House of birds: A historical ethnography of a Tibetan buddhist nunnery in Nepal
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Climbing the Hill

From “Village Anis” to a female monastic Community

Introduction

It is 1953, nearly twenty years after the founding of Tashi Gomba. About sixteen anis, of whom three were but small children, were living under the miserable conditions of an unfinished gomba, without an abbot. One wonders how life was for them, what their daily practice entailed.

In 1952, Kusho Pema disrobed and stepped down as the abbot of Tashi Gomba. Although Bigu’s monastic community now also fell under the supervision of his younger brother Kusho Tsetsu, as the heading Rimpoche of the Drugpa Rimpoche’s four gombas and abbot of Bakang Gomba, its daily affairs were left largely in the hands of the Même Lama. Without a presiding abbot, the remaining anis were left without religious guidance, until the Même Lama, himself a disrobed monk, started to consolidate his self-appointed position as the village lama of Bigu. As such, he became the only male authority of the Dharma in the valley, in which capacity he started to involve the anis in the household and village temple rituals he performed, turning them in fact into his personal religious assistants.

Despite his efforts to improve the living conditions of the nuns, and to keep the financial affairs of the nunnery and of the village gomba strictly separated, the anis were drawn more and more out their monastic setting into village life. As such, they started to resemble the kind of “village anis” whom March describes as older women dedicating their lives to the Dharma and assisting the village lama in his performance of household rituals (March 1976:274). As a result, only one nun seemed to have joined the community after 1952, namely the widowed Tuchi Dolma in 1953, while the child nun Pema Chucki went back to secular life. The failing influx of novices again endangered the future of the religious community.

The arrival of the Guru Lama in 1959-60 was a turning point in the history of Tashi Gomba. This monk had been one of the Drugpa Rimpoche’s visiting students, who left again for Tibet until the Dalai Lama went into exile in 1959. He, however, did not follow Tibet’s religious and political leader to India, but returned to his former teacher in tantric practices (tsawé lama). Finding Tashi Gomba untended and mainly a home to eat and sleep, he started to implement changes and innovations. New buildings, religious routines and a structured organisation of the community had to recreate a proper monastic community, a monastic habitus unknown during the thirty-year existence of Tashi Gomba. Through his activities as an abbot, as well as his own reputation of a devoted and learned monk, he superseded the Même Lama as the religious authority of the valley.

Nunhood became an attractive option again, and parents, too, entrusted the Guru Lama with their daughters. Between 1960 and 1974 - the year Fürer-Haimendorf visited the gomba and recorded its anis (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976) - twenty-four anis joined Bigu’s religious community. Seventeen of them were young, unmarried women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. Three were widows in their thirties and forties; four were child nuns, of which one had come with her widowed mother, two sent by their parents, and one an orphan. The community was rejuvenated and finally made an impression of viability.

1 See Ch. IV, The problem of authority.
2 See Ch. V, Women and the Dharma.
The gomba complex

Around 1950, the gomba complex must have made a rather shabby impression. Its main building, the temple hall (duang), was the same rectangular construction of approximately twelve by twelve metres that the Drugpa Rimpoche had inaugurated. Its front showed a wide porch of about two-and-a-half metres deep, protected from the rain by heavy brown yak-hair curtains. Some metres to the left of the duang the small mani house guarded a man-sized prayer wheel. A terrace lower, beneath the mani house, stood the Drugpa Rimpoche's modest accommodation, the simsung, which after Kusho Pema's departure only served Kusho Tsetsu during his visits to Tashi Gomba. Next to this lama house, a little chörten had been built for the Drugpa Rimpoche after his death. On the same level, half-way to the water place where a prayer wheel was set into motion by the brook, a meagre shelter was set up, an improvised construction of rush mats fixed on a wooden frame like those of herdsmen on the pastures. Here, and on the garret of the mani house, the anis slept, cooked, and lived.

The site could easily have been mistaken for a village temple, with the temple doors only open on request or on specific religious days, and its side buildings looking empty and only for occasional use. The grounds in between were weed-choked fields with paths of trampled earth that betrayed the nuns' path across the small complex, and their circumbulations around the gomba and mani house, around the simsung and the chörten.

In 1952, two young novices joined Bigu's small community of older anis and child nuns, Dorje Dolma and Sange Gyelsum. Ani Dorje Dolma was the first to build herself a little stone house on gomba ground, behind the improvised shelter of the nuns, with the help of the Thami tenants to whom she had let her younger brother's land. Her initiative was followed by Ani Sange Gyelmu, from Jiri, who came soon after her. When she had convinced her parents of her desire to renounce, they gave her the material support to hire labourers to build a similar small stone house two terraces up behind the duang (see map 4). These two little houses are reminiscent of the tendency among parents in Solu Khumbu to construct a little home for themselves close to a gomba after the marriage of their youngest son (Otter 1978:47). As he was to inherit their house, and what remained of their land and herds, his wife would come to move in with him and his parents. To avoid nearly inevitable conflicts between the old and the future lord and (particularly) mistress of the household, the parents, by then already aged, often choose to leave their home and to dedicate their remaining years to dharma practice (cf. Führer-Haimendorf 1964; Goldstein 1980). In Bigu, however, this kind of retreat was not practised by the elderly. Given that the Bigu Sherpas were used to living with married sons and daughters-in-law under one roof, they never felt the necessity to leave their home in favour of their youngest son and his spouse. Thus, Tashi Gomba's centre only comprised the duang with, at its periphery, a growing amount of dispersed little buildings, whereas I had imagined a gomba in Solu Khumbu to consist of a monastic centre with a temple hall, a kitchen building and the sleeping quarters of monks and nuns, surrounded by one-room houses with elderly people gradually merging into the nearby village settlement.

The building activities of the two novices emphasised the urgency to replace the improvised shelters of the other nuns who lacked the means and support to improve their living conditions. The construction of a double-storeyed ani house in 1954-5 must have been initiated by the anis' complaints to Kusho Pema and the Même Lama, who both handled the financial affairs of the gomba, and the latter's ambi-

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1 See Ch.V, The anis of 1952.
2 See Ch.V, Marriage, nuclear families and Bigu Sherpa wives.
3 Only in the 1960s, Kusho Pema's widow and ex-ani Nim Dolma built herself a small house uphill from the gomba, to get the Même Lama as her neighbour a decade later when he became a widower and took up the robe again. The only lay person - without a monastic past - who moved into a little house actually on gomba grounds was the widow of Tashi Gomba's lay founder Nim Pasang (around 1977).
Dorje Dolma's House

Nuns' Shelters

Sange Gyelmu's House

3rd row of ani rooms

Temple Hall

Chörten

Mani House

Rimpoche House

Figure 4  Plan of Tashi Gomba in 1952
tion to consolidate his position of village lama and religious authority of Bigu. The lower floor was to serve as a cooking place, the upper floor as sleeping quarter.

The building of the ani house was part of a larger renovation project of the gomba. The roof of the temple hall had already been leaking for years, its wooden planks were rotting and in disrepair. It was decided to replace the wood by more durable tin sheets. These tin sheets had to come all the way from Kathmandu. Because a paved road to Kathmandu did not yet exist, the anis had to make the ten-day trip back-and-forth to Kathmandu on foot "each nun carrying three sheets at a time, and making two or three journeys" (Fürrer-Haimendorf 1976:125). Ani Dorje Dolma liked to bring up the painful memory of this arduous enterprise whenever young nuns complained about their task of carrying the harvest from the gomba lands up to the nunnery.

When wondering where the cash came from to pay for the tin sheets from Kathmandu, I found indications by the Même Lama in his report of his contributions to the development of Tashi Gomba.

The two lower rows [of ani rooms] I made. They [i.e. the anis] only had two small houses [the houses of Dorje Dolma and Sange Gyelsum], but the roofs were of wood and I changed them into slate. I got money from Drumthola [?] when I asked, and they got it from district capital [Dolakha]. And I took risks and made that one [he points at the "guesthouse"] and later on, when they finished that one, they thought of making a guest house. That simsum is made by the [Guru] lama, we did it together, we joined, and that house where nowadays anis are living, the lama made, but I made the roof. The lama went to Sailung - in Sailung he also made a gomba. Here, I went on and made later the upper row of ani rooms [1986-7]. For that, the government gave Rps. 30.000. They asked in Dhrumthola and later on in the district’s committee they made some fuss about it, so we only got Rps. 15.000, and also this we did not get all. Afterwards, they [the anis] started to ask for donations. Karma Sangmo is my brother’s daughter and I have sent her to ask for donations. In Kathmandu, I have many relatives, I am the only one here, all my brothers and sisters, uncles, went to Kathmandu. From them I got help and got Rps. 15.000 and from another Rps. 16.000. In total I got 32.000. And I made the upper row of houses, all completely new. I took care of all the nunnery up to last year.

According to this account, then, government funds seem to have been the main financial source for the improvement of Tashi Gomba. This is interesting, because it is the first time that the government is mentioned as a benefactor of the gomba, rather than an obstacle to its development, e.g. through the meddling of the local men in power, the Kharkas. As the funds came off in 1954-5, there must have been a connection to the founding of Bigu's primary school.\(^7\) The Kharkas had connections to all layers of the bureaucratic system, and knew how to solicit government funds for a school. Presumably, the Même Lama - "I got money from Drumthola" - managed to promote Tashi Gomba as a school as well, which it was from his, religious, point of view. Probably with the help of Tashi Gomba's lay founder Nim Pasang and the latter's son, Tsering Ngutu, who was appointed as Bigu's mizar in 1951, he managed to draw some governmental funds for the gomba too. It must have felt like a victory, because for once the Même Lama did not complain about the amount and the rake-off.

The governmental funds, however, were not sufficient but had to be supplemented by donations. In the introduction of his essay on Tashi Gomba, Fürrer-Haimendorf remarks that his interest in this gomba had been evoked by an encounter, in 1953 when on his way to Khumbu,\(^8\) with two Bigu nuns. "The nuns were collecting funds for the enlargement of their gompa" in the Tamang village of Risingo, some five

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7 In 1966-69, a paved road was constructed between Kathmandu and the Chinese/Tibetan frontier, suitable for motor vehicles, which reduced travelling time to the capital to two days. See Ch.VII.
8 See also Ch. IV, Pushing and pulling Sherpa monks.
days' walk to the south-east of Bigu (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:121). Taking into account the general re-
sentiment at letting women travel, this faraway encounter with Bigu anis reveals that they must have been
sent to their native area to ask their relatives for donations. Although the ethnographer does not mention
the names of the two nuns, it is not unlikely that one of them had been Ani Ngawang Chutin, the only
Tamang nun of Tashi Gomba recorded in that year, who originated from Risingo’s vicinity.

Clearly, the anis collected enough donations in addition to the governmental funds, for the gomba
could purchase not only tin sheets, but also slates from the Alampu mine at the end of the Bigu valley, to
cover the roofs of the ani house as well as the roofs of the houses of Ani Dorje Dolma and Ani Sange
Gyelsum. The Même Lama’s remark that these were redone with slate was confirmed by Ani Dorje
Dolma. “They were leftovers when the old guesthouse [i.e. the ani house] was built”, she said, downplaying
any importance. Nevertheless, disregarding the fact that one had needed quite some “left-overs” to
replace two wooden roofs, a slate roof is a sign of wealth even in today’s Bigu.

When the Guru Lama reappeared at Tashi Gomba in 1959-60, he encountered a modest but well-kept
gomba with all the facilities needed to accommodate its about fifteen anis. Soon after his arrival, how-
ever, construction activities started anew. A first row of thirteen cells was built on the terrace below, and
spanning the distance between, the lama house, and the kitchen building; each cell of approximately
three by three metres, ideally to accommodate one nun. At the same time, a separate kitchen and store
house was constructed at the place where once the improvised shelter had stood. These extensions point
unmistakenly towards a growing need to accommodate more anis; in other words, towards a growing
enrolment of novices.  

The Même Lama remained very short on the new building projects and did not mention the resources
from which they were paid as he did with those of the 1950s and 1980s. With the Guru Lama having
become the new leading lama of Tashi Gomba, it may not be surprising that he initiated the changes of
the 1960s and 70s. Moreover, taking the popularity of this learned, respected, new abbot among the Bigu
laity into consideration, it is very clear that he collected large amounts of donations from local Sherpas
as well as from visitors from outside the valley - as the Drugpa Rimpoche had managed before him, and
his successor Lama Kelsang would do after him. It must have been due to this stream of visitors who
came to seek his advice and his blessing, that the Guru Lama needed a guest house to lodge the lay guests
as well as a more prestigious lama house. The ani house was turned into a guest house, and the modest
simsung was enlarged and provided with a shrine conform his status. The head nun during my one-year
fieldwork recalled that this rebuilding started three days after she entered Tashi Gomba in 1964. The first
row of cells was ready by that time, for she was one of the first to get her own space there.

After the simsung, a second row of cells below the first was built. Obviously, the inflow of new novices
did not stop. Besides, it is worthy to note that the two rows were going to form a closed compound. The
doors of the upper cells were facing the valley, which could be reached by a few steps through a wicket
gate. The doors of the lower row faced uphill. Both rows were connected by a wall on each side with, in
between, small plots where the anis could grow turnips, potatoes, and other vegetables for their own use.
While the cells offered the nuns a privacy similar to the two detached houses of Ani Dorje Dolma and
Ani Sange Gyelsum, and unlike the dormitory in the former ani house, the compound, as forbidden
territory to lay people, also shielded them off from direct contact with the outside world. This privacy
was a necessity to the Guru Lama’s introduction of meditational practices.  

  
11 I will return to the growing number of anis after the Guru Lama’s arrival in the later section The community’s internal organisation.

12 See also Ch.IV, The problem of authority.

13 See also later section, The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.

14 See section below, The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.
By the end of the 1960s, Tashi Gomba started to look like a monastery after all. The whitewashed buildings were dazzling in the strong mountain sun, in which the red-painted tin roof of the duang looked like a red coral between the pearls of a Tibetan necklace when looking down from the top of the hill. That the gomba, in the person of the Guru Lama, furnished the anis with housing, however, did not mean that it also supported them in their livelihood.

**Economic bases**

The gomba as an institution had three modest sources of income. The first consisted of the plots the lay founder Nim Pasang had donated to the monastery, and a small herd; the second source derived from its money-lending system (Nep. guthi; Sh. tenma); and the third of donations by the laity.

To start with donations, these were seldom given in cash but in kind, usually butter which was both used for butter lamps, and buttertea to be served to the nuns on collective rituals and to visitors. In general, these contributions were made in return for religious merits, as any gift to a religious institution or religious person has been seen as an aid in the upkeep of the Dharma. The religious merit gained by supporting the Dharma are to compensate for the sins a person amasses during his lifetime. Usually, these donations on a voluntary basis remained modest (up to 1 kg of butter), but in some specific cases the butter contributions could go up to 20 kg. In my experience, the motive for generous butter gifts were always related to death and dying. Inauspicious signs during a funeral, or bad dreams of either the dying person, or of a close relative before or shortly after the passing away, were considered to be signs that the dying or deceased had to square sins committed during his or her lifetime. If these remain unsettled, the spirit of the deceased might get lost on its way through bardö, the forty-nine days between death and rebirth. Consequently, the wandering spirit would turn into a ghost haunting its close kin in this world.

In the case of inauspicious signs, a lama makes astrological inquiries on the dying or dead person in order to interpret these signs and to advise the family what to do and when. A huge butter lamp put in a gomba to light the spirit's forty-nine days lasting path through bardö mostly suffices. Sometimes the family is ordered to give one of the chörten in the valley a fresh whitewash and to sponsor the lama for performing a “guiding” ritual in front of the chörten; sometimes a small restoration project on the gomba is requested.

It seems very likely that merit-making as part of memorial rites (gyewa) were introduced by the Même Lama during the 1950s, when he was consolidating his position as the village lama of Bigu. Moreover, as the only remaining religious authority in the valley, he was also the lama who decided what the family had to do to counter the deceased kin's sins. Although I did not manage to extract detailed information of him on that period when he was both assisting Kusho Pema in the nunnery's financial affairs and Bigu's village lama, it seems that his village temple got most of the “memorial” assignments. His own fortune, he had brought from India in 1944, and the financial support by Calcuttako, the well-off Sherpa who had been in the Gurkha army, had hardly lasted into the 1950s. Then, the sponsoring had to (mainly) come from the Sherpa laity, and taking into account their unaccustomedness with dharma practice, the Même Lama's introduction of such merit-making rites must have served both religious - subscribing his prestige as a religious leader and teacher - and economic ends - in the materialisation of his prestige in the village gomba. He did manage to enlarge the village gomba in length and height, to get the Même Khepa to decorate its interior with frescoes, and to construct a guesthouse next to the temple to house sponsors of memorial rites (gyewa) and the Narak festival. The sponsoring of the nunnery by the laity, then, must have merely entailed butter gifts, and occasionally some small amount of money.

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5 Here I translate the Tibetan *soms* with spirit, despite its suggestion of similarity with the Christian “soul”. See, for instance, Tucci (1980) for a meticulous description of *soms*, and Evans-Wentz (1960) and Mullin (1987) on **bardö**.

6 See Ch.IV, *Pushing and pulling Sherpa monks*.

7 See Ch.III, *The village lamas and the village gomba*.
The competition between the nunneries and the village temple, due to Même Lama's religious politics, however, changed in favour of the nunneries with the arrival of the Guru Lama. This Tibetan, learned monk presumably attracted many lay people who would traditionally offer him rice, eggs, and small banknotes. Much of these donations must have been used for the new constructions, some - if not all - cash was put into the gomba fund to serve as guthi, a loan fund for lay people. According to the Même Lama, the gomba's capital did not surpass the amount of Rs.1000, for villagers to borrow up to Rs.100 for buying cattle or financing a marriage, until the Guru Lama came and the gomba had about Rs.7000 at its disposal. Fürer-Haimendorf mentions the amount of Rs.8100 for 1974, for villagers to borrow between Rs.25 to Rs.1000 a person a year (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:129). Interest had to be paid not in cash, but in commodities. Again butter, used for continuously burning lamps in the duang and at the shrine in the simsung, was a main item. After the Guru Lama's introduction of three extensive annual rituals, however, the larger part of interest to be transferred was used to support these rituals: again butter for the extra lamps needed, rice and flower to make effigies (torma), and food for all the participating nuns and lamas. The fund was thus largely divided over three rituals, and were named after them as the Nyungne guthi, the Bum guthi, and the Diksha guthi.

Also the village gomba had its funds, started up mainly with the donation made by the already mentioned Calcuttako. One was called after Narak, during which repayment and the interest were due (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:130), thus like the guthi of the “big gomba” based on a one-year term. The smaller village gomba guthi, however, was a monthly affair around which the Même Lama had established a special day of devotion, on every last day of the Tibetan month. The combination of a religious session devoted to the Guru Rimpoche (Skt. Padmasambhava) and the fund were his main tactic to promote dharma practice among the Bigu Sherpas. During these sessions, the village lama would tell hagiographies, teach one-line mantras (prayers) and make prostrations and circumambulations with those present. Although his energy seemed relentless as I saw him seizing these days, as well as any other occasion, to lecture about religious examples and practices, very few people were interested enough to leave their work on the field and pastures, and in the house, to come to the “thirtieth-day puja” at the village gomba. Those who came often felt obliged to because they had to repay their loan, or intended to borrow out of the fund in the near future. After the 1950s when the Même Lama held his religious monopoly, then, the village gomba could not compete with the developments of the nunneries under the direction of the Guru Lama; not in financial resources, and not in ritual practices which seemed to promise more religious merit - in which the laity was not even allowed to participate.

As the plots of the nunneries concerned, these had been donated by Nim Pasang, and were situated at the same altitude as the gomba. They were of the same poor quality as the parcel the Sherpa headman had offered to the founding of the gomba. The 3 muri (ca. 202.5 kg) of wheat, maize, and potatoes the nuns harvested from it, yielded hardly enough to furnish each of them with a meal during the four monthly days of devotion. During the 1960s, the gomba property was extended with land donated by a wealthy Thakuri, i.e. the member of a high Hindu caste, who held the rank of captain in the Nepalese army. The Thakuri's wife had remained childless and he hoped to be blessed with a son by dispensing such charity to a Buddhist temple. Though his efforts were in vain, he stayed in close touch with the nuns, and when his wife died, the inmates of the gompa performed a memorial rite (gyewa) which was attended by the deceased woman's relatives. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:127)

The Thakuri's land was dispersed over three villages in the Sunkosi valley, on the way to Barabise, a two-day walk from Bigu. In Latu and Marsekarka, maize and wheat were grown, whereas the land in Budi-

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19 In 1994, the gomba coffers contained Rs.120,000 for villagers to borrow up to Rs.5000 a person a year.
20 See Ch.III, The recognition of the valley's sacredness.
The plots were let to Brahmans, Thamis, and Tamangs, according to a system that whatever the harvest had been, the owner's share was fixed (kot, ibid.:127). After every harvest, a group of nuns had to go to the fields to collect the gomba's share. In 1986, when the Guru Lama died and Lama Kelsang became the new abbot of Tashi Gomba, it was decided to exchange these fields in the Sunkosi river for fields closer by. Since then, the wheat had only to be carried up from Alampu, four hours away, and the rice from the paddy fields down near Sangba.

Another gift by Nim Pasang consisted of a small herd of dzomu, female yak-cow crossbreeds, which was taken care of by herdsmen on higher situated pastures. Their negligence of the gomba's cattle, however, reduced it by the year, and the reluctance of the herdsmen to deliver the fixed amount of butter to the gomba, brought the Guru Lama to sell the herd except for a few cows which were taken into the care of a Thami neighbour of the nunnery. Its produce was negligible.

In short, during the 1950s the donations and the funds, as well as the yield of land and herd, were not sufficient either for the improvement of the anis' living conditions or their day-to-day subsistence. The regular incomes received provided the anis with the most basic and necessary items for religious ceremony, the butter lamps, and buttertea and simple meals they were served during the four monthly pujas. The once-only governmental fund had at least made the replacement of their shabby hut possible. Under the Guru Lama, the donations rose, but had to finance further enlargement of the gomba. The guthi extended, and with it the amounts villagers could borrow and the interest they had to pay; but so did the community of Tashi Gomba, and the income of butter and food had to sustain a growing number of anis. Thus also in the 1960s the gomba could only support its nuns on days of collective rituals, and even then not all of them.

In 1974, this selection excluded seven out of thirty nuns from having a share of the gomba land's yield, which only sustained the remaining twenty-three nuns for about two months besides the meal or two they were given at the four monthly pujas (ibid.:128).

The nuns, then, were highly depending on the support by their natal family. The anis who originated from outside the valley went to visit their family once or twice a year to collect a basket of potatoes or a bag of maize, material for a new robe, and household items. The anis from the Bigu valley were supplied more often with fresh fruits from garden and field, and products were often exchanged. Those nuns who had no family to support them - like orphans and old widows - had two other options. The first was to enter a servant relationship with another nun who was better off; the second option was to beg in the village. It has to be stressed, however, that these instances have been very rare in the past as well as at the present time. Führer-Haimendorf only mentions one case of a begging nun, Sangesomu, who had no relatives to look after her (ibid.:140-41); during my stays at the nunnery I encountered no one doing so. A servant relationship usually occurs between two nuns who are relatives anyway, such as an orphan going to live with her monastic aunt or cousin. The poor ani would live with the older nun and do all the household jobs, including the gardening work and the fetching of firewood from the forests uphill. As a matter of fact, all novices start to live with a nun, who then taught them the Tibetan alphabet and the first pecha in return for services, but they usually move out after about six months whereas the poor novice tends to stay with her teacher and supporter for the rest of her monastic life.

I encountered three cases of servant relationships. Ani Maili has been the first Thami nun of Tashi
Gomba (see also ibid. 146). Her father was a local shaman, who lived permanently in a pasture hut just below the gomba and the yield of his land was barely enough to sustain his four daughters (the mother died in childbirth). He had a few cows and buffaloes and by selling or exchanging dairy products and meat, he clothed and fed his children. When becoming a nun, Ani Maili went to live with Ani Sherap Omu, Kusho Tendzen’s daughter, with whom she was still sharing the same small room in 1994. Ani Sherap Omu, however, is on pilgrimage and ritual tours most of the time, only being at Tashi Gomba two months a year, so Ani Maili lives more or less alone. Ani Sherap Omu always brings her some material for a new robe, a new pair of shoes, a watch or some other present, and always a small amount of money. Ani Maili, however, always looks poor in her shabby robe and oversized shoes.

Ani Thupten Hoser, her mother and older brother and sister were left by the father who ran off with another woman. When the love couple returned after thirteen years with six children, the deserted mother had gone to live with a neighbouring widower and had left her former husband’s house and land in the care of the children. When the father returned, the two eldest left for Kathmandu to work in a hotel. Ani Thupten Hoser, then thirteen years old, moved to her mother and stepfather, who were having three children. When she was eighteen, she fled her stepfather’s place and asked the new abbot to cut her hair. He agreed and asked Ani Sonam (Ani Sherap Omu’s half-sister) to take care of her. Neither her father—who did not want to care for his children from his former marriage—nor her stepfather support her with food or cash. Only lately, her father’s second wife brings her eggs, flower and vegetables once in a while, under pressure from her oldest son.

Ani Thuli entered the nunnery in 1993. Like Ani Maili, she is Thami. Her parents are tenants of the gomba land, and have always worked as day labourers for the nunnery, whether for threshing, butchering, or repair and cleaning jobs. As such, she grew up with the nunnery, and is now living with Ani Karma Sangmo, the Même Lama’s granddaughter.

In addition to their families’ support, the nuns grew turnips, potatoes, and a kind of endive for their own use in the tiny plots in front of their cells. Although the monastic vow implies a restraint from any agricultural labour, as it would effect the killing of millions of insects and thus the breaking of the oath not to kill, my pointing out the discrepancy between their vow and their gardening practices was only answered with a shrug, as if to say “what else to do? We have to eat, don’t we?” Also Lama Kelsang, the Guru Lama’s successor, remarked

Yes, in former times, in Tibet, villagers donated enough money to feed the monks and nuns. In Kathmandu, we also receive enough money to do so. But here, the people are poor, so the nuns have to work in the fields as well. They have to live, and then it is the same as when you walk over a path or through fields. Also then you are killing many insects. We can’t fly, can we?

Yet, the nuns had another, modest, source of income, namely the small payments they received for performing ritual services for lay people. Their religious practice during the 1950s, and the changes and extensions brought along by the Guru Lama will, however, be dealt with in the next two sections.

22 See Ch.IV, “The monks’ withdrawal.

23 And, like Ani Maili, Ani Thuli is also called by her Nepali name denoting her rank in birth (maili, “middle daughter”; dtul, “eldest, biggest daughter”). It cannot, however, be said that it is typical to call Thami nuns by their social name instead of (one of) their religious names, and thus drawing the conclusion that they are taken less serious than Sherpa nuns. A highly admired Sherpa nun is also known primarily by her social name, Ani Kancchi (“youngest, smallest daughter”). What these anis share is that all three spent most of their childhood at the gomba because their parents performed all kinds of small jobs for the gomba, so that they were known to the anis by their social names already for years before they became nuns themselves. Besides, Ani Kancchi happens to be small of stature, while Ani Thuli is a tall elegance.
The village lama and a pragmatic orientation

Kusho Pema and the Même Lama may have remained responsible for the financial affairs of Tashi Gomba, but these two ex-monks could not have any religious authority over the nuns’ community. This lay in the hands of the Drugpa Rimpoche’s youngest nephew Kusho Tsetsu. The abbot of Bakang Gomba and general supervisor of all his uncle’s gombas, however, had hardly time to visit and stay at Tashi Gomba; moreover, he was also the carer of the little boy who was recognised as the Drugpa Rimpoche’s reincarnation. During the 1950s, Kusho Tsetsu’s presence at Tashi Gomba was mentioned only once, accompanying the young Tulku on his first visit to the nunnery in 1958 (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:126). A flyer, calling for donations for the renovation of Bakang Gomba, records that it had its last renovation in 1959. All this suggests that during the 1950s Kusho Tsetsu was far too occupied to be able to fulfil his task of guru lama at the small nuns’ community in the Bigu valley.

Consequently, religious practice at Tashi Gomba during the 1950s entailed what the succession of lamas had managed to teach - which was not much. Some nuns were able to read and memorise the few religious texts the Drugpa Rimpoche had ordered from Tibet. According to Ani Dorje Dolma, these were the Diksha, texts for purification rituals, and the Bum pecha, the “Book of 100,000 Lines” (Prajnaparamita Sutra; Samuel 1993:193). The nunnery had neither a copy of the Kangyur nor of the Tengyur, the canonical works of Tibetan Buddhism. The two books the nuns had at their disposal were read respectively at Losar (New Year) and Buddha janmi (the Buddha’s birthday). Very likely both Kusho Pema and the Même Lama led these annual festivals, as well as the pujas on the four sacred days of the Tibetan month, simply by participating and chanting the texts for the nuns to follow.

The Même Lama may not have been allowed to act as a religious teacher within Tashi Gomba, but outside its walls he did his utmost to educate the Sherpa laity, and no lama was there to withhold him from also including the Bigu anis in these activities. Those anis who were able to read became his assistants and, together with the male lay students he gathered around him, they formed an impressive board at funerals rituals, memorial rites (gyewa), and kurim, a generic term for exorcising, curing and protecting rituals. Their main activity consisted of the reading of appropriate sacred scriptures. The spoken words of the Dharma had to expel demons, show wandering ghosts their way back to bardo or silence them when they acted out of the netherworld, to pacify upset lī (skt. naga, serpent-like guardians of soil and water), or to protect a house (domang puja) or a person who was about to set out for a possibly dangerous enterprise. Like in many an oral tradition, the spoken word has an inherent power, power exacted through its sound. In Tibetan Buddhism it is thus believed that the more mouths utter words of the Dharma, the stronger its effect will be (cf.Tambiah 1976; Tieman 1992). In consultation with the lay sponsor (jindak), depending on how many “mouths” he or she was able to feed, and to pay for, during a puja that could last for one hour to several days, the village lama decided what kind of puja was needed, its duration, and who would assist him in performing it.

Needless to say that the rituals performed by the Même Lama, his lay students and the anis were largely of a pragmatic nature, in accordance with Samuel’s definition of the “pragmatic” orientation in Tibetan Buddhist practice belonging to

44 The flyer was distributed by Lama Kalsang on a trip to Germany as well as among his foreign visitors at his office in Kathmandu. It said that Bakang Gomba consisted of sixteen monks in 1995; a trifle compared to the about sixty nuns at Tashi Gomba. Several Bakang monks, however, had followed their abbot Kusho Tsetsu to Kathmandu to his new gomba in 1980, when he transferred the supervision to the Tulku, while Tashi Gomba started booming exactly in that year. See Ch. VIII, Lama Kehang and his scheme.

45 See Ch.IV, The problems of language, teaching, and practice.

46 Only in 1986, the Kanjur copy was brought from Sallung Gomba to Tashi Gomba, after the Guru Lama had died (cf.Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:124). See for Sallung Gomba Ch.VII.

27 See next section, The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.
The realm of this-worldly concerns, conceived of in terms of interactions with local gods and spirits, and carried out by a variety of ritual practitioners, foremost among them being the lamas, who employ the techniques of Tantric practice for this purpose (Samuel 1993:31).

After all, in order to consolidate his religious position among the Bigu Sherpa laity, the Meme Lama had to play on their needs in coping with death, illness and misfortune - the kind of concerns they had been used to turn to their shamans for. On the other hand, his emphasis on the reading of religious texts by as many "mouths" as possible, indicate that he also prospered clerical Buddhist notions of practice. Having been a monk himself and a student of the Drugpa Rimpoche, it is very well possible he also expressed "karma-oriented" interpretations during his lecturing his students and lays, emphasising the "ideology of merit" in relation to death and rebirth, and past and future lives (ibid.:31). Particularly with the Guru Rimpoche puja on every thirtieth day, he must have intended to create an occasion during which he could educate the laity in matters of religious merit and compassion, just as the Guru Rimpoche (skt.Padmasambhava) was said to have converted the Tibetan people to Buddhism. But precisely its lack of a direct this-worldly concern, if it were not for taking part in its guthi, attracted but very few. Nevertheless, thanks to the Meme Lama the efforts of the Drugpa Rimpoche to "tame" Bigu to Buddhism were not entirely forlorn.

For the anis, however, the Meme Lama had been of vital importance. Not only had he extended their religious knowledge and activity, but in bringing them in regular contact with the laity through the performance of rituals, he ensured their reputation as religious specialists. If he would not have taken up the ambition to become Bigu's village lama, and would not have engaged the anis in his activities, Tashi Gomba's community would, once again, irrevocably have died out.

Nevertheless, the anis were considered to be the lowest in rank. As the presiding lama and teacher, it was natural for the Meme Lama to be seated higher than his students. Both laymen and anis sat on the same level, but the laymen flanked their lama, while the anis constituted a row facing them. This distinct positioning, as the Meme Lama explained to me, reflected the notion that every male student of the village lama was a potential village lama himself, a post no woman was ever allowed to take up. As such, the payments they also received differed. When the Meme Lama received Rps.30, his lay students would collect Rps.15, while the anis got only Rps.10.

In 1992, however, I witnessed the sponsors of a Bum puja, the reading of the "Book of 100,000 Lines", in a nearby village paying nine Bigu anis the same amount of Rps.200 as they gave to their village lama, whereas his two male assistants got only half of it. Being now treated equal to a village lama, and valued more highly than the "would-be village lamas", I only can conclude that during the past four decades the anis have become appreciated as religious experts in their own right. In other words, that the anis of the 1950s had lacked a religious identity as a community, but had been depending on the Meme Lama, the village lama. As such, they had been treated as "village anis".

One might ask how the Meme Lama received all his religious knowledge. We have to recall that he claimed to have studied with a Tibetan village lama, before he took his monastic vows with the Drugpa Rimpoche.

I was working and living on the pastures, herding cattle. We had sheep, and chaunri [i.e. half-breeds], and yaks. Yes, we had many sheep. But I wanted to learn to read pechu [i.e. religious texts]. So I went to Tibet. But I didn't like it there and I came back.

Maybe he came back in 1935 because word had reached him about the Drugpa Rimpoche, maybe he only heard about him on his return. In any case, it was in Yelmu where he met the Rimpoche and became a

28 See als Ch.1. The paths of dharma.
29 See above, Economic base.
His teacher in Tibet, then, must have been a village lama, whose teaching how to read and chant the sacred Tibetan must have been through texts he used for rituals himself. Consequently, the Même Lama’s expertise as a village lama was largely based on these instructions during his youth, added to what he had learned as a monk from the Drugpa Rimpoche, his guru lama. Besides, one of his brothers founded a village gomba in Kalinchok, a day’s walk to the south of the Bigu valley, to become its village lama. The two brothers visited each other regularly and may have exchanged texts and knowledge. Both were highly respected for their religious knowledge and devotion.

With the arrival of the Guru Lama, however, the Même Lama’s religious monopoly came to an end, and with it the anis’ dependence on the village lama for their religious reputation and practice.

The Guru Lama and the karma orientation

When asking the older anis who had been teaching them the protecting, curing or exorcising rituals they performed either individually or in small groups, they would answer either the Même Lama, or the Guru Lama, or an old or already deceased ani. Some of these rituals were still practised at the request of a lay sponsor, sometimes they were part of the (older) anis daily routine. Also in the anis’ exposition on these ritual practices both pragmatic and merit-making intentions were given side by side.

Sur and Tormathoong, for instance, are rituals against wandering ghosts. Ani Thupten Omu explains

You have to do it at night, on smouldering embers. Not on a big fire, because the dead from the netherworld are afraid of fire. Like of dogs. Living people get sick when they encounter wandering ghosts. That’s why they need to be fed. They are hungry, and will look for food everywhere. Every night I put milk, and curd, and sugar, and tsampa [i.e. roasted and ground wheats], and ghi [clarified butter], and honey into a bowl, and make many little balls out of it [fieldnote: “I only saw tsampa and water.”]. Ten little balls are enough for one ghost. But before I bake the little balls on the charcoal, I first have to meditate. I have to make myself into a god, have to imagine I am Pawa Chenrezig [Skt. Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of Compassion]. And I read pecha. Only afterwards, I am allowed to cook the balls and to offer them to the dead. Yes, sometimes this dead person is a specific person, when a sponsor has come to ask for this puja. He has to supply the tsampa, and the butter, and so on. Four years ago, for instance, a friend became very ill, because her dead husband was bothering her. The lama found out they had not done gyewa for him. Those things happen to poor people. They are too poor to pay for gyewa. Then I was asked to dedicate my Sur puja to this friend’s dead husband. They gave me tsampa for two weeks, so I did it for two weeks. But no, usually it’s not for anyone specific.

I also do Tormathoong. It nearly the same puja, but the pecha differs. And this one you do in the morning, at sunrise. It’s mainly for the little children who are in the netherworld, because they are orphans, or because they died in an accident [signals bad karma]. They have been playing all night and have become thirsty. If their parents don’t offer them milkwater, then they suck on an empty tap and injure their mouths. That why we have to pour milk over the little balls constantly while reading the pecha. When I heard this story for the first time, I felt such pity for these little children that I wanted to learn this puja very badly. Besides, it’s very good for my dharma. And afterwards, we throw the little balls around the chörten for the pigeons to eat. Sometimes the dogs eat them. That is no good. The pigeons can fly away, and spread the Dharma over the world.

See also Ch.IV, The problems of language, teaching and practice.

Unfortunately, neither Sur, nor the Luthor and Tormathoong given below, were an entrance in the literature I consulted; nor did I come across any description of rituals that matched what I observed and was told by the anis. Consequently, I have to rely solely on my own information here.
When Samuel states that "it makes little sense, in many cases, to attribute any particular practice to one category [of orientation] or another" (Samuel 1993:172), we find in the ani's interpretation of Sur and Tormatkoonga a fine example of both a pragmatic and a karma orientation. Compassion with (and mercy for) hungry ghosts make of these practices meritorious acts, "good for the Dharma" (read: karma) of the practitioner as well as for the whole universe. As such, most of the elder anis, who already had served their terms in the gomba organisation and felt they had to prepare themselves for dying - i.e. to accumulate as much merit as possible for the rest of their life to secure a good rebirth - dedicated themselves to this daily routine of offering to the dead of the netherworld. In the example Ani Thupten Omu gives, however, Sur becomes a curing ritual. Two weeks of feeding the dead husband is presumably enough to get him off her sick friend's back. Here, as in all cases when a lay person sponsors with a specific deceased relative in mind, the ritual becomes predominantly pragmatic.

Although the karma orientation may have been taught by the Meme Lama as well, the daily performance of these rituals suggests that they were adopted by the Guru Lama as part of Tashi Gomba's monastic routine, now emphasising their quality as "dharma work". The integration pulled the anis out of the social realm of the village lama, back into the confines of their gomba. Besides, as they performed these kind of rituals on a daily basis, they became experts on these kind of rituals in their own rights. Consequently, the laity had the option to ask either the anis, or the village lama, or may be both - but then probably on an equal basis, as during the Bum puja I mentioned above.

A similar breaking-up of the village lama's monopoly occurred in the context of the gyewa. During the 1950s, this memorial rite had always been organised in the village gomba under the direction of the Meme Lama. In the next decade, however, gyewa pujaas shifted into the nunnery. This was not the result of deliberate competition with the village lama enacted by the Guru Lama, but the simple consequence of the latter's religious reputation. Having been known as a very learned monk and once a student of the Druga Rimpoche, he must have attracted more sponsors than the village lama. The anis welcomed this development for it meant that, since a gyewa took place in their own gomba, all the anis were to participate and all of them would be offered a payment and free meals too, whether they could actually read or not.

The shifting of gyewa from the village temple to the nunnery, however, did not necessarily result in a total exclusion of the village lama. A gyewa I witnessed in spring 1992 at the nunnery inspired me to imagine how the Meme Lama and the anis may have come to play complementary roles in this memorial rite under direction of the Guru Lama.

At gyewa I observed at the village temple in 1994, the Meme Lama would sit inside with his students leading the ceremony, while, the laity wandered in and out the gomba, chatting and socialising over constantly served buttertea, chang (beer) or arak (liquor). They would all gather inside to occupy every inch of the small temple for two kinds of reasons: to accompany the sponsor with a repetitious chanting of Om Mani Pe Me Hum, the mantra of the Buddha of Compassion, during those moments when he or she is invited to make offerings (chok) and prostrations to the gods. Together they plead the gods for mercy and compassion, and "to show the dead the right path through bardö." Also, the twice daily meals were served inside. The Meme Lama would take this opportunity to lecture on the meaning of bardö, on the importance of merit-making - as "a clean-washing of sin" - the karmic Wheel of Life and the six realms of existence. Only at the end of a ritual of one to three days duration, would the Meme Lama lead an outdoor ceremony. During this concluding rite, the torma (dough effigies) were brought outside and thrown on to a large fire (cf.Ortner 1978:108-9). Lured by the reading and chanting of the Meme Lama and his assistants, these effigies were to contain demons, who may have been attracted by the corpse to bother both the spirit on its way through bardö (trying to lead it astray) and the living.

Also during those three days of February 1992, the guests were strolling around the gomba square and 32 See next section on The community's internal organization.
the kitchen building, drinking and chatting. The gyewa had been requested by a Bigu Sherpa whose wife was dead and cremated in Kathmandu, where they had lived for the past three years. The memorial rite was to cover the last three days of his wife’s spirit through bardo, day forty-six to forty-nine. He told me he had preferred to have the gyewa at the

thulo gomba [“big” gomba, i.e. the nunnery] because here were many anis who can read the pecha and I am able to pay them all. Only the poor go down to the sano gomba [“small” gomba, i.e. village gomba].

At the big gomba, however, the guests were not invited to sit inside the duang; and neither was the Mème Lama. While the anis were reading and chanting, and the sponsor conducted his offerings and prostrations in front of the statues inside, the Mème Lama would gather the lay people on the verandah outside the duang to lead their Om Mani Pe Me Hum-m’mg. It was on the verandah too, that the laity was having their meals while the Mème Lama gave his teaching, making use of the frescoes on the porch walls. And above all, there was no big fire on gomba territory and no exorcism ritual. Instead, the torma were thrown away behind the temple hall to be eaten by the dogs, after which an ani waved an incense burner at the temple entrance.

During the gyewa at the nunnery, then, the Mème Lama was not so much excluded from the ritual as he was kept out of the temple hall. Added to the fact that he was nevertheless present to lead the congregation in their chanting part - and to give a teaching - as he would have done in the village gomba, makes clear that he and the anis fulfilled different tasks in the performance of this ritual. These different tasks emphasised a different orientation. In his capacity of village lama, the Mème Lama was to accommodate the pragmatic needs of the laity, who are only permitted as observers at ceremonies performed in a monastery and to pay reference to the gods and the lamas. Except for a sense of communitas their collective chanting created - particularly important in the case of death - and expressed their compassion with both the deceased and the family, it also had to support the sponsor’s plea to the gods to protect them against demons as well as to prevent the dead from becoming wandering ghosts. Monastics do not bother about these kind of this-worldly affairs in their collective rituals. The anis thus focused merely on the merit-making, i.e. the karmic part of the ritual, in order to secure a better rebirth for the dead woman.

It may well be possible that this fragmented form of the gyewa became common under the supervision of the Guru Lama. Like the exorcism rituals, treated above, he may have initiate a “clericalisation” (Samuel 1993:35) of the gyewa in favour of his monastic community.

Next to the “incorporation” of rituals the anis had learned from the Mème Lama, the Guru Lama also introduced new practices. The first to be mentioned was the annual Nyungne.

Nyungne is explicitly a microcosm of the highest ascetic ethic of the religion, normally observed only by monks and even higher adepts. The two renunciations of Nyungne, from food and conversation, embody the two basic dimensions of monasticism transposed into terms appropriate to the conditions of lay life. The abstention from conversation, symbolising the renunciation of social inter-

ornter describes how the gyewa in Solu Khumbu “are feasts which, in a variety of ways, deny social status and hierarchy” (1978:109).

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course, parallels the monk's more dramatic actions of breaking completely with family and society, and foreswearing marriage and the formation of new family bonds. The abstention from food, symbolising the renunciation of sensuous gratification, parallels the monk's more dramatic vow of celibacy and the renunciation of sexuality (Ortner 1978:43).

At Tashi Gomba, this purification ritual - to accumulate merit and to "wash away sin" as its present abbot put it - lasted eight to sixteen days, when observed by the whole community of anis. It is always counted in couples of one day of abstention of food and conversation and devoted to silent prayers and prostrations, one day of collective prayer, and being allowed to talk and eat however only white, i.e. pure food (rice porridge, curd, cucumber etc.). As a collective ritual it was sponsored by one main lay person, who would give a payment to each ani and donate the bulk of provisions needed to feed them. The participants of the gushi, set up with the introduction of Nyungne, would return their loans as well as pay their interests in kind just before its performance. Their contributions, mainly butter and tsampa, were used for tea, butter lamps and torma (effigies). The Bigu Sherpas, however, may have supported the ritual, they did not participate in the observance of Nyungne like the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu have been doing as reported by Fürer-Haimendorf (1964) and Ortner (1978). Here, those in late adulthood and old people would observe the Nyungne restrictions and practices, in an imitation of monastic, ascetic life (Ortner 1978:35). In Bigu, on the other hand, only the main sponsor would join the anis - and lama, if present - and even then not to its full extent. He or she would renounce food and conversation on the appointed days, but, instead of the praying and prostrating inside the temple, would circumambulate the temple hall while praying mantra on a rosary. No other lay person, whether gushi client or not, would do so. The reason is not simply to be found in my earlier conclusion, namely that the Bigu Sherpas were not particularly accustomed to religious, dharma, practice for Nyungne was only a recent introduction, by the Guru Lama - if we may believe the Meme Lama and Ani Dorje Dolma. Rather, the Guru Lama's attempts to create a solid monastic community with his anis excluded any participation by a laity - and certainly not inside the duang.

If the Guru Lama was such a dedicated adept of the Drugpa Rinpoche, as oral history would have it, then his introduction of Nyungne was certainly inspired by his guru lama. For it was said that the Drugpa Rinpoche had been dedicating his retreat at Phuma during the last years of his life in the performance of this purification practice. It may not be surprising, then, that Nyungne was not only practised collectively, once a year, but also became an option for individual retreat, tsam. With the permission of the abbot, an ani could be allowed to start a Nyungne tsam during the raining season. Its length would depend on her ability to supply herself with "white" food, her own capital and the support she might arrange with her parents and brothers, as well as her endurance - for, indeed, the physical demand of 108 prostrations to be performed every other day should not be underestimated (cf. Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:183; Ortner 1978:35). Usually, an ani would stop after the 32nd day.

Next to the Nyungne retreat, the Guru Lama taught the anis two other tsam. The shorter one called Tsam Nyenba is devoted to an emanation of Tara (Tib. Dolma), the consort of Pawa Chenrezig (Skt. Avalokitesvara) who is said to have sprung from his tears out of compassion for the suffering of living beings. During one month, the renunciate has to recite "the single most important canonical text of the

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31 It should be noted, however, that the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu observed their Nyungne practice in the village temple. Their religious practices have always been dominated by the Nyingma Pa, the "old school" of Tibetan Buddhism, with the non-celibate village lamas as their religious leaders. Nevertheless, according to Ortner the "ideals of monasticism", renunciation of lay, family, life and sexuality, "are [i.e. have become] the highest ideals of Sherpa religion" (1978:44). In Bigu, Nyungne was never introduced in the village gomba. The Meme Lama did not even manage to popularise a one-day puja, let alone a initiation into monastic life lasting several days, what is more, exemplified by women the laity was only beginning to respect as religious experts.

32 See Ch.IV, The problem of authority.
Tara cult, the *Hommages to the Twenty-one Taras*" (Beyer 1973:13), each day, and complete her day with praying the *Om Ami Deva Ri* mantra. This *pecha* is part of the *Kangyur*, the main body of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. As Tashi Gomba only got a *Kangyur* in 1986, I have to conclude that the Guru Lama brought this text with him on his flight from Tibet. It seems that he had a special bond with this deity. This may not be surprising because Tara is a central deity for both the Drugpa Kargyu subsect - in which he probably started his religious career - and to which the Drugpa Rimpoche adhered - and the Gelug Pa - by which he was trained several years, at Sera monastery in Tibet.

His personal devotion to Tara comes also to the fore with the relocation of Tara *puja* he initiated. As soon as his *simsung* (lama house) was redone, he moved this *puja* on the eighth day of each Tibetan month out of the *duang* and into the *simsung*. No ani could tell me his specific reason for this move. Considering the meaning of this *puja*, however, some speculations could be made. This eighth day of the waxing moon was devoted to a specific emanation of Tara, Kurukulla, the most potent deity of subjugation, that is to the Dharma. In his "Magic and Ritual in Tibet, the Cult of Tara", Beyer describes this tantric ritual as a magical device of coercion by "killing" those who ignore or resent the teachings of the Buddha, attack the person of a *guru*, show neither love nor compassion, or hold perverted views about *karma* and its effects (Beyer 1973:301-10). As a collective ritual, its aim is to convert, liberate, or "tame" all evil persons and malevolent spirits into the Dharma. As a tantric practice, the subjugating power the meditator gains through the visualisation of, and identification with, Kurukulla - and the Dakinis - can be used with a specific person in mind. My suggestion is, that with the shift of this practice to the *simsung* its evoked powers could be directed towards the laity who sought the Guru Lama's blessings and advice in this same reception room. Moreover, as Tara *puja* lends itself also for more pragmatic oriented goals, like a desire for a child (think of the Thakuri who donated land to the gomba), this recurring, monastic ritual had the special attention of lay people. From a more sophisticated, karmic, point of view, it opened them up to its converting, dharma-enforcing powers. In this way, the Guru Lama may have continued the Drugpa Rimpoche's efforts to "tame" the Bigu Sherpas to his "higher" form of Buddhism.

As a ritual against the three evils of ignorance, hate and envy - as an ani summarised it - but also against "those who break their vows and pledges" (ibid.:305), Tara *puja* could have served also as an disciplinary device for the anis. Once a month, it would remind them explicitly of the life they had chosen, and that in a room that left little space for distraction and relaxation. In addition, the Guru Lama gave most of the women whose hair he had cut a novice name that included "Dolma": Tsering Dolma, Pasang Dolma, Pema Dolma, etc. As if their name had to remind them that they had to be like Tara, compassionate with all those who suffer, and consequently like Kurukulla, who ended all suffering by subjugating the ignorant to the Dharma. It would take, however, some more time until the anis actually were accepted as religious advisors.

The longest *tsam* the Guru Lama introduced is called after its main deity Dorje Sempa (Skt. *Vajrasattva*). It is the basic initiation into *tantra*, a purification practice consisting of four different actions, which have to be repeated for a whole month. The first month, as one young ani explained to me, was called *Tsak Bum*, after the 11,100 prostrations that should be done while reciting a four-line *mantra* to Dorje.

7 The Guru Lama was said to have originated from Kham (Furer-Haimendorf 1976:126). According to Beyer, Kham (in eastern Tibet) was dominated by monasteries belonging to this sub-school, "the Drug Kaju" (Beyer 1973:21-6).

8 At the Guru Lama's time, the anis fitted into the *simsung's* shrine room, but this room became rather overcrowded when the community grew in the 1980s. In 1993, the Rimpoche resettled the Tara *puja* back to the *duang* again.

9 See Willis on these female "sky-goers", who represent "one of the most important, potent, and dynamic images/ideas/symbols within all of Tantra" (1987:57).

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Figure 5 Plan of Tashi Gomba in 1970
Chang, a Buddha of Confession (Samuel 1993:222). The renunciates count her prostrations on a rosary. The second month is called Igja, after the mantra of one hundred words they have to say 11,100 times dedicated to Dorje Sempa. The third month is called Mendell (mandala), after the mandala bowl of three rings, they have to fill, empty, and refill again - meditating on the impermanence of all things and beings - while citing another mantra to Dorje Sempa. The last month returns to Dorje Chang again, now called Lami Lamyur. The preceding months focused on purification, “a burning of the sins”, and offerings to the deities for help, as well as a more practical training of the mind in concentration. This last month is dedicated to the example of Dorje Chang. In him the anis have to see the Drugpa Rimpoche, their “root lama” (tsawé lama) and tantric master, “as an example of God in their own hearts”. His mind has to become their mind, his heart their heart. During this meditation they have to concentrate on the throat chakra, “where all the lies and bad words come from, and then they have to think that they burn these lies and bad words in fire”.

It will be clear that these retreats were only possible thanks to the privacy the anis could have in their own cells. When practising a tsam, she would lock herself into her small room, and put a small clay mandala on a shelf next to her door to warn another visitor not to disturb her. Nevertheless, in 1992 the anis complained about the difficulty of concentration. The voices and noises, and laughter of their neighbours were very distracting. As such, the later abbot’s main project was to be the building of a separate retreat house, tsam khang, more uphill. In spring 1995, it was ready. It consists of four small apartments, each with a bathroom, a kitchen - where also the assistant was to stay - and a meditation cell for the renunciate. Because it can only house four nuns in retreat at a time, it is used by older nuns who do a one-year tsam, while the other nuns still perform their, shorter, retreats in their rooms.

Particularly because of these retreats, the Guru Lama must have earned his title. When asked, the nuns would tell me that, in fact, their present abbot gives them more teachings and makes more disciplinary speeches than the Guru Lama did. Although both lamas had a Gelug Pa background, i.e. educated with an emphasis on the path of sutra, the Guru Lama was obviously much in favour of retreats, meditation and contemplation, the path of tantra. As probably his own desire to develop his tantric practice had brought him eventually to the Drugpa Rimpoche some twenty years earlier, he now was pursuing his guru lama’s lineage with the Bigu anis. In addition, it has to be noted that the Guru Lama also had to contend with problems of communication, certainly in those first years. The Même Lama had served as his interpreter in interaction with the laity, but it seems unlikely he also translated the abbot’s religious explanations and instructions for the anis - which he did not state either. Perhaps Kusho Pema, although a layman now, was still respected enough as the former abbot and a Rimpoche to stand in once in a while, but most probably it was Ani Hishi Dolma, who claimed to have travelled to Tibet and was said to have been quite learned, who assisted the Guru Lama in translating his Tibetan into Sherpa.

Furthermore, the Guru Lama’s adopting of the exorcism rituals and larger ceremonies like gyewa and Nyungne established a bond between the nunnery and the laity, however with distinctions that only enforced the religious authority of the monk lama and his monastics. In due time, the anis gained in respect. It never lead lay people to ask an ani for advice in personal (religious) matters - as they would do with the Guru Lama or the Même Lama - but certainly to a kind of reference towards them, and a trust in their religious knowledge and development. Parents gave their daughters permission to become an ani with more ease. They would also send their sons to the gomba to study the Tibetan alphabet and some basic pecha for some years with one of the older nuns. This development, however, only started in the early 1970s.

The dispersed land property of the gomba, the changes and innovations of religious practice, and the growing amount of anis soon asked for a more effective management. This meant a division of tasks among the anis.

41 See Ch. VIII, Lama Kelsand and his scheme.
42 See Ch. IV, The problems of language, teaching and practice.
The community's internal organisation

When the Guru Lama arrived at Tashi Gomba, three anis were more or less in charge of the community's daily affairs. One acted as a head nun (umse), a second was the overseer of the gomba supplies and the kitchen (niermu), and a third took care of the temple hall (konier). In 1960, he expanded these three posts with several other offices, according to the traditional hierarchy within Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, and put into a line of succession.

The three anis who occupied the three posts before 1960 were presumably appointed by Kusho Pema when he became Tashi Gomba's abbot (kempu). Ani Tsangzum Sangmo, at least, stated that she had been niermu (kitchen nun) for seventeen years, until she was released in 1960 (Fürer-Haimendorf 176:144). The appointed head nun seems to have been Ani Ngawang Chutin, the Tamang nun who entered Tashi Gomba in 1943, whose age and experience had made her the best nun for umse - according to a young ani who took care of her during her last years at Sailung Gomba in 1994. In practice, however, her job was probably focused on organisational affairs, the settling of disputes among the anis, and allocation of anis for rituals for lay people, in consultation with the Même Lama. However, the leading of the chanting during communal puja, an important task of an umse, may well have been performed by Ani Hishi Dolma from 1952 onwards. Who had been the konier who also performed certain priestly functions during puja, nobody remembered.

In 1960, probably in concert with Kusho Tsetsu and Kusho Tendzen, a nun from Tsum Gomba was transferred to Bigu, to act as a teacher (loben) and to help with the nunnery's internal reorganisation as umse. Her name was Ani Tsering Yangdzum, but was called Ani Purbu by the Bigu anis. With her, a line of succession was introduced by which every umse would hold her position for seven years. After this term, her office passed over to the ani next in line, not of age, but of date of enrolment. Within this context also the distinction between surba and thiba nuns is important.

A novice can be six or sixty years of age when joining the community, while another could only be sixteen, but when the younger one entered a year earlier than the older one, the younger will be the first to hold an office. Yet another distinction excluded some anis from the right and duty to hold an office at all. Surba nuns might be compared to the christian lay sisters. They differed from thiba anis in that they no longer felt capable of learning to read and to memorise the religious texts. Commonly, surba anis joined the community above the age of forty, and often as widows. Their social background, then, is often similar to March's “village anis” (1976:134) and Ortner's genchü (1978:35), as older women having decided to devote the rest of their lives to the Dharma. These, however, were not discriminated on the basis of knowledge and practice, for they were recorded to assist a village lama during rituals, and to take active part in the Nyungne ritual. Within the monastic community, however, they were discouraged in trying to learn how to read and, thus, to take full part in puja. Bigu anis held that persons beyond the age of forty are not able to learn new and difficult things such as an alphabet and another language. “My hair already turns grey, so my memory is failing me. I already have trouble to memorise pecha”, or “my eyes have become bad. It is too tiresome to read”, they would complain. Older novices were not expected to waste their time, but “to prepare themselves for death and dying” and a next life as an ani.

Surba nuns, then, were largely left to simple dharma practices like circumambulations, prostrations in reference to the gods, and the praying of one-line mantra on their rosary. During communal ceremonies in the duang, they would sit with the other anis, again praying their rosaries, and occasionally join in with chants and prayers they memorised from hearing them being sung by the thiba anis often enough. During these occasions, they would be served buttertea and food from the gomba kitchen like the rest of the nuns. A share in the harvest as a gomba contribution to the anis' life subsistence, however, was denied to them.

44 See Ch.V, The anis of 1952.
45 See Ch.VII, The rise and fall of Sailung Gomba.
However, as in recent years no “old” woman had joined the community of Tashi Gomba, the distinction between surba and thiba disappeared. The younger nuns, who had enrolled from 1980 onwards, only guessed the difference to be between those who had taken the monastic vows (rabzung) and those who had not done so, or not yet. While the women who could be assigned as surba at Tashi Gomba indeed had not taken the vows, this was not the criterion as Fürer-Haimendorf mentions that “some of the surba living outside the gompa precincts have taken the rabzung vow” (1976:136). The older nuns immediately pointed out Tashi Dolma - who entered as a widow in 1968, together with her ten-year old daughter (ibid.:138) - and Nim Pasang’s widow as the two surviving surba ansis of Tashi Gomba. By 1992, they were the only ones who could not read pecha, did not even participate in joined rituals, and had not held any office within the community’s hierarchy.

I have used the phrase “taking the vows” as a synonym for “becoming a nun”. This requires, however, some extension, as it might lead to confusion. When a woman’s desire to join a monastic community is admitted by the abbot, he will cut a truss of her hair - to be finished off by an ani afterwards - and ask her ceremonially to take refuge in the “Three Jewels”, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and to comply with the rules of the gompa. Then, the lama blesses her and gives her a new name. With this ceremony, she has become a novice (gyengi, “living by virtue”). The rabzung vow, however, signifies a total commitment to the ten precepts and the eight gurudhammas (D.Paul 1979; Tsomo 1997). Besides, they have to swear they have never committed a major crime, like homicide, in their life, that they are not married and that they have the permission of their parents to take the vows. As such, the objections of the parents (or elder brother, or uncle, in case of an orphan) is not necessarily an obstruction to women from entering a nunnery, but it can be at their rabzung ceremony. Generally, however, parents have already accepted their daughter’s choice by then. Most Bigu nuns, however, had understood little of the vows they had sworn. They said they were told to answer the lamas with the Tibetan word for “I will”, and remembered only to have repeated this answer about twenty-five times, but nothing of the explanations they had been given with each vow.

A rabzung has to be administered by at least ten lamas of the rank of gelung. Whenever such an assembly occurs, whether specifically organised for a rabzung ceremony (usually in Kathmandu) or during a gathering at a pilgrimage site, the Bigu novices will take the opportunity to take the vows, while others may be wanting to repeat them in front of other lamas of higher religious esteem. In some cases, gyengi who take their rabzung have only been at Tashi Gomba for a couple of weeks, others may have been waiting for years to get the opportunity. “The requirement of scriptural knowledge”, Fürer-Haimendorf noted in Khumbu (1964:143-5), however, never played a role in Bigu. The rabzung vow has an important religious significance, but had little effect on the clerical organisation of the Bigu community as it neither implied a spiritual or scholarly advancement, nor resulted in a change in status, rights or duties. The ansis who have taken the vows received again a new name, but this second religious name was seldom used by, or even known to, the other nuns.

Although the rabzung vow is not a requirement to gain the right of holding a post in the community’s organisational framework, all the nuns were given the opportunity to take the vows before they start their office careers. To be a thiba, however, has been obligatory, because some posts required the ability to read. Especially the post of umse, whose main duty is to lead the puja. She has to have an extensive knowledge of the scriptures, to know which prayers have to be recited and chanted in which order at specific rituals. Her voice has to be trained as well, for she is the precentor who also sets the pace of the chanting with the help of a small drum or a pair of cymbals. Besides, she also has to organise rituals requested by lay persons, and will, together with the lama, make a choice for the relevant puja to be performed - whether the ritual is meant to be for a cure, the initiation of a new house, directed against ghosts or spirits, to mention the most common applications - assigning the best day according to Tibetan astrology, as well as appointing the anis who enacts it. Especially when more than one ritual has to take place on the same date, it is necessary to compose teams of nuns who equal their ability of performing the ritual, or to
postpone a puja when it leaves too few nuns at the gomba itself. She also has the right to give nuns permission for leave, to go on a pilgrimage or to visit their family.

Although these decisions are often made in consideration with the kempu, abbot, she has to be one of the most knowledgable nuns of the community. Usually, a nun gains the necessary experience in the years before her becoming umse, but when the Guru Lama started to reorganise Tashi Gomba, he needed the assistance of a nun knowledgable of the ins and outs of monastic tasks, who was not available in Bigu at that time. This is why Ani Purbu was brought in from Tsum Gomba, which had a separate nunnery as an annex to its monastery. She guided the Bigu anis in their offices, and extended their knowledge of religious texts.

Ani Purbu held the office of head nun at Tashi Gomba from 1960 until 1967. “She died in 1968, one year after Hishi Dolma became umse”, Ani Urken Palmo recalls. The succession of the umse’s position over the years was as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Umse</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ani Purbu</td>
<td>1960-1967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hishi Dolma</td>
<td>1967-1973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorje Dolma</td>
<td>1973-1980;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with Dorje Dolma, the umse term is shortened from seven to three years and an assistant, utchung, was added.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ani</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sherap Omu</td>
<td>1980-1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sange Gyelmu</td>
<td>1983-1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urken Dolma</td>
<td>1986-1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tserap Sangmo</td>
<td>1989-1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urken Palmo</td>
<td>1992-1995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two offices next in hierarchy were the position of kutum (or gerku), the disciplinarian, and of niermu, the kitchen nun. The kutum assisted the umse in several tasks, such as the appointment of anis for sponsored rituals, deciding when to have a break during long pujas, and deciding, together with the head nun, on the punishment given to a nun who broke a rule. According to Fürer-Haimendorf, minor offenses, such as “[c]ausing dissension among the nuns by telling tales”, would be punished by a temporal suspension from gomba services and communal activities (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:134), which meant no accumulation of merit by partaking in rituals and no meals sponsored by either the gomba or a lay person. The suspension would be discontinued after the punished nun offered tea during an atonement ceremony (mangse) for all anis, which included 108 prostrations and the presentation of a ceremonial scarf, a kata, to the Guru Lama. For major offenses, such as theft, or a love-affair, a nun could be expelled permanently. However, before leaving she would be forced to wear a torn cap, called tsapani, and circum­bulate the gomba three times. After having been shamed publicly, she had to pay a fee to the gomba, which could be as much as 1000 Rps., in 1974 a lofty sum of money.

I myself, however, found the two kutum I experienced during their duties rather gentle. Torn caps were not remembered by any ani I asked, but they mentioned instead the use of whips in former days, a tough one for the major offenses, and a soft one for minor offenses. As they were not able to show them to me, I am afraid they were pulling my leg here. At some occasions, a nun would be seriously reprimanded by the kutum for not upholding the rules of silence, or for sitting on an elevated place such as a wall or a door step, during Nyungne. Also when improper behaviour towards men, leading to gossip, was assumed, the kutum would warn the nun in question in discrete privacy. Punishment for an acknowledged love affair, as Fürer-Haimendorf mentions, however, was laughed off.
Anis who have a love-affair just run away. Sometimes she, or her family, pays the fine after some years and also gives some money to perform *mange* for her without her herself being there. Sometimes she just moves to Kathmandu and we never see her here again. You don’t get a chance to punish her, the *kutum* of 1994 remarked.

In fact, most cases of dissension, I witnessed, were often caused by the *kutum* herself, as the outcome of a disagreement between her and the *umse*. Conflicts and disputes between nuns were seldom arbitrated by the *kutum*, but usually by the *umse*. In unremitting cases, the abbot - or even the Tulku - will interfere, or, in their absence, a meeting with all the anis who had held the position of *umse* once would try to solve the problem, chaired by the Même Lama. When we accept Fürer-Haimendorf’s account on the *kutum* and the disciplinary measures she had at hand, and assume that the anis had their reasons for not recalling the instances rendered by Fürer-Haimendorf, we have to conclude that the *kutum* had more responsibility and authority during the 1960s than she had during the 1990s. This assumption could be subscribed by two factors. First of all, discipline was what the community needed during the 1960s in order to make the organise and ensure the changes the Guru Lama initiated. The ringing of the morning bell by the *kutum*, in which capacity she was called the *tilbu*, had been one of the innovations to discipline the nuns of getting up before dawn to start their morning prayers, individually in their own rooms. During the Guru Lama’s absence in overseeing Sailung Gomba’s construction during the 1970s, this habit bogged down, but by that time the morning prayers were already such a routine, and if oversleeping, a nun would be woken by her neighbour’s activity in the anything but sound-proof rooms. Contacts with lay men, which had been frequent during the absence of an abbot at the gomba and during rituals for lay people under direction of the Même Lama, became restricted and controlled. With the building of the two rows of rooms, with a porch entrance at the gomba-square side, men were forbidden to enter this ani compound, and certainly not to sleep there. Some nuns recalled a time when they were all told to stay overnight in the *duang*, because men were lodging in the guest house, even when they were only little boys. I have not been able to check this account, but problems with the vow of celibacy were not unknown in the history of Tashi Gomba. Moreover, the community’s image and monastic identity had to be safeguarded, particularly after the 1950s.

A second aspect of the *kutum*’s stronger authority may be derived from the fact that the disciplinarians of the 1960s had been older than they are since the 1970s. In the 1960s, many of the nuns were older than thirty-five years - as most of them had been older than twenty-five in 1952 - with a new influx of mostly young women between sixteen and twenty-four of age. As the term of this office lasted only one year, its succession went rather rapidly. In 1992, a nun was only in the *gomba* for eight years, and about twenty-six years old when she became *kutum*. The authority she had to radiate was in opposition to the socially accepted respect of age, so that she would seldom feel inclined to reprimand the older anis, that is, about half of the community. When necessary, she preferred to leave this up to the *umse*.

Besides assisting the *umse* in religious organisational matters, the *kutum* would also help the kitchen nun in organising teams of anis to fetch the harvest from the gomba fields and firewood for the gomba kitchen, and other labour-intensive jobs.

In addition, the *nierrmu* also holds her post of kitchen nun for only one year. Her responsibility consist of cooking and serving meals and butteer tea on communal rituals to all the anis, and to receive guests properly with tea, *chang*, and meals. As such, she is also responsible for the processing of the gomba land’s produce, such as the threshing and grounding of cereals and its roasting into *tsampa*, the drying of turnips, potatoes and tea leaves, the cleaning of butter, the making of *chang*, and to use the food supplies as economically as possible. Storage was on the upper floor of the kitchen, and in order to guard it, the *nierrmu* had to live in the kitchen during the whole year of her duty. In her tasks, she is assisted by the
nieryok, and by other anis when the jobs to be done needed many hands. The niermu supervised these activities, but also when lay people came to the gomba to sponsor a ritual. She would give them instructions on the kind and quantity of the food required, and manage the cooking and distribution of the food. The lay women involved usually help out with the preparations, and as they often have a close relative among the anis, this ani would help them and the niermu as well.

The umse, the kutum, and the niermu are the three nuns responsible for the management of the gomba, its resources, its division of labour, and the supervision of the nuns. The succession of the posts went from kutum (one year), toniermu (one year) to umse (seven years). Before becoming a kutum, however, an ani had to hold the post of chöben for one year, which consists of performing certain priestly functions during puja. She enacts the offerings to the deities, the burning of incense, the distribution of implements to the anis and lamas, such as grains, sacred water, and the bells (ghanta), at specific moments during the ritual. In addition, she had to supervise the preparation and burning of the butter lamps, and to manage the donations of lay people in return for butter lamps and kata (ceremonial shawls).

In her duties, the chöben is assisted by two nuns, who play the conch-shells (tungba) at the beginning and during rituals to invite the deities to join their performance of the Dharma, and by the konier, the sacristan. The konier is in the first place “responsible for keeping the gompa hall and altars clean and in good order” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:135), but has two additional religious duties too. She has to fill the water bowls in the duang, the mani-house, and the simsung in offering for the Gods every morning, and to empty them every afternoon. The water, she has to fetch in a large brass pot from the well, “symbolises all the various offerings which according to Buddhist belief are the dues of the deities worshipped in the gompa” (ibid.:135). One hour before sunset, she performs solely a ritual for the Srungma Chudin, the protective deity of the gomba imaged by a terrifying painting in a wooden case in the right corner of the altar. With these tasks, konier-ship is a highly responsible job as it bears the responsibility for the benevolence and protection of the deities for the gomba; the konier works on a daily base as an intermediary between the gods and the monastic community. Knowing this, Fürer-Haimendorf’s remark that “[f]or the post of konier the nuns usually choose a woman of no great intellectual ability, but strong and dependable, and above willing to take on what is undoubtedly the most onerous task in the maintenance of the gompa as a tidy and dignified place of worship” (ibid.:135) seems to me not only insulting the anis who I know to have been konier, but also is to be dismissed as definitely untrue. Besides, the anis did not choose the konier-to-be.

Whereas the succession of all the other offices followed a strict and obligatory line from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Years to</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tungba</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chöben</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kutum</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niermu</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umse</td>
<td>7 years - after 1973, 3 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the position of konier was, until 1993, held on a voluntary base. I interviewed three nuns, who had held this post for many years. Two expressed their choice in very practical terms. The succession of all the other offices would take, after the reduction of the umse term from seven to three years in 1973, eight years. Due to the fact that the community witnessed more than one new member per year since the 1970s, the succession of the offices has been spread over as much as twenty years. By implementation of the Guru Lama, a konier could fulfil the obligatory years of offices consecutively, that is eight years. At the time of Fürer-Haimendorf’s visit to Tashi Gomba, AniTuchi Dolma already held the office of sacris­tan for twelve years, thus having covered her obligatory years of duty. She “repeatedly expressed the wish of being replaced” (ibid.:135), but she had to wait another two years, before another nun was willing to
Ani Kancchi was konier from 1976 to 1984, followed up by Ani Pasang Dolma from 1984 to 1992. The motivations of their choice were “to get done and over with the duties as quickly as possible, so that they would be free to do whatever they wanted ever after”. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the implications of this presumed freedom. It will suffice here to state that the choice for konier was not made on the base of the konier’s responsibilities and religious importance, as these were counterbalanced by, what Fürer-Haimendorf rightly stated as, the “most onerous task” in the community. It should be notified that a konier had no day off during all those years as the water offerings and the srungma puja had to be performed every day. Only in case of emergency, such as severe illness, somebody else might take over her task temporarily.

Only one nun expressed explicit religious motivation for becoming konier. In 1986, the Guru Lama decided to have a separate konier for the simsung, who would also be his caretaker and cook. He appointed one ani for the job, but when he died soon afterwards, she quit her duties, and the duang konier took that part back again. After a year, however, Ani Sonam Dolma became seriously ill, and the Tulku, according to her own account, suggested its cause was her disobedience. Filled with shame, she took up the job again, and bought additional water bowls for the shrine in the simsung to reach the sacred number of 108. She made the vow to fill and empty these 108 bowls one bum times, i.e. 11,100 times. After about three and a half years, she got so used to the routine, that she explained she felt a headache every time she did not perform the water offerings. All her energy and concentration were focused on the water bowls, and so she became one of the most devoted, but also most puritan, anis of the community. She openly condemned other nuns of their laziness and enjoyment of spare time, and even scolded visiting monks for the use of my radio.

The establishment of the offices not only organised the community, but, in holding these offices already from an early stage of their nunhood, the anis became a disciplinary device by themselves. From helping the chöben, to becoming responsible for religious actions, from helping the niemnu, to being responsible for the produce and distribution, from assisting the umse as kutum, to leading the religious sermons and the religious community, each fully-fledged nun became educated in the economic, organisational, disciplinary, and religious tasks of the community, and learned to bear the responsibility for the well-being of their gomba. As the upkeep of a religious institution is interpreted as an act of dharma, a good execution of the duties, as well as the respect for those in office, were considered to render religious merits as much as religious practice in itself would pertain. This interpretation, however, served more often as a sop - by the Même Lama and the present abbot - and a device by the anis themselves to keep their duties up while actually feeling fed up with them, than that the nuns considered it as religious practice pur sang. With the years, the community grew and the relations to the outside world became more complex. Many of the anis did not feel able to cope with the equally growing responsibilities, partly because they also felt they were lacking the proper knowledge to conduct their duties effectively: a knowledge of languages, of reading and writing, and of doing sums. Older anis complained that these duties kept them from religious practice proper. As such, the offices were very often experienced as a trial, a necessary evil. In the next chapter, we will see how these duties, together with the arduous construction activities, led to a generational conflict between the anis of 1952 and those who enroled after 1960. In Chapter VIII, I will return to the growing need for “secular” knowledge.

Reflection

The developments described in this chapter suggest a transformation of the nuns’ community from a group of women held loosely together by the Meme Lama’s activities as a village lama, into a monastic community led by the Guru Lama. Thanks to his efforts, and his personal reputation, Tashi Gomba acquired a religious reputation and identity of its own. Religious practices, the anis had learned to perform by the Meme Lama, were adopted into monastic practices or, to use Samuel’s expression, “clerical-
ised". The separation of these rituals from the social realm into the monastic realm also procured the supplementing of the pragmatic orientation that dominated their usage for the laity, with a karmic interpretation of the rituals. This higher level of orientation both disciplined the anis into their monastic habitus, and emphasised their religious expertise vis-à-vis the Memé Lama and his lay students.

The expansion of religious practices, especially the meditational retreats, were, on one hand, only possible because of the improved living conditions of the anis which offered (more or less) each of them the privacy needed to meditate. On the other hand, they also caused a renewed influx of novices and, as such, more housing facilities for these newcomers. Similarly, the incomes of both the community as a whole, as of the anis individually increased - although still not sufficiently to support them on a daily basis, was nevertheless enough to create the impression of a flourishing gomba.

For the first time in its history, then, Tashi Gomba seemed to live up to its name as a "heavenly garden", where the Dharma would prosper as the Drugpa Rimpoche had wished for. In following his example, the Guru Lama not only continued to promote the Dharma among the Bigu laity, but also the path his guru had preferred, that is the path of tantra. However, this emphasis on meditation and retreat would already churn up the community in the following decade.

One could speculate on what would have happened if the Guru Lama had not returned to Bigu. The lack of a new influx during the 1950s suggests again a course towards extinction of the community in time. Perhaps the community would once in a while have attracted a widow, just as the life of a village nun had appealed to older women in other Sherpa areas, but I am inclined to think that the community would have dispersed and would finally have been reduced to a few nuns keeping up the gomba and its main activities as water offerings and burning butter lamps. This is now the case at Sailung Gomba, the monastery that was supposed to reduce Tashi Gomba to an annex of a monks' community. The impact of this gomba on Tashi Gomba of the 1970s, and the Guru Lama's role in it, are the subject of the next chapter.