around 1938 at, or shortly after, Tashi Gomba’s consecration: for after 1938 the Drugpa Rimpoche went into retreat in Phuma and died in 1942. We thus may conclude that he either did not succeed in persuading Tashi Ongdi’s parents to give (one of) their daughters to the new community, or that Tashi Ongdi and her family did not visit the first Rimpoche but Kusho Pema, for it took Tashi Ongdi about eight years, till 1946, to finally enter Tashi Gomba. In any case, Tashi Ongdi and her sister had to run away from home to become an ani. Her parents objected that fiercely against their daughters’ choice that they even threatened their attendant with the police if he did not bring their daughters back; and they were not “Nepalis” as the Même Lama wanted to have it, but Sherpas. Whether they opposed monastic life for their daughters as a matter of principle or not, they certainly did not think of Tashi Gomba, in the mid 1940s when many monks and nuns were leaving and the site was still under construction, as an attractive and safe place for their daughters.

Tashi Ongdi’s enforcing her choice for a monastic life by running away from home will prove to be a recurrent strategy of young anis in the years to come, until the 1980s. In the following chapters, it will become clear that parents generally withhold their permission both because of Tashi Gomba has been lacking a convincing “pulling” force, and because the parents’ claim that they cannot miss their daughters’ labour at home. Determined young women then take their chance when her parents start with their

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7 To refer to E. Ardener’s “women” as a “muted group ... [who] are silenced by the structures of dominance, and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies” (1975:1).
8 See Ch.IV, Harmonious and disharmonious time.
9 See Ch.IV for the Dharamsala event.
10 Sherpa culture is a typical “shame culture”. See R.Paul (1977) and Tieman (1994) on the emphasis on shame in Sherpa culture and Creighton (1990) on shame and guilt cultures.
11 Which will be explored in Chapter VII.
12 Remember Kusho Pema was also a Rimpoche.
13 See this chapter, Introduction.
marriage arrangements, and the parents' motivation of their help at their parental home would lose any
ground. They would run off to the gomba to take the initiatory vows with the lama and to shave her hair,
leaving their parents no other option than to accept their choice. In that context, we also understand why
Tashi Ongdi's daughter never became a nun, for she was the only child who, also after her marriage and
together with her husband, was to help and support her parents till their death.

Nim Dolma and her children exemplify yet two other categories of novices who have made up the
religious community for years, namely those who are either not bothered by unwilling parents because
they were orphaned, divorced or widowed, and those who were children of parents with a religious past
of their own.

Nim Dolma was born in Bigu. When she was but a baby and her only sister still a little child, their
parents died. At the age of ten she, as well as her little sister, became an ani - which must have been
around 1942. Eight years later, she left the gomba again, in the company of Kusho Pema. They built a
two-storied house a few hundred metres up the gomba complex and had three children. Their son be­
came a high lama at the court of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, and never returned to Bigu to see his
parents. Their eldest daughter had been a nun in Tashi Gomba as well, but left in 1976 for Dharamsala
never to be heard of again.14 Their youngest daughter married and lives in Kathmandu. Kusho Pema died
in the early 1960s. Nim Dolma sold the house and most of their land, and had herself a smaller house
built next to the Même Lama's.

In 1968, Nim Dolma remarried with a man from “up there” (Lapthang) who did not possess anything,
no land, no house, no cattle. Shortly after the birth of their daughter, he left for Kathmandu. She did not
feel like joining him, because she dislikes the city, its largeness and its crowds, and preferred to stay in the
peacefulness of her little house next to the gomba. Besides, the man had turned out to be a drunk and
Nim Dolma was gladly relieved of his presence. She never saw him again. Their only daughter she sent to
the “Khamko lama” - the Guru Lama who came from Kham, eastern Tibet, Tashi Gomba's abbot after
1960 - to make her an ani at the age of eleven, in 1982. Although living at the gomba, her daughter came
to see her everyday and helped her with the work on the fields, but now that the young ani is in line for
offices at the gomba,15 she will not be able to help her mother on a daily basis anymore. Nim Dolma has
decided to sell her land and the few valuables she possesses, like the coral beads she offered to us on the
risk of having to counter uncomfortable questions.

Nim Dolma's life story not only exemplifies that orphans are favorites for monastic life and the willing­
ness of former religious parents to give their children to a life of dharma (all Nim Dolma's children but
one daughter (sic!) became monastics). It also serves as an introduction to the problems single Sherpa
women have to cope with, which have urged several to take their refuge at the gomba. Indeed, the
divorced and widowed made up the largest group of anis in 1952, when Tashi Gomba was decisively to be
called a nunnery.

The anis of 1952

In 1952, an ani from Yelmu joined Tashi Gomba's community who reported to Fürer-Haimendorf that it
consisted of twelve religious women at that time (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:146). This number was more
or less confirmed by one of the two anis who had entered nunhood at Bigu in that same year, but after
Fürer-Haimendorf's informant, by mentioning fifteen nuns to me. Eight of these nuns were still alive
and an ani of Tashi Gomba during Fürer-Haimendorf's visit in 1974, and appear among the twenty-nine
anis he offers individual information about (ibid.:137-146). Only two of those were still alive during my

14 See Ch.VII, on The Dharamsala conflict.
15 See Chapter VI on the posts that make up the organisational structure of the religious community.
stay in 1994-5. As such, my reconstruction of these women’s motivations, to enter nunhood and to continue their religious life at Tashi Gomba despite its unfavourable conditions and its failing monastic habitus, is largely based on the little information my predecessor made available on about half of the nuns who had made up the community in 1952. Nevertheless, what we do know about these nine nuns is insightful enough to gain some understanding of the change in the composition of Tashi Gomba’s community from the feminine point of view. Let me summarize the information on each ani first.

Pema Chuck was still - or rather, again - at Tashi Gomba in 1994, fifty-five years old then, a very silent, solitary woman. She had no friends or relatives among the other nuns. We only managed to arrange one interview with her on a ritual she had recently been initiated to. During this occasion, she told us that her father, who had been a village lama near Jiri, had brought her to Bigu when she was eight years old (in 1947), implying that she had been an ani ever since. Her plans to join Dorje Dolma and two other senior anis in a one-year retreat (1995-6) seemed to confirm this. In Fürer-Haimendorf’s listing, however, she appears as a widow, who entered Tashi Gomba after the death of her husband in 1972 (ibid.:143-4). Her two children had also both died. Inquiries among other nuns confirmed his information. Pema Chuck left Tashi Gomba around 1956, at the age of seventeen, and married shortly after. Nobody, however, knew for sure whether she had met her husband while she was still at Tashi Gomba, or whether her marriage had been arranged after she returned to her parental home.

Note that her father, who was a village lama, had brought her to Tashi Gomba. It seems that he had also sent some of his sons to a monastery in Solu. This village lama from Jiri, to the south of Solu, was more familiar to monasticism than many another parent of Bigu’s nuns. Pema Chuck took up her vow again when she became a widow and had lost her children too. One nun suggested that Pema Chuck felt these tragedies in her life had been her punishment for having given up monastic life when she was young, but I was not able to have a conversation about this possible motivation with Pema Chuck herself.

Ngawang Chutin came to Tashi Gomba in 1944, at the age of about thirty. She was not Sherpa but Tamang from the Charikot area, who had worked many years at the royal palace in Kathmandu as a maid. When she heard about Tashi Gomba, then still under construction, she became interested in becoming a nun. The king granted her request to leave the royal service and two month later she moved permanently to Tashi Gomba (ibid.:139).

It is a pity that we cannot trace how she became a maid at the royal court, and why she had remained unmarried at the age of thirty.

Sangesomu had joined Tashi Gomba right from its foundation, when she was 23 years old. She had been married in Chautara, a village some two days from Bigu. Two of the four children she had given birth to had died, and so had her husband, on a trip to India. When she became a nun, she brought her daughter with her, but left her then five year old son and her land, for him to inherit at marriage, with her parents-in-law. When they died, however, and her son left for India too, kinsmen took over the land, unwilling to support her in her life sustenance. She had to beg for alms for the rest of her life. Her daughter left the nunnery and disappeared to India as well (ibid.:140-1; no date indicated).

16 See Ch. IV.
17 Including Nim Dolma’s sister, who remained an ani at Tashi Gomba until her death around 1970. She is mentioned in the life history of Chembal Chindu, the daughter of Kusho Pema and Nim Dolma in Fürer-Haimendorf’s essay (1976:142).
18 The information on the next seven anis rendered here are abstracts from Fürer-Haimendorf’s essay on Tashi Gomba (1976). Only on the two nuns still alive in 1994, Pema Chuck and Dorje Dolma, I could collect some additional information.
19 Tamangs are, like the Sherpas, a Tibeto-Burmese speaking ethnic group (see March 1979; Holmberg 1989).
20 See also Ch.VII, The rise and fall of Sdilung Gomba.
Tucht Dolma had been married and widowed as well, in a village some three days from Bigu. She became an ani in 1943 at the age of twenty-one. Fürer-Haimendorf tells us that she had a daughter, but does not mention what happened to the child (ibid.:141).

Tsangdzum Sangmo had become, like Sangesomu, an ani at Tashi Gomba’s onset. She was fifteen years old when she shaved her hair, but returned to her parental home in Jiri where she lived as a nun for several years before she came to join Bigu’s religious community permanently (ibid.:144).

We only can guess why she returned home for several years. Being from Jiri, like Pema Chucki, she probably had no relatives to stay with in Bigu during the gomba’s years of construction. She must have lived as, what March called, a “village nun”, a woman in monastic robes and short-cropped hair who leads a celibate life at her natal home (March 1979:134; see also Goldstein 1980:53).32

Hishi Dolma was a Sherpa woman from Yelmu, who became a nun when the Drugpa Rimpoche visited the site for the later Bakang monastery.33 She had been so impressed by this high lama that she took the vows without asking her parents’ permission. Only when she went back home her parents gave their consent, some provisions and clothes. She went on pilgrimage to several gomba in Tibet, and on her return, in 1952, Kusho Tsetsu34 advised her to join the twelve nuns of Tashi Gomba. She was twenty-five years old at that time (which makes her about eleven years old when she took the robes: quite young to do so without her parents’ permission, and to travel to Tibet) (ibid.:146).

Sange Gyelmu was about sixteen years old, when she came with her two sisters from Jiri to Tashi Gomba in 1952. Her sisters had no desire to stay, while she sought admission to the community. Fürer-Haimendorf renders that her decision “was not influenced by her parents, who are alive and give her material support” (ibid.: 1976:145).

Dorje Dolma, who was sixty years old in 1994, became a nun in 1952 at the age of eighteen. She was born in Darjeeling where her father worked in a bakery. In 1947, the family returned to Bigu and five years later both her parents died within fifteen days (the year of the great famine, 1952), leaving her, her nine year old sister and her five year old brother as orphans behind. Dorje Dolma then let out their land, and took care of her younger sister and brother together with a Thami servant (ibid.:140). When her younger sister was old enough to take care of herself and their little brother, she built herself a little house on the gomba grounds and became an ani.

Looking then at the familial circumstances of the first anis of Tashi Gomba we have met so far, we see that two had been a widow of whom one had brought her daughter too (Sangesomu and Tucht Dolma); three had been orphans (Nim Dolma and her sister, and Dorje Dolma); one a spinster (Ngawang Chutu); one had been a child nun (Pema Chucki), who left the community in her teens to return as a widow; two others had presumably the consent of their parents (Tsangdzum Sangmu and Sange Gyelmu), while two had to run away from home to become an ani (Hishi Dolma and Tashi Ongdi). When considering the dates of their joining Tashi Gomba, four nuns seem to have met the Drugpa Rimpoche (Tashi Ongdi is a dubious case). A widow (Sangesomu) and her little daughter were already at Tashi Gomba from 1934.

31 In Chapter VI, I will return to these kind of religious women, in comparing the anis of Tashi Gomba during the 1950s with them.
32 See Ch.III and IV.
33 Fürer-Haimendorf writes here “Lama Ngawang Paldzen”, i.e. the Drugpa Rimpoche (1976:146), but in 1952 the founding father was already dead for ten years. I thus assume it must have been Kusho Tsetsu.
34 Bakang Gomba’s kempu, and supervising Rimpoche of the Drugpa Kargyugpa gomba, who sent her to Bekung.
as it seems, while two young recruits first went to live elsewhere (Hishi Dolma and Tsangdzum Sangmu) before they joined the community. Three took their vows after the Drugpa Rimpoche’s death, during the 1940s: the child nun (Pema Chucki), one widow (Tuchi Dolma), and Tashi Ongdi. They joined by one who already had been taking the vows with the Drugpa Rimpoche (Tsangdzum Sangmu). The other recruit by the Drugpa Rimpoche (Hishi Dolma) only came in 1952. She was followed by the adult orphan and the one who claimed to have had her parents’ consent.

At first glance, it seems as if no general statements can be made from this listing. Anis of all backgrounds and ages seem to have been welcomed. When focussing on the date 1952, however, two aspects are striking and might be telling about changes in Tashi Gomba’s community during the 1940s. The first is the age of the remaining anis in 1952, the second their dates of taking on the robe.

Hishi Dolma had remarked to Fürer-Haimendorf that all the anis who made up Tashi Gomba’s community at the time of her entering were much older than herself, that is twenty-five years of age (ibid.:146). Four of the above listed anis must, indeed, have been in their thirties and early forties in 1952, while three others had been younger than sixteen24 at the time. The twenty-five year old ani obviously did not consider these child-anis fully-fledged nuns yet. If we assume these eight cases to represent the age sets of the Tashi Gomba’s remaining anis in 1952,25 a lapse in age between sixteen and twenty-five years becomes apparent. When now also taking the social backgrounds into consideration, particularly of the older anis who were either widowed (Sangesomu and Tuchi Dolma) or dedicated to remaining unmarried (Ngawang Chutin and the village ani Tsangdzum Sangmu), and recalling that Tashi Ongdi and Nim Dolma were around their twenties, I cannot but conclude that the problems surrounding Tashi Gomba’s development and their youth had driven most, if not all, marriagable women into love affairs (mostly with monks) and back to secular life.

Another revealing observation concerns the 1952 nuns’ places of origin. The given list tells us that only one ani (Nim Dolma’s sister) originated from the Bigu valley, before she was joined by Dorje Dolma. All the others had their natal places at least two-days walking distance away. Were there perhaps more Bigu anis among the three to six who made up the community in 1952 on whom we have no information? As none of them was still alive and an ani at Tashi Gomba in 1974 when Fürer-Haimendorf appeared, we may assume that they either had already been of age in 1952, or had discarded the robe between 1952 and 1974. In addition, the dates of enrollment of the anis of 1952 we know of reveal only one ani who took the robes between Tuchi Dolma (1943) and Hishi Dolma who was sent to swell the ranks in 1952; namely the child nun Pema Chucki who was brought by her religiously devoted father - and who left to marry when she was about seventeen! The conclusion speaks for itself: after the Drugpa Rimpoche’s death, Tashi Gomba’s community was not only drained of much of its young monastics, but failed to substitute them by fresh blood too.

By 1952, then, Tashi Gomba was made up merely by widows and orphans, many of whom did not even originate from the Bigu valley. It now becomes understandable why Nim Pasang declared to Fürer-Haimendorf he had wanted “to establish a gompa for nuns, where women anxious to lead a religious life, and widows and deserted wives in need of a place of refuge, could find shelter and inspiration” (ibid.:123). Tashi Gomba had shifted not only from a monastery into a nunnery, but also into a nunnery that was merely constituted of women who seemed to have been “in need of a place of refuge”.

In the next section, I will try to set out why widows and orphans must have felt attracted to the communal life, Tashi Gomba offered. I will also try to explain why I believe the Bigu Sherpas were not very eager to send their daughters to Tashi Gomba.

Marriage, nuclear families and Bigu Sherpa wives

In Chapter IV, I already made some references to the Sherpa family structure in the context of the

24 Pema Chuckey, Sangesomu’s daughter, and Nim Dolma’s sister (who must have been fifteen in 1952).
25 Sange Gyelmu (16) and Dorje Dolma (18) came after Hishi Dolma.
position of sons within the family, and its responsibility in supporting their monastic sons. Here, we need more detailed information on the nuclear family in order to understand the social circumstances widows and orphans had to cope with, as deviances of women's roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law.

Sherpa social structure, in Solu Khumbu as well as in Bigu, is organised around the ideal of nuclear families, parents and their children making up separate, economically independent households - to use Ortner's words:

The private-property owning, highly independent nuclear family is the "atom" of Sherpa social structure (...) a whole range of cultural and structural factors emphasize the ideal autonomy and self-sufficiency of the nuclear family unit. Ensconced in its own house and operating as a self-sufficient enterprise, the nuclear family is both the normally valued institution and the statistically prevalent form. (Ortner 1978:39)

This self-sufficiency makes a nuclear family rely heavily on the labour of the family members themselves, that is, the children. As such, a family is most productive, and prosperous, when it has several children in their teens who can be given the responsibility of looking after the herds on the pastures (where they have to stay overnight as well), of taking care of the younger children and helping with other household activities, as well as agricultural work, the fetching of fodder and firewood, and so on. This period in a family's life cycle, however, is of short duration. From the moment the oldest children start to marry off, the parental family's productivity is in decline. There is, however, a difference between sons and daughters.

When a son reaches the age of sixteen, his parents will start negotiations for his marriage. When the parents of a suitable girl agree, male relatives of the boy offer the bride (năm) on an auspicious day, pointed out by the village lama (the Même Lama), a pair of golden earrings and two heavy silver bangles, and take her home with them. This gift can be interpreted as a kind of payment for the bride's labour - paid to the bride and not to her parents - for she will live with, and work for, her parents-in-law until the final wedding takes place. This last marriage ritual (larra tongup), however, occurs only years after the "engagement", during which the groom's family builds a separate house for the young couple. It is at these final rituals, when the couple moves out and the son receives his share of land and cattle to start his own independent household, that the economic decline of the parental households sets in.

Nuclear families do cooperate in mutual aid groups, but only in larger projects such as the building of a house or harvests. In Solu Khumbu, these fixed relationships between families are called tenga tsali (Ortner 1979:22-3), but in Bigu this expression was unknown. Bigu Sherpas use the Nepali parna time, probably as a result of the fact that they also have been cooperating with non-Sherpa families, like Tamis and Magars.

In Bigu, each golden earring ranged from a half to one thola (11 grams of pure gold = 1 thola). The "wedding" earrings of Sherpa women from Solu Khumbu 1 met weighed at least two thola and were much more elaborated too, which signals the relative poorness of the Sherpas of Bekung as compared to those of Solu Khumbu. The earrings nowadays are still the main dowry jewelry; the silver bangles, however, are replaced by big wrist watches with as many pointers as possible. Since the 1980s, the heavy but simple silver bangles are seen as extremely old-fashioned and typical for rural, poor Sherpas.

This "engagement" period in Bigu can take, like in Solu (March 1979:186), five to nine years; in Khumbu even ten to twelve years (Ortner 1978:46).

Goldstein criticises Ortner, as well as Fürer-Haimendorf, in taking the Sherpa nuclear family as "the "atom" of Sherpa social structure" for a fact, instead of an ideal, because brides move in with her in-laws for several years, and parents will live with their youngest son, who inherits their house and last plots and cattle, until their death (Goldstein 1980:47-8; Ortner 1978:39-47; Fürer-Haimendorf 1979:86). In practice, then, Sherpa households consist for most of its time of extended families of two or three generations.
Sherpa families are not only economically tied units, but also social strongholds. My experiences in and of Bigu are reflected in what March wrote about her fieldsite in Solu.

There is [...] little or no easy inter-household visiting, chatting, or commensality. [...] Sherpas limit interpersonal interactions outside the nuclear household largely to the obligatory formal occasions. Adults do not congregate freely or informally within the village. This is reinforced by typical village layouts and architecture. There are no easy gathering places such as water taps, washing places, shade trees with resting stations, or clustered housing with or without shared courtyards. With few exceptions, every house stands in the approximate center of its landholding, which is to say at maximal distance of from all neighbors. (March 1979:78-9)

The economic and social reliance within the nuclear family evidently also creates strong emotional ties between parents and children. This is most clearly expressed in a song I heard Sherpas singing on the second night of the Narak festival. The song consisted of seven stanzas, of which four were sung by men and women together, and three only by women. I will first present three of the four that were sung by all, as they lament exactly the breaking of these ties between parents and children, and the children's new responsibility for their own household.

1 In summer, flowers are blossoming, but one never knows whether they will bloom next summer again. This year we are together with our parents, but we will never be sure, whether we will be together next year as well.

2 The mountain can be high but still snow reaches the valley.
   Our parents can be rich,
   but still we have to solve our troubles ourselves.

5 When we go to the forest we can see the incense tree blooming.
   When we meet with our parents inside us our heart is flowering.

The stanzas (1) and (5) in particular, however, have for women a slightly different meaning than for men. The difference lies in the virilocal12 nature of Sherpa marriages. The Bigu valley may be a multi-clan settlement, but not necessarily locally endogamous. The area of intermarriage of the Bigu Sherpas ranges from Jiri, in the south of Solu, to the valleys between Tingsang La and Barabise, and from Lapthang on the Tibetan border to Kalinchok on the mountain range to the south of Bigu (see map 3). Sons inheriting

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a part of their parents' former land property will generally set up their household in their natal village, and have a regular contact with their parents. Their uncertainty whether they will be able to see them next year too (i) has to be interpreted as a matter of life and death. As Sherpa marriages are virilocal, however, daughters often have to move to another village, to another valley, at the time of their betrothal. These married daughters actually will meet their parents about once a year. The fifty-nine year old Ongmu Sherap, for instance, had not seen her aged parents for five years, although they live just across the pass, only a one-day trip away. Her responsibility for her own household and family, and the festivities in Bigu she was supposed to attend, never gave her the opportunity to leave for a couple of days, she said.34

The sorrow of the bride for having left her parents, and often her natal village too, got two stanzas of its own, only sung by women. In additions, these lyrics emphasize simultaneously the tensions the young bride is bound to experience in her new home, particularly in relation with her mother-in-law.

When we were living in our parents' home,
we were like a statue of gold.

When we moved in with our parents-in-law,
we became a statue of mud.

Janma* should grow in bunches together, but it does not;
it squatters around into lonely entities.
We want to stay happily with our parents, but cannot:
karma brings us to places far away from them.

It has to be noted that the moment of the bride's residential shift differs between Solu Khumbu and Bigu. As said above, a Bigu bride will already be brought to her parents-in-laws' home at the first wedding ceremony (sodane), in a sober parade of only family. In Solu Kumbu, on the other hand, a bride remains living with her parents until the couple’s house is ready (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:57-8; Oppitz 1969; Ortner 1978:20-1; March 1979:186). Here, her moving to her new home is the highlight of the final wedding ceremony, a huge musical procession made up by family and friends from both bride and groom of both villages, dressed up in traditional clothing. Assuming that the Solu Khumbu practice reflects the Sherpas' traditional moment of the bride’s parade, one may ask why in Bigu it was moved up to the time of the betrothal. As also in Bigu the bride’s parents do not receive a brideswealth to compensate for their daughter’s labour, but collect a dowry of movable goods - household utensils, jewellery, cattle - to bring her at the final marriage rite, the bride’s early move to her parents-in-law does not seem to be based on economic grounds. This change in wedding practices, however, may be explained from a sociocultural perspective. One important factor distinguishing Bigu from Solu Khumbu is that the Bigu Sherpas had to share their valley with several other ethnic groups. Confrontations between them may have led to cultural adaptations, conformations, particularly when dealing with a sensitive issue like women’s sexuality (cf. Phillimore 1991). In Solu Khumbu, as a matter of fact, a Sherpa groom may visit and sleep with his bride, in her parents' home, from the first wedding ceremony (demchang) onwards. As several years may pass between the first and the final marriage ceremony when (in Solu Khumbu) the bride moves into her new home, the young women usually has given birth to one or more children. These children are considered to be legitimate. As March notes, however, this final wedding ritual...
is frequently mistaken for the wedding itself, leading people to believe that there is a great deal of “pre” marital sexual liberty and/or little stigma attached to “pre” marital pregnancy—both of which are false impressions (March 1979:18911.12).

It is not made clear who March means by “people”, whether she refers to foreign researchers or local non-Sherpa individuals. Bigu, however, certainly had a people who pre-eminently would have misunderstood the Sherpa marriage structure: the high-caste Hindu family of the Kharkas. With their own marriage practice of dowry and virilocality into extended families, they must at best have frowned upon young Sherpa women getting pregnant while still living with their parents. In the light of their other attempts to accuse Sherpas of immoral behaviour, it is not unlikely that, in course of time, the immigrated Sherpas of Bigu have changed the timing of their bride move to criticism of their politically powerful Hindu adversaries. If so, it shows once more how the Sherpas were influenced by Hindu culture in this valley.

One consequence of Bigu’s early bride’s move was the intensified relationship between the bride and the mother-in-law. While in Solu Khumbu, a bride moves directly from her parental home to her own new home, in Bigu she must live and work under the supervision of her mother-in-law as long as it takes her groom’s family to build a house for the young couple. That this relationship between the mater familias and the young woman is generally not a harmonious one, is expressed by the feeling women expressed in the Nark song of being turned from gold into mud (3). The Cinderella syndrome of having to do the hardest and dirtiest jobs, being scolded and even beaten by the mother-in-law, while the daughters of the family show little respect for the elder brother’s wife (ajyi), was a complaint often heard from living-in brides in Bigu.

One of them visited Dawa and me regularly, often with a basket of potatoes or some vegetables in return for a chat, a cup of sugar tea and a cigarette. One day she had bruises on her face. When we asked her what happened she started crying and told us her mother-in-law had beaten her because she had refused to fetch fodder from uphill. “That is a children’s job. Why doesn’t she tell Kanchi [younger daughter] to do it? If people see me carrying a doko with fodder, they ridicule me.” Dawa told her future mother-in-law about it, who in turn went to the young woman’s mother-in-law for an explanation. The woman reacted, “so what are you going to do with your future daughter-in-law? Make prostrations before her? She has to work, and the harder she works, the sooner their house is finished, the sooner she is out again!”

A groom will seldom interfere in the disputes between his bride and his mother, since he is not only to respect his mother as a parent, but also as the mistress of her household. As most Bigu Sherpa families rely on both agriculture and animal husbandry, the labour division between man and wife are divided along these lines. The care of the cattle on the pastures, as well as the sale and purchase of livestock and the sale of dairy products - butter and churpi (hard cheese candy) - are mainly the responsibility of the husband. These activities are, however, mainly seen as surplus to the household’s economic base, agriculture. And the organisation of the farm work and the processing of its products lie largely in the hands of wife. With her husband being regularly absent from the farm, it is the wife who makes the decisions in day-to-day matters, which rendered Fürer-Haimendorf the impression of Sherpa women being a rather...

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57 Fürer-Haimendorf states that “young [Sherpa] people of both sexes are practically unrestricted in the pursuit of casual as well as prolonged love-affairs” (1964:82), and that “sleeping arrangements in a Sherpa house are such that there is no privacy for the daughters receiving their male friends and lovers” (1964:83). Neither March nor I, however, have encountered this kind of sexual freedom among Sherpas, unless one misinterpretes their marriage system.

58 See Ch.II and III.

59 In order to prohibit the Bigu Sherpas to gain political domination over the valley on the basis of land property, and to prevent Sherpa cultural domination by the founding of Bekung Gomba, the Kharkas were said to have accused them of murder, theft, and alcohol abuse and other “impure” practices.
independent and equal partner in marriage, “radically different from the marriage of all Hindu populations of Nepal” with its “traditional docility and meekness of a Hindu wife” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:80-1). The Sherpa woman’s position within the household, as the productive and reproductive base of her nuclear family is symbolised in a ritual that proceeds the celebration of Sherpa New Year, Bulako Losar.40

On the waxing moon before the three days of Losar celebration in early December, the Sherpa shaman makes a tour along all Sherpa households, joined by four or five elder village men. On this occasion, they sing a song wishing the household wealth and health, while the mistress of the house offers them a jar of her home-made raksi (liquor) and a plate of her best foodstuff along with a small plate of butter. When the song has come to an end, the shaman uses the butter to bless both the house and the woman with butter marks. The specific spots where the shaman attached his butter blessings are revealing: inside the house on the main supporting pillar and outside above the main entrance, and on the parting of the woman’s hair and in her neck on her first vertebra. Pillar and spine, door and forehead, display here an analogy between the family house - the one pole still a reference to the tents of nomadic Tibetans (Stein 1972:120) - and the woman on whose strength, health, and fertility the existence and survival of the household relies.

Women enjoy high esteem in their role as wife and mother. However, a fortress can have the feeling of being a prison too. While women’s responsibility for the fields, the processing of foodstuffs, the household and care for the children keep them at home day-in day-out, they often complain about their men “just strolling around, while they had to remain like chickens under a doko (basket)”, expressing their envy towards men’s freedom of movement. If men return from the pastures with the herds or from small trade expeditions, they seldom stay at home to help their wife and children in household activities, but gather with other men in local teashops to drink and gamble. According to Kunwar, Solu women are able to manipulate a kind of female spirit (hamba) which can turn men “cold”, with which they can exert control on their husbands (Kunwar 1989:185). This notion, however, is totally unknown in Bigu. “The women of Bigu cannot say anything to their husbands even if they lose much money in gambling. A lot of male members were seen engaged in gambling in Bigu” (ibid.:185). Men come and go, and with their main preoccupation with the household’s surplus - for their sons’ houses and daughters’ dowries - are also the first to seek for paid jobs in and outside the valley, while women secured their home base. Since the 1930s, men were reported to have gone to India for labour, although the numbers from Bigu remained modest compared to Sherpas from Solu Khumbu who went already for temporal migration to Darjeeling since the 1860s or 70s (Ortner 1989:160).

“[T]here is no tradition of leaving home by the daughters of Bigu” (Kunwar 1989:186). It now becomes understandable why there were no anis mentioned in Tashi Gomba’s early years of moving to Bakang. They were not used to travel and not supposed to travel, but to stay at their new home, and to take care of it as proper wives and daughters would do. The nuns may have been as dissatisfied and disappointed by monastic life as the monks, but tradition prohibited them from seeking their salvation elsewhere. Unless they exchanged their monastic home for a home they had been destined to before the monastic alternative came up anyway, the parental home of their lovers.

**Single women**

According to Oppitz’ survey in Khumbu, 30% of the Sherpas in 1961-2 had been divorced (Oppitz 1969:124-8; cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:44). Also Ortner signalled a rather high rate of Sherpas “having gone through three or four spouses” (Ortner 1978:21). The reason behind the dissolvings of marriages, she offers (Ortner 1978:46), is an economic one, namely the unwillingness of parents to let go their son

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40 We have met, for instance, Calcuttako (Ch.II), Dorje Dolma’s parents above, and the Meme Lama (Ch.IV and VI). Kunwar reports of 10 Bigu Sherpa families who migrated to India between 1960 and 1980 (Kunwar 1989:88). Since then, however, labour migration has taken a spurt, mainly to Kathmandu (see Ch.VIII).
(and his inheritance share) or their daughter (and her labour and dowry). Parents try to drag out the marriage process as long as possible, with the excuse that they are not yet able to afford the final wedding. Divorcees, both men and women, do not seem to be blamed, since the responsibility for a dissolved marriage is generally sought with the parents. This may be so in Solu Khumbu, in Bigu, on the other hand, the situation is quite different, particularly for women.

The bride's years of living with the groom under his parents' roof can be seen as a trial. During this stage, the two young people may simply find out that they do not get along with each other. Or, the bride does not become pregnant. As it is taken to be most natural for her to have one or more children while living with her groom and in-laws, she might be accused of being barren, and on that ground be send back to her parents. Often, however, it seems to be a chicken-and-egg problem; the match does not work, so no sexual relationship between the married couple is established, or the bride does not become pregnant, so the marriage has failed. One young woman, for instance, was still not pregnant after five years of residing with her in-laws. Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law started to beat her and made her life so miserable that she ran off, back home. When her father went to her parents-in-laws to mediate, they refused to take her back stating that she was obviously infertile, and thus an unsuitable wife for their son. The young woman herself, however, confided to me that she had found the young man so disgusting that she refused to let him touch her. Another women, now in her late sixties, offers another example.

My parents married me off when I was only sixteen. I had not even my menses yet - they only came when I was twenty-five -. My husband was only a child. Twelve years old he was. They had no daughters so they needed a cheap housekeeper. Yes, that's what they needed. After four years, I realised when I ran off, back home. My parents were not angry, but they were afraid I would never marry again.

The fact is, that in Bigu young women divorced during this early stage of their marriage are stigmatised for being barren and thus are outcasts of the matrimonial market. Their only socially acknowledged chance for a family is marrying a widower who merely needs a mother for the children he already has.

Other divorcees may choose, or be destined to, a life as a spinster, remaining with their parents with the promise of a plot and a small house at their death; or to stay permanently on the pastures to take care of their youngest brother's herds. Their solitary life, however, exchanges the one stigma for another by making these single women regular subjects of gossip, of being of easy virtue. It may not be surprising, then, that some preferred a life of a nun. In 1994, three anis had been married but divorced because they had remained childless during their years of betrothal.

Presumably barren brides, however, are not always forced to return to their parental home. In 1994, Bigu counted two polygynous households, where the groom had taken a second wife with the consent of his first wife and her parents (cf. Ortner 1978:21). When in both cases the second wife also did not become pregnant, it was clear the husbands were to blame. However, neither of the two polygynous households were dissolved. Probable infertility of women is a socially accepted ground for divorce, while male infertility - even when proven - is not.

Divorce when the couple already set up their own household is usually initiated by the husband, leaving his wife and children for another woman. The elderly woman mentioned above was twenty years old when she was divorced. Five years later, she fell in love with a married man during a Narak festival. They ran away together, only to return to Bigu fifteen years later, with five children. The man's first wife stayed behind in their house with three children, until a widowed neighbour asked her to move in with him and his two sons. She left the house in the care of her eighteen year old son and sixteen year old daughter, and took only her youngest daughter with her.

42 See also March (1979:187): "women without children are more likely to divorce or to be divorced".
43 Kunwar noted five cases of polygyny in Bigu in 1981 (1989:177).
Usually, the family of a deserted wife will try to force a payment from the run-away husband or his family to substantiate the divorce. Many deserted women, as in the example above, however, can never be divorced simply because their husbands disappeared. Often, these men went to India for wage labour, and probably started new relationships and families there. As long as they do not return and publicly renounce their marriage, their Bigu wives keep their married status, thus obstructing them to start a new relationship. Their “married” status also precludes them from admission to the gomba, for they are not free, their husbands might come back any day; which is why Tashi Ongdi’s daughter could not become an ani after her husband abandoned her. Sangesomu, the deserted wife who became a nun, on the other hand, presumably got message from India that her husband had passed away. Her, socially acknowledged, widowhood had made her permissible to the religious community.

If a young woman becomes a widow while still living with her in-laws, she will be expected to marry her husband’s younger brother. When the husband, however, was an only son, or when his younger brothers are already married, or when the age difference between the widow and a younger brother is unacceptable, she will be allowed to leave her first husband’s family. Her parents, or brothers, will look for another groom, whose family will have to make a token payment to her late husband’s kin. The widow will have to return the earrings and bangles she received as brideswealth, and will have to leave her sons with their grandparents. Her daughters, however, will have to move with her to her new in-laws.

If a woman loses her husband while already running her own household, she becomes the head of her family until her sons reach adulthood. However, she will be completely alone in her task, self-sufficient and autonomous as a household is supposed to be, to cultivate their fields, to take care of their cattle, to process the dairy and field products, to look after her children. It will be easier for her if the children are old enough to help her, but if they are still very young, the young widow will have a hard time. Provided she makes good arrangements concerning the usufruct of her land until her son or sons are to inherit and can support their monastic mother thereafter, a life at the gomba may be much easier and more religiously rewarding for her than that of a single mother. In the case of Sangesomu, however, we have seen that her arrangements were not respected by her family-in-law. They bereft her son of his land, which made him leave to seek his fortune in India, and made his mother depending on the begging bowl.

Monastic life, with whatever it promised to be or to become at Tashi Gomba, seemed to offer exactly what Nim Pasang told Fürer-Haimendorf it to be, “a place of refuge” in both its religious and its social sense: a place to renounce a social world where single women were to face social solitude, childlessness, and a bad reputation; a place, where they could devote their lives to the Dharma, where solitude and celibacy was exactly expected from them, however without a loss of self-esteem.

Orphans
A song which cherishes the ties between parents and children could hardly do without a stanza on children without parents. As it shows, they were in need of refuge as much as single women.

Like a river is always flowing downwards
and will never return to its source,
so will an orphan go into the world
and never return to his home.


45 Much more can be said about the problems single women have to cope with in relation to karma - their fate being a consequence of their actions in a former life; in other words, only they themselves can be blamed for their present situation -, and witchcraft (see Tieman 1994). As I have, however, no information on Bigu’s early nuns to substantiate interpretations from these religious and psychocultural perspectives, I have to neglect them here.
In Bigu, parentless children are considered to constitute a social problem. Like the lyrics say, they are turned into homelessness with the loss of their parents. With the Sherpas' emphasis on the nuclear family, brothers and sisters are very reluctant in taking the orphans of their siblings under their wing. It turned out that it were mostly the grandparents who were willing to take care of these children. They either moved into their deceased sons' home and left their own house and plots to their youngest son—as he inherits his parents' last property at his father's death anyway—or they took the orphans with them into their home, to leave the house of the deceased son empty for the eldest grandson to inherit at marriage. When the old people, however, already had passed away, generally a brother would have to take care of the children. As might be expected in a society where every family had to work hard to survive, they favoured their own children in the distribution of food, clothing, and the work that has to be done, as well as, in recent times, giving leave (and money) for attending school. Frequently, disputes would arise between the orphaned boys and the care-taking uncle about the share of land which was legitimately theirs to inherit, as it had been their father's property, but of which the uncle had the right of usufruct until his nephews' marriage. It may not be surprising, then, that all male orphans I came to know about had left the Bigu valley to build up a life in Kathmandu or India.

Orphaned daughters saw themselves confronted with marriage arrangements at a very young age, that is between ten and thirteen years. The husbands chosen for them tend to belong to families with no, or still very few, daughters; in other words, families who would accept a poor dowry in exchange for more years of domestic help. Needless to say that their relatives did not welcome them back home if they felt unhappy with their groom and in-laws, or "proved" to be infertile. With the founding of Tashi Gomba, an alternative was created by way of nunhood. The intentions of the orphaned girls' relatives were, however, seldom inspired by religious motivations, but by the same economic grounds as the marriage negotiations. Instead of a small dowry, her relatives could restrict themselves now to supply the tea ceremony accompanying the girl's enrollment and her first robe. Whereas other aunts were supported by their parents or brothers, all orphaned nuns I came to know of received no economic support whatsoever by their relatives. In former times, these nuns may have made begging rounds, like Sangesomu; nowadays, they tend to become the servant of another ani with enough economic back-up. Of the three orphan-nuns mentioned, Nim Dolma and her little sister were already made an ani at the age of ten and six. According to Nim Dolma's own account, the Drugpa Rimpoche himself (and, no doubt, also his nephew Kusho Pema) had seen to it personally that she was fed and dressed during her time at the gomba. Also Dorje Dolma's relatives stayed completely out of the picture. She became an ani only when her younger sister was old enough to take over the responsibility of the household and their younger brother, assisted by a loyal Thami servant. After some years, Ani Dorje Dolma arranged the marriage of both her sister and brother. Her sister went to live at the pari side of the valley, her brother remained in their natal home and supported his nun-sister until his death in 1989.

For orphans, then, "going into homelessness" - the Pali expression of renouncing social life - was less a leaving home which they had lost already, than finding a home. This counted as much for children who lost only one of their parents. March noted down that

women whose mothers have died call themselves orphans, even if their fathers are living; and men whose fathers have died call themselves orphans, even if their mothers are still living (March 1979:156-2).

This expression denotes the strong emotional tie between a parent and child of the same sex, as well as the social consequences of death. Sons losing their father seemed indeed to run the risk of becoming the

46 See again Sangesomu's case.
47 See also March who states that "certain sex-specific expectations about the division of labor would mean that a lone daughter in a large household would have to work somewhat harder, at least until her brothers brought in wives" (1979:156n.2).
48 See Ch.VI, Economic bases.
victims of losing their land inheritance, and thus their future life sustenance and home, too (see Sangeshomu's son). Also daughters who lose their mothers often find a hard time with a stepmother as the new mistress of the household. I only have examples of motherless daughters, but I can imagine also fatherless sons opting for monastic life as a way out of their social situation. However, whereas motherless sons have little to fear of a stepmother unless they are still babies, fatherless daughters still have to cope with the same hardships their single mothers have to face. When these take refuge at the gomba because they feel unable to sustain their household and family all alone, they have to take their daughters with them. Leaving them behind with her in-laws would destined them to practically the same fate as when they would have lost both their parents.

Still one stanza of the Narak song is left to be quoted, sung only by women. I have saved it until now for it bears reference to gender and religious practice, and as such brings us back to the first anis of Tashi Gomba.

Women and the Dharma

Instead of learning dharma,
we learn this meaningless song.
Instead of giving birth to a son,
we give birth to a daughter.

Also in this stanza the traditional role of Sherpa women as wife and mother is celebrated. The higher appreciation a mother faces when having male offspring is hardly surprising in patrilineal society. What is particular interest here, however, is the way sons and daughters are put in a Lévi-Straussian opposition with dharma and a “meaningless song”.

In my interviews with Sherpa men one of my standard questions was what they thought a perfect Sherpa woman was like. I quote an exemplary answer.

A perfect Sherpani speaks Sherpa fluently and knows to sing the Sherpa songs. But, of course, when she has Nepali guests, she should be able to speak proper Nepali too. But the main thing is that she raises her children properly, according to Sherpa culture and teaches them our Sherpa language, teaches them that this is our culture, that they should not forget that, and should wear our [“traditional”] clothing. And she should make the house look beautiful and clean. That sort of thing. Others may emphasise her looks, her jewelry, her clothing, find it more important that she radiates wealth. But I think that tells more about her husband. I think her knowledge of the Sherpa language and the songs are more important. And, of course, her behaviour towards other people, young and old; with love towards children, with respect towards the elderly.

All Sherpa men mentioned the ideal woman’s main roles as a “guardian of tradition” and that of a good lady of the house, although they differed in emphasis. These roles can hardly be unique to Bigu Sherpa culture, but the specific cultural aspects that should be guarded may differ from one context to another, as well as against what or whom. Here, language, songs and, to a certain extent, clothing were clearly endangered most, but we have to consider also the contemporaneity of the men’s responses. Sherpa language definitely suffered from the Nepali language children learned at school (founded in 1954). The

44 Only songs, not oral tradition in general, since story-telling is confined to men, preferably shamans. Music-making (the last kind of Sherpa lute in Bigu was sold some ten years ago to a French ethnomusicologist, and is ever since completely replaced by the mouth organ) is not gender specific, but in its accompanying role to song and dance also not considered to be important enough to be mentioned.
older generation complained that most of nowadays's children were hardly able to understand Sherpa language, let alone to speak it. Songs, as I stated earlier, were hardly to be heard anymore except for the celebration of \textit{Narak}. Instead of Fürer-Haimendorf's experience of young women singing happily while working in the fields, I only heard the silence of hoes hitting the earth and corn and potatoes falling in large baskets. Like marriage songs, the working songs were hardly known anymore\textsuperscript{50} because seldom performed. The reason given was that the teams of women which are formed during harvest time are more and more joined by women from other ethnic groups, such as Thamis, Magars and Tamangs. In support of this argument could be brought forward that the Sherpa term by which these mutual aid teams are known in Solu Khumbu, tsenga tsali, was virtually unknown in Bigu but presumably replaced by the Nepali \textit{parna tirne}, “extracting help”.

That the safe-guarding of Sherpa language and its songs, however, was not a particular recent phenomenon - although its necessity may have been intensified by, for instance, the Nepali school system competing with the mothers’ role as educator - but probably was at stake long before. This is suggested by the third feature of Sherpa culture mentioned, clothing. Sherpa women’s traditional dress consists of a blouse often with Chinese patterns (bangdzu), the Tibetan dark-coloured wrapover dress (chhuwa), and an multi-coloured apron (matrit). But till before 1981, most of the [Sherpa] women at Bigu were seen in cholo (full sleeve blouse) and kenam (a kind of short dhoti looked like petticoat). They have now started to wear traditional Sherpa dress writes Kunwar (1989:144). Sherpa women, then, seemed to have brought their way of clothing in accordance with the dress in which most women of the other ethnic groups, Hindu and Thami, are still to be seen. Only with the growing encounter with Tibetans and Sherpas, in Kathmandu, Sherpa women of Bigu started to wear what has become their culture - which, by the way, has over the last couple of years been under attack again by Sherpa girls who prefer the much disapproved urban dressing of kura (Indian dress and trouser) and jeans. The initial abandoning of the chhuwa may have had a very practical reason, such as a shortage of the Tibetan woolen material which like women’s traditional jewelry (earrings and necklaces) must have been too expensive. “The price of ornaments worn by the women of Bigu is very cheap in comparison with the Tibetan type of ornaments worn by the women of Solu-khumbu [sic]”, Kunwar concluded, and I agree (Kunwar 1989:105-6). In their daily outfit Sherpa women thus seemed to have been hardly distinguishable from women of other ethnic groups. Only their language and their songs served their ethnic identity, and in their omnipresence in the valley as the main \textit{représentants} of the Sherpa-ness of the valley.

Women as guardians of Sherpa culture, then, served not only a cultural but also a political purpose against an advancing hinduisation of their own culture. Their shamans joined with those of other ethnic groups in offering rites to Shiva, Parbati, Devi, and other Hindu deities at the Deodunga mountain and the village shrines of Devithan and Maisingthan. Their bridal move was advanced to avoid accusations of immoral, sexual behaviour, which created a subordination - to the mother-in-law - women in other Sherpa communities did not experience. Their dress had changed into one similar to Thami, Magar and Chetri women. Why, then, did (and do) Sherpa women consider singing Sherpa songs, in the only song that survived, to be “meaningless”? Did Nim Pasang’s project of founding a gomba, generating \textit{dharma} practice in the valley, not support to the same goal, namely of imposing Sherpa cultural domination on the valley? And did women as anis, as \textit{dharma} practitioners, not also participate in that same purpose? Why, then, was \textit{dharma} practice considered, in its connection to sons, to be male and seemingly more significant?

\textsuperscript{50} Which urged Dorje, Dawa’s later husband, to collect the lyrics with elderly women like his mother, to offer them to the Sherpa Association in Kathmandu, an institution dedicated to the preservation of Sherpa culture.
Until the founding of Tashi Gomba and the reanimation of village temple life - particularly during the 1940s - the Bigu Sherpas were not familiar with monasticism with its lamas and Rimpoches, nor had they a strong village lama tradition. Male dominance of dharma practice was hardly an issue, or it must have been for the shamans, since they had always been men. The main rituals they performed, however, centred around women. I already described Bulako Losar, which celebrates the mistress of the house as the backbone of a household's wealth and prosperity, but also during agricultural rites like Bumi Puja women have been main actors in offering eggs and chickens to the goddess of the soil. Also the offerings to Deodunga were directed towards women and, their own, fertility. Women may not have been taking the lead in shamanic rituals like these, but their prominence was acknowledged, as wives and mothers.

With the introduction of nunhood by the Drugpa Rimpoch, women hardly gained any religious prestige. On the contrary, I would say they lost more. Monasticism, promoting the separation of religion - as a withdrawal - from the social realm, with celibacy as one of its features, was to supersede shamanic practices, as good, meaningful religious practice. Consequently, it also moved women out of the central position they took in shamanic rituals that celebrated their productivity and reproductivity. In the monastic institutionalisation of religious practice, then, women only gained a religious position next to the monks to be subordinated to them, to form the lowest ranks in its clerical hierarchy. In other words, instead of being central to religious practice, the Buddhist dharma made of religious practice mainly a men's affair in which women were but permitted (cf. Paul 1979; Gross 1993). It taught them in words and deeds that they were inferior to men, both in the social and in the religious realm.

Also the reinforcement of the position of village lamas in Bigu only supported the maleness of dharma, for a female counterpart of this non-celibate position was non-existent. "In some Sherpa communities, there are women who had adopted many religious traits, becoming a kind of ‘village nun’, analogous to the village lama" (March 1976:134).

The[se] women are usually older widows [sic!] who have chosen a more contemplative life within the village. Their knowledge, discipline and dress are not perfectly orthodox, but they are nevertheless recognized as individuals with legitimate religious purpose and called upon to assist at household rituals, especially weddings and mortuary observances (ibid.:274).

The ritual activities these “village anis” were engaged in may have lent them their analogy with village lamas, but their short-cropped hair, their red monastic dress - although not always “perfectly orthodox” - and their “monastic traits” such as a vow of celibacy - which village lamas are not inclined to - suggest an individual female practice rather inspired by monkhood than by the village lamas, probably in regions with monasteries but no nunneries (Goldstein 1980:53). Bigi’s lack of relationship with monasteries until the founding of Tashi Gomba, then, could hardly have triggered off the option of an individual, ani-like life among its women, and made unnecessary with Tashi Gomba’s community of nuns.

With Tashi Gomba’s failing lamas, however, dharma teachings could only have had an impact on Bigu monastics and laity with the advent of a dedicated teacher and monk - the Guru Lama in 1959. Also the village lama’s position as a religious leader only became substantialised when it was taken by a man who managed lay people respect, the Même Lama, a former monk at that. These two men not only assailed the shamans’ monopoly successfully by promoting the Dharma on which they based their authority, but

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19 See Ch.III, The village lamas and the village gomba.
20 Also among the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, contrary to other ethnic groups in Nepal, like Gurungs and Rai, who did have female shamans. See, for instance, in “Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas” (Hitchcock and Jones 1976) the essays by Kurz Jones on Limbu female shamans, by Fournier among the Sunawar, and Reinhard on “witches” among the Raji; and jankhiri, female shamans, among the Chantel (Michl in Fürer-Haimendorf 1974).
21 Although the Bigu anis of the 1950s became in many senses comparable to these kind of “village nuns”. See Ch.VI.
also showed the nuns their lower ranking to themselves as male religious specialists. The internalisation of the concept of dharma by laywomen, leading to its usage in the song, then, makes this stanza of a recent date, not earlier than the 1960s; when they, moreover, also tended to lose the battle as “guardians” of Sherpa culture vis-à-vis the Nepali school and the growing importance of Kathmandu as an economic resource. As much as Sherpa language and its songs had become insignificant in their struggle for life, expressed precisely by “last meaningless song”, women’s role as educators and tenders of the household’s fields as its economic base had also become meaningless. What remained to prosper as the main feature of their Sherpa identity was the Dharma, led by men, and their sons to bring cash and goods from the city.

Also Tashi Gomba’s first nuns must have understood the little prestige to be gained by them by leading a celibate, religious life. Like the monks, they must have been disappointed at the opportunities monastic life at their gomba offered. But unlike the monks, they had no options to improve their situation, for instance by following their lama to another gomba. Shamanism, celebrating their responsibilities as mistress of the household and as mothers, was still uncontested by dharma practice. Nunhood at Tashi Gomba, then, had still little to offer against the social esteem rendered by marriage and motherhood, and could hardly concord with a wife’s independence in her own home. This might explain why Tashi Gomba was drained by its young marriagable women during the 1940s, leaving religious life mainly to those who either had little prospects of a favourable marriage, or who already had experienced marriage life and motherhood. It was the only time that nuns left their religious community for marriage on such a large scale.

The parents must have also felt little pride for their monastic daughters. Not only had they undoubtedly a hard time in accepting their vow of celibacy, they also were supposed to support them for the rest of their life too. They probably only encouraged them to leave the robe after the death of the Drugpa Rimpoche, although the wild love affairs with monks with whom their daughters choose to run off with could hardly have gotten their approval where, under normal circumstances, they would have arranged their child’s marriage. The Tashi Gomba of the 1940s proved not to be fit for young women, and a threat to parents’ control over social relations through marriages. No wonder then that very few parents volunteered to bring their daughters to Tashi Gomba during the 1940s and 50s. As such, it becomes understandable why Tashi Ongdi had to run away from home to become an ani, Hishi Dolma cut her hair without asking her parents’ permission first, and perhaps also made Sange Gyelmu - whose explicit statement that her decision “was not influenced by her parents” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:145) sounds very suspicious to me - leave her home unasked. Also these two anis of 1952 were (with Dorje Dolma) the last to volunteer for a life at Tashi Gomba for the rest of the decade.

Reflection

Women’s importance as wives and mothers, as productive and reproductive pivot of any society, makes it nearly impossible to introduce female celibacy as a socially accepted option (cf. Ortner 1981). According to the Cullavagga texts, exactly these female qualities had made also Gautama Buddha doubt the rightness of women “going into homelessness” (Paul 1979; Gross 1993; Ch.1). In the Bigu of some two thousand years later, it could only have succeeded with a strong rooted sense and practice of dharma. But the Bigu Sherpas were still involved in a process of conversion to the Dharma, of getting familiar with its institutions like the monastery and the village temple. Only the Drugpa Rimpoche, who had introduced nunhood in Bigu and managed to recruit the first anis, had the religious charisma to overcome not only Sherpa notions, but local notions in general, on womanhood. Again, he retreated and died too soon, and none of his followers was able to prevent young women returning to social life.

54 See Ch.VI, The village lama and a pragmatic orientation.
55 See Ch.VII and VIII.
The first Bigu anis must have been inspired by the Drugpa Rimpoche as well as by the nuns who had been in his retinue. They seemed to promise a life of learning and independence, which may have countered their prospects of years in service of a mother-in-law. Once a nun at Tashi Gomba, however, the freedom of mobility the anis in the Drugpa Rimpoche’s retinue exemplified were not in store for them. In their society, women were supposed to take care of the home, and not to travel around, so their main task was to help out at the construction of the monastery. In addition, the nuns from beyond the Bigu valley, who had followed their guru lama, also had to return home at his death, back to Yelmu, Lapthang and Lapche (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:125). Their mobility seemed only to have been possible because their places of origin lacked a nun’s community of its own. In the absence of sufficient economic support, so far away from home, they had to return to their families, just like the Bigu monks who had to return from Bakang. In addition, nunhood at the gomba required an obedience and servitude to (all) the monks (think of Tashi Ongdi serving the Même Khepa) that resembled the subordination to a mother-in-law in many ways, but lacked the temporariness it had in lay life. The missing prospect of once becoming the mistress of her own home and being respected as the mother of her children makes me agree with Fürer-Haimendorf that “It is difficult to determine what causes a young Sherpa or Tamang girl to leave her own village and renounce all prospects of marriage and motherhood and accept the many restrictions of a nun’s life” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1984:152). However, only in the context of Tashi Gomba’s first anis; not for those he encountered in 1974, as I will argue in Chapter VII.

Nunhood during Tashi Gomba’s early years offered too little to replace the social esteem women could gain in the social realm. No wonder many young anis did not resist their feelings for monks, they had served as if they had been their wife anyway. Subsequently, their leaving the robes motivated but few parents to bring their daughters, or to give them permission to go, to the gomba. Nor did it inspire the women themselves to join the religious community. Most of those who remained, or enrolled until 1952, were in need of a place of refuge; women whose prospects on a married life were shallow or past, who had no home to return to. Whatever the hardships at, and poorness of, their new home, it gave them a social identity, socially accepted because they were widows and orphans. If it had not been for them, Tashi Gomba would have died an early death by the 1950s.