House of birds: A historical ethnography of a Tibetan buddhist nunnery in Nepal
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Introduction

During the 1960s, the Guru Lama had done everything that was within his power to construct a monastic habitus in Tashi Gomba. Thanks to his efforts, and his mere presence, the nuns' community gained a reputation of serious religious practitioners not only among the Bigu laity, but throughout the region. Both his personal repute and his religious instruction - notably his emphasis on meditation and retreat - however, contained the seeds of conflict which would germinate during the next decades.

The first event to bring the improvements at Tashi Gomba to a halt was the founding of Sailung Gomba in 1970. This new gomba was to complement the nunnery with a monks' community, equally under the Guru Lama's supervision. A second factor disturbing the religious community's newly established reputation resulted from the influx of young novices the Guru Lama's presence and innovation had brought about. The differences in motivation for, and expectation of, a life as an ani between those nuns who had entered before 1953 and those who had come after 1959 caused a true generation gap. Whereas the older generation learnt their lama's lessons on karma and adopted his preference for the path of tantra, the younger generation developed a taste for study and the exploration of the wider world. These different interpretations of a religious life came to the fore in the commotion around the umse (head nun) succession of 1973, and in what I will call the Dharamsala conflict among the anis of Tashi Gomba in 1976.

As such, Fürer-Haimendorf's conclusion was already superseded the moment his essay appeared, namely that

many of the nuns have travelled in India, Sikkim or Bhutan. Yet, these experiences do not seem to make them restless, and the nuns, at least, seem to be very content with their peaceful life at Tashi gompa. The large proportion of young nuns would seem to indicate that despite the awareness of the outside world there is as yet no trend away from monastic ideals such as has become apparent in the case of Tengboche and other monastic centres of Khumbu and Solu. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:152)

Fortunately, however, the Dharamsala conflict did not initiate an exodus comparable to monasteries in Solu Khumbu. In fact, the population of Tashi Gomba would only increase substantially until well in the 1990s. The reason was that the anis may have become aware of the outside world, but the outside world was not yet intruding into their world. Except for Fürer-Haimendorf himself, who, particularly through his publication, may himself have played a role in the process of growing restlessness.

1 See The Dharamsala conflict below.
2 Devuche, Tengboche's annex of nuns, for instance, was already from the 1960s onwards waning. Ortner counted only thirteen anis in the early 1970s (Ortner 1981:101), while in 1995 Devuche only consisted of half a dozen aged anis (personal communication with Jim Schellenger and Tshering Sherpa). Devuche clearly did not attract new novices anymore, and as such resembled the Tashi Gomba of the 1950s.
The rise and fall of Sailung Gomba

The story of Sailung Gomba, the youngest shoot of the Drugpa Rimpoche's lineage at five-day hiking distance eastward from Bigu, is not only significant for the effects it had on Tashi Gomba, but also offers interesting comparisons to the nunnery's history.

About Sailung Gomba's founding Fürer-Haimendorf writes

[…] there are indications that the influence of Kusho Tsetsu, and the dedicated nuns of Tashi gompa has been instrumental in the establishment of a new monastic centre at Sailung right in the heart of Tamang country. There used to be an old gompa inside Dorumba village, and some years ago a Tamang donated a site on a nearby hill in the name of Kusho Tsetsu, who provided the inspiration and initiative for the plan of establishing a larger gompa (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:153).

The major feature of Sailung Gomba was that it was a Tamang affair, not a Sherpa as Tashi Gomba had been. Not only did a Tamang man offer the land for the monastery to be built, but also

local Tamangs of the Sailung area collected funds for the construction of the new gompa, and some people gave as much as Rs.200-300 or substantial quantities of rice to feed the construction workers (ibid.:153).

Tamangs are, like the Sherpas, a Tibeto-Burman speaking and Buddhist ethnic group said to have migrated from Tibet. Unlike the Sherpas, however, Tamangs were never engaged in orthopraxis forms of Buddhism such as renunciation, celibacy and monasticism (see Holmberg 1989). They never seemed to have maintained relationships with monasteries in Tibet, nor initiated the founding of monastic institutions, as the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu did. However, also in other Tamang regions a "gradual transformation toward monasticism" was noticed during the same period (Holmberg 1989:233). As in Sailung, where Fürer-Haimendorf granted Kusho Tsetsu the initiative of founding a monastery, in the Gorkha district a high lama also played a crucial role.

The Dukpa [i.e.Drugpa, Bhutanese] school of lamas has become prominent in the greater western Tamang region through the activities of their millennial guru. He was a respected teacher until his departure at age ninety-six for more important Buddhist sites; during his residence - with two "nuns" - he held numerous retreats and initiated some fifteen Tamang lamas. He also embellished the lore of local geography by linking it to Buddhist prophesies and legend (ibid.:233).

An equation of Kusho Tsetsu and this guru lama from Gorkha, however, falls short on the basis of the local population's acquaintance with monasticism. The Gorkha lama's appropriation of the local religious landscape and his reputation as a man of retreats resembles the activities of the Drugpa Rimpoche in Bigu in the early 1930s, since both men had to introduce monastic, clerical, Buddhism into an area that was governed by village lamas and shamans. Sailung, on the other hand, was not as unfamiliar with monastic life anymore. Kusho Tsetsu's founding act was already paved by the very existence of Tashi Gomba and, more importantly, by the Tamang anis who were part of its religious community. I would like to argue, therefore, that only Kusho Tsetsu's position and authority as supervisor of the Drugpa

3 The "millennial guru" of Bhutanese origin, Holmberg mentions here, as well as the area of his activities, the Gorkha district in which also Tsum Gomba is situated, made me consider whether this guru lama may have been Kusho Tendzen. Kusho Tsetsu's brother who moved to Tsum after a love affair with an ani and was never heard of thereafter. Holmberg, however, offers no detailed information on which this idea could be substantiated.

4 See Ch.III, The recognition of the valley's sacredness.
Rimpoche's gombas granted him the honour of having founded Sailung Gomba, but that the actual work had been conducted by the oldest Tamang nun of Tashi Gomba.

In 1953, Fürer-Haimendorf met two nuns from Tashi Gomba in a Tamang village on his way to Khumbu (see Fürer-Haimendorf 1964). Their "statement that in Bigu gompa Sherpa and Tamang nuns lived side by side, for I had been under the impression that these two ethnic groups, though both professing Buddhism, seldom joined in the creation of religious communities" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:122), in fact, had brought him to Bigu in 1974 for short-term research. The presence of Tamang anis at Tashi Gomba clearly predated a Tamang development towards monasticism, to a time when it must have been as uncommon for a Tamang woman to become a nun as it had been for a Bigu Sherpa woman. To join a Sherpa-dominated religious institution this far away from home, however, asked for a profound decision of the first Tamang woman in particular to set an example. Her name was Ani Ngawang Chutin.

Based on the little information available, it seems that Ani Ngawang Chutin's personal history had been decisive in making her the first Tamang nun of Tashi Gomba. Before she became a nun in 1944, at the age of thirty, Ngawang Chutin had worked many years at the royal palace in Kathmandu as a maid. She was originally from the Charikot area - a five hours walk from Sailung. When she heard about Tashi Gomba, which was then still under construction, she requested leave from royal service from the King, which he granted. Two month later, she moved permanently to Tashi Gomba (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:139). Had she been "pushed into the position of servitude or slavery as many non-Hindus in the plains were forced to" (Bista 1991:42)? In any case, to this aging spinster already living away from her home and family for so long, nunhood seemed to be an attractive alternative.

Ani Ngawang Chutin seems to have maintained (or re-established?) contacts with her relatives in her home area, for she enjoyed the support of her two brothers who "send her cash, grain and butter" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:139). Whether they had done so from the day she had become a nun onwards - in other words, whether her status as a celibate, religious woman was accepted by her family from the onset - remains unclear. Fact is that for twenty years she remained the only Tamang ani at Tashi Gomba. Only in 1964 she managed to recruit another Tamang novice, a seven year old child for that matter, her orphaned niece (her brother's daughter). In 1966, a young Tamang woman became a nun "when in the company of some older nuns from Temal [?] she first visited Tashi gompa" (ibid.:141). In the same year, a Tamang widow from Sailung joined Bigu's religious community after "[t]he Guru Lama and Kusho Tsetsu had visited her village and had accepted her as a nun", to be followed by her brother's daughter in 1969 (ibid.:145). They all originated from the same area between Charikot and Sailung. What is striking is that not one Tamang woman from the Bigu valley has ever joined the nunnery, although the valley knew several Tamang families. The family network of Ani Ngawang Chutin, then, seems to have been crucial to the recruitment of Tamang anis.

Ani Ngawang Chutin, however, was not only engaged in recruiting and fund collecting activities in her home area. She must have been the key figure in Sailung Gomba's founding, since Tashi Gomba also had several Sherpa anis from the Sailung area, but it had been a Tamang, and not a Sherpa, who donated the land for the monastery. One might ask what had motivated her. No doubt, Ani Ngawang Chutin was a very religious woman; perhaps she wanted her people to convert to the monastic Buddhism she had come to known. Perhaps her reasons were based on ethnic grounds, maybe Tamang and Sherpa anis did not live harmoniously side-by-side as it may have appeared to Fürer-Haimendorf. Understandably, there

5 In this context I wonder what the role of the two "nuns" Holmberg only describes as companions of his "millennial guru" (1989:233; see quote above) has been in their guru's founding of the "Dukpa school". Despite his writing "nuns" between inverted commas, they were important enough to be mentioned.
6 See also Ch.V, The anis of...
are no reports on dissensions between the nuns of Tashi Gomba based on their ethnic background - since this past belonged to a social world that was renounced by their vows - during those years, urging Ani Ngawang Chutin to enact a separation of Tamang and Sherpas anis by fighting for a Tamang gomba in their home area. However, in 1986 a dramatic event would bring Sailung Gomba to a fall, which evidently led to disturbed relationships between the Sherpa and the Tamang anis, and between the Sherpas and Tamangs of Sailung.

To understand what happened to Sailung Gomba in 1986, we have to return to the Tamang man who is considered to be the lay founder of the monastery. Whatever Ani Ngawang Chutin's reputation and actual role may have been, the Tamang's willingness to agree to such an unusual act as founding a monastery had to be based on a strong personal inclination too. Although we came to know little about this man, it was in fact the 1986 event that revealed his political agenda, a motivation which made him in many ways comparable to the lay founder of Tashi Gomba, Nim Pasang.8

In 1986, the Guru Lama died at Sailung Gomba. A Bigu Sherpa, whose father had been a close friend to the Guru Lama, recalled,

Nepal was not a democracy then yet - it is now, since four years - but at that time it had the panchayat system. The king was the only ruler, but each panchayat could choose its own village panchayat chairman. Then, just before the Guru Lama's death, there were elections, and a Tamang man wanted the lama to support him publicly. But the lama did not want to. He said that, as a lama, he did not want to get involved with politics. The Tamang man got very angry with him. I do not think that he really killed or poisoned the lama, but due to these events the lama had a heart attack, or something like that. A week after these quarrels, he died. That is what my father told me.

Where this Sherpa tried to avoid an accusation of murder, a Sherpa ani (now in her sixties) made the Tamang directly responsible for the Guru Lama's death, by shifting the date of his passing away immediately after the Tamang man visit. She still had to suppress her indignation.

The Guru Lama died on the day when people from a certain party came to ask him and his monks for their votes. He said he did not care for politics, and he did not care what his monks would do. He did not want to vote. But of course they knew that if he would not vote, his monks would not either. One Tamang went to see him at night, to persuade him, and in the morning his monks found him dead. He sat like a Buddha, as if he was meditating, but he was dead.

The old painter, the Meme Khepa - who had been working on Sailung Gomba's frescoes, but had not been there during these dramatic event - even mentioned the occurrence of violence.

When the lama refused to vote for the Tamang, this man got very angry. He said the lama owed that to him, because he had donated so many things to the gomba. When the lama still refused, he went away but came back late at night with his gang and they stole all the statues and all the pecha. They plundered the gomba. The Guru Lama became afraid and locked himself up in his upstairs room. The next day, they [i.e. police officers] found him there, dead. They took Sange Lama [then a monk at Sailung] to the police station, to make a statement about the Meme Lama's death.

From the Tamang man's insistence on the support of the Guru Lama and its monks I conclude that Sailung Gomba played a major role in his political rally. This was hardly limited to his efforts to collect votes for the elections of 1986, but must have already been reasoned the Tamang's initiative in founding

8 See Ch.II.
the gomba in 1970. Certainly he knew the “success story” of Tashi Gomba of a Sherpa eventually becoming mizar. Perhaps Ani Ngawang Chutin reminded him of it in order to ensure his support; perhaps he even had met the lay founder of Tashi Gomba, Nim Pasang, personally, or the latter’s son and grandson, the actual mizar of the Bigu valley on their regular visits to the district’s capital, so close to Sailung. His political ambitions were clearly as strong as those of Nim Pasang, and most probably based on the same grounds. For, although the Nepal state had undergone a big change with the demise of the Rana regime in 1951, on local level “the rivals for power in the village in the 1970s remained the direct descendants of the most prominent headmen of the Rana era [...] local Bahun (Brahman), Jaisi Bahun, and Chetri” (Holmberg 1989:47). The Tamang man, however, was not running for mizar, the best position available to a non-Hindu like Nim Pasang in the 1930s, but strived for the position of pradhan panchayat, chairman of his administrative village: not a governmental designation, but an eligible position for which he needed votes from the local people.

Taking into account that Sailung and its surrounding villages also had a substantial Sherpa population, it is obvious that the Guru Lama’s political support was instrumental to the Tamang man assuring Sherpa votes - the votes of the Sailung monastic community in itself would hardly make a difference, since it only consisted of six monks, two Tamang, four Sherpa. The Tamang man, however, did not reckon with the Guru Lama, a man of high principle when it came to the monastic rule of renouncing the social world, and certainly of political involvement which would only cause a disturbed state of mind and fractions within a monastic community. The Tamang’s pressure turned out to be counter-productive, to say the least. Whether it involved physical violence or not, his insistence and the abbot’s passing away shortly after were interpreted as cause and effect by the Sherpas of Sailung, and of Bigu. Needless to say that he never made it to pradhan panchayat.

The Guru Lama’s death and the Sherpas blaming the Tamang man and his supporters for it had severe consequences for both Sailung Gomba and Tashi Gomba. For one, both gombas lost their abbot. The Guru Lama was replaced by Lama Kelsang, the kempu of Yelmu Gomba and Kusho Tsetsu’s assistant and interpreter who from the late 1970s onwards started to travel around the world to give teachings and lead initiations. This latter occupation already left him little time to spend at Yelmu, let alone to divide his time among three gombas in Nepal’s foothills at considerable distance from each other. Tashi Gomba had become a thriving community by that time, so he tried to spend at least a month per year at the nunnery. Sailung Gomba, however, was left to fizzle out. Of the six monks, one became Lama Kelsang’s assistant in Kathmandu, three left the robes, and only two already aged monks remained. They were joined by an old nun from Tashi Gomba, Ani Ngawang Chutin.

She was not the only ani who moved to Sailung. Already during Sailung Gomba’s construction phase, both Sherpa and Tamang nuns of Tashi Gomba who originated from the Sailung area were sent there for help.

There was the intention that the gompa should ultimately be staffed by monks, but as it takes time to collect sufficient monks for the establishment of a new monastery, nuns from Tashi gompa have taken it on themselves to look after the new religious centre. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:153)

That was observed in 1974, and no doubt the Sailung anis continued to spend a few months a year in Sailung until the gomba’s ramne (consecration) by the Tulku in 1981. What is conspicuous, however, is that none of the Tamang nuns who were in Fürer-Haimendorf’s listing, were still at Tashi Gomba at my

\footnote{See Ch.II, Nim Pasang for mizar.}

\footnote{A discussion on whether monastics should participate in elections or not became again an issue in 1994. Then the nuns of Tashi Gomba decided to bring out their votes (See Ch.VIII).}

\footnote{See Ch.VIII, Lama Kelsang and his scheme.}
first visit in 1992. When I inquired about them, the older Anis would answer evasively that Ani Ngawang Chuting had died and the others had left nunhood. At that time, they did not tell me that Ani Ngawang Chuting had moved to Sailung Gomba. Nor did they tell me whether the other Tamang anis of Tashi Gomba had accompanied her to Sailung. They only volunteered that the Tamang anis of 1974 had left nunhood. Had they left the robe and Sailung Gomba, because they were disappointed about ani life at the new gomba; because they were not welcome at Tashi Gomba anymore? Had they gone voluntarily, or had they felt forced to leave for the Tamang gomba, being Tamang themselves? For Sailung Gomba had become identified as a Tamang gomba. Once I asked a Sherpa ani from the Sailung area why she did not stay at the gomba there instead of Bigu.

"Sailung is a monastery, for monks."
"But there are also anis, aren't there? Two other anis from Tashi Gomba are living there now."
"Yes, but they are Tamang; I am Sherpa."

The two anis mentioned were the only two Tamang nuns I met at Tashi Gomba in 1992. They were of a later generation. One became a nun in 1971, only seven years old, and was made a nun by her parents. She remained living with her parents, until the Tulkhu send her to Tashi Gomba in 1981. She was the only Tamang who seemed to have survived the turbulence of 1986. Perhaps the fact that she had only recently started her eight-year term as konier (caretaker of the temple hall), had made her stay. In 1993, however, when her konier term was finished she was sent to Sailung Gomba - much to her dismay - to take care of the duang there, and the two old monks. Her cousin, who had become an ani at Tashi Gomba in 1988, was sent with her.

Equally, Sailung Sherpas considered Sailung Gomba as Tamang, and as such not suitable for the puja they wished to sponsor.

"Why aren't you sponsoring Thoongchö at Sailung Gomba?" I asked two Sherpa jindak from Sailung.
"Because there are far more anis here than there" one of them answered. The other man added, "and Sailung Gomba is a Tamang gomba."

A full discussion on the subject was evaded, but the message was clear. Sherpas and Tamangs seem to have chosen sides after the 1986 election, with a long-lasting hostility between the two ethnic groups.

To conclude, two last remarks on Sailung Gomba's impact on Bigu's nunnery. What would have happened if the Guru Lama had not died at that time, so soon after Sailung Gomba's consecration, is an unanswerable question. It should be noted, however, that the Bigu Anis complained they had not seen much of their abbot and guru lama at their own gomba ever since Sailung Gomba was founded. This might be understandable considering the fact that he had to oversee the gomba's construction. On the other hand, the fact that Sailung Gomba was set up as a monastery, that is for monks, and that it owned a copy of the Kangyur, one of the Buddhist canonical texts, which the monks used with the Guru Lama, is significant. Tashi Gomba never had this text, and the Guru Lama also did not seem to find its purchase necessary. Considering the fact that he introduced many minor texts, of which most were introductions to meditation practices, I am inclined to think that he thought the Kangyur not suitable for the anis. In other words, it seems that his emphasis on the path of tantra he advocated at Tashi Gomba may have been a gendered choice. This impression is fuelled by remarks the present abbot of Tashi Gomba made in my presence concerning the anis' capacities as religious specialists. Nevertheless, Sailung Gomba's Kangyur was transferred to Tashi Gomba in 1986, where they were but venerated as sacred books, stored in the lama house, but never used. Because its letters in red made them hard to read, it was said. In 1993, the

See Ch.VIII, Lama Kehang and his scheme.
Tulku brought another copy of 108 volumes, with black letters, which the nuns now read every summer. The abbot, however, has no time to explain, and to stimulate discussions on, its content.

Finally, the Bigu anis involvement in the construction of Sailung Gomba became an important issue at their home base. It stirred up the dissensions between two generations of nuns. Let us first have a closer look at these two generations.

Recruitment

As we have seen in Chapter VI, the community of Tashi Gomba did not receive any novice between 1952 and 1959. With the Guru Lama's arrival, however, the nuns' community experienced a gradual growth. According to Füleri-Haimendorf's rendered life histories (1976), ten women became nuns between 1959 and 1965, eight between 1965 and 1970 (among whom three widows), and seven between 1970 and 1974 (one widow). Together they made up a community of twenty-nine nuns in 1974, of which eight belonged to the older generation.4

The majority of new anis were young women of marriageable age, which reflects the changed image of Tashi Gomba from a mere place of refuge for widows and orphans to a religious community with prospects for a younger generation of nuns. Four of these young anis were children of a village lama, shaman, or ex-monastic; most of them had, not surprising, a relative among the nuns. The Guru Lama seems to have played an active role in recruiting nuns for his nunnery. He had asked a Sherpa man who had become a close friend to send his seven year old daughter to the nunnery. She was Tsering Dolma, whom we will meet more extensively in the next section. In another case, he urged Ani Dorje Dolma to become a ritual friend, a mitini, of a young Sherpa girl from Sailung to assure the latter's interest in nunhood and eventual became a nun. He seems to have persuaded parents to let a daughter go, who had already knocked at his door with the wish to become a nun, by telling them it would be a sin to keep their daughters from a life of dharma if she really wanted it. Parents still preferred their daughters to stay at home until they got married. Nevertheless, the community gained a respectable size thanks to its abbot's reputation and supervision.

However, his teachings of the 1960s which emphasized meditation and retreat, and his extended absence from the nunnery since the founding of Sailung Gomba took its toll.

Problems surrounding the umse succession

Since 1970, the Guru Lama spent most of the year in Sailung. According to the nuns, he only came back to Bigu for about two months a year, between April and June, to supervise the yearly transfer of duties and the sponsored Nyungne rituals. An ex-monk of Sailung stated that the abbot had not shown his face for many years in Bigu. Obviously, the Guru Lama had put all his time and energy in the new gomba and left Tashi Gomba in the hands of the Même Lama and the umse (head nun). The Même Lama had already been assisting the Guru Lama in the previous years, and naturally continued to take care of the administrative affairs of the nunnery. Its daily affairs, however, were foremost in the hands of the umse. The problems which arose from this for the Bigu anis' new experience of responsibility - of a community of nearly thirty - came to the fore with the transfer of the umse office in 1973, but had their prelude at the first umse transfer in 1967.

In 1967, Ani Purbu was eventually succeeded by Hishi Dolma. Eventually, because this transfer of duty did not go without blows being struck. According to the line of seniority (of fully-fledged nuns), there were three candidates for the office of umse: Ani Hishi Dolma, Ani Dorje Dolma, and Ani Sange Gyelmu, all of whom had entered in 1952. Füleri-Haimendorf writes, that "there was no consensus among the nuns" about who should be the next head nun, so

1 In 1979, Kunwar counted 32 nuns, and a decrease by 4 in 1981 (Kunwar 1986:57). From 1981 onwards, the community started to grow steadily again to 44 in 1985, to 60 nuns in 1994.

4 See Ch.VI, The communituy's internal organisation.
the Tulku, who had come to Tashi gompa for the occasion, arranged for each of the three names to be written on a piece of paper. He then made each slip into a ball and placed the three paper balls on a dish which he half covered with a scarf (kata). Raising the dish, he prayed to the gods and then moved it in such a way that one paper ball after the other fell out. The nun whose name was on the paper ball emerging first was to be umse. Hishi Dolma’s name came out first, and I was told that the two other candidates wept with disappointment. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:133)

At the end of Ani Hisi’s seven-year term in 1973, however, again a choice had to be made between Ani Sange Gyelmu and Ani Dorje, but

neither Sange Gyelmu nor Dorje Droma wanted to become umse, and the latter canvassed the name of Sherap Omu […], who is relatively junior but extremely gifted and popular. The Tulku who had come to Tashi gompa consulted all the nuns, and they unanimously recommended the appointment of Sherap Omu as umse. (ibid.:i33)

However, the Tulku did not choose to break with rule of seniority in the umse, so he appointed Ani Dorje Dolma. But he did yield to the anis in creating a separate umse assistance office, utchung, for Ani Sherap Omu. As Ani Hisi had been ill quite often, this newly introduced post would be able to stand in for the umse in case of emergencies, and at the same time would prepare the assistant for a full take-over of the head nun’s position.

What strikes me about these succession quarrels, is the eagerness of becoming umse in 1967, and the disappointment by Ani Sange Gyelmu and by Ani Dorje Dolma, followed by a reluctance to take the office over from Ani Hisi seven years later. In my view, there are two approaches to this change of attitude. The first is what I would call a monastic-cultural interpretation, the second is more connected to notions of responsibility and duty, a social-organisational issue.

The forty-year itch

When I asked Ani Dorje Dolma why she had not felt much for becoming umse, she confided in me that by 1973 she already felt too old. After having learnt the tsam practices, she wanted to devote her life to dharma as fully as possible and retire from as much responsibilities towards the nuns’ community as possible. In 1973, however, Ani Dorje Dolma was only 39 years old! But the imagery of the age of forty as a dividing line in life is a very common and accepted one, at least among the anis of Tashi Gompa.

Forty is the age when the grey hairs begin to show. “Grey hairs itch”, one ani explained while a young ani was seeking through her bristles, as if she was looking for lice, to pull the grey hairs out. Anis who already turned grey at a young age felt embarrassed and, nowadays, colour their crew-cut black with rinse shampoo they get in Kathmandu.

Forty is not an age to start new enterprises, but to rehearse what you already know, as a preparation for death and the next life. Ani Pema Dolma expressed her discomfort with reaching her forties by asking me: “Aren’t you worried about getting old? You are already thirty-three. You know, our time is running out. Death is coming very close”. Ani Sonam Dolma said, “Life is fun until you are twenty. After that life is suffering, and after forty it’s all over.” This nuns’ image of a life cycle is definitely different from how

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15 See, for instance, Ekvall on divination in decision-making, Pra PHab ("lot fall") and the use of paper balls (Ekvall 1964:258-269).

16 I doubt whether we should take Fürer-Haimendorf’s appointment of the Tulku as the decisive authority in both the 1967 and 1973 umse transfers for granted. It could have been just as well the Guru Lama, who in 1967 may have avoided any accusation of preferring one ani above the other. He had not been at Tashi Gompa when the three anis entered nunhood in 1952. Or it could have been Kusho Tsetsu, for that matter. The anis usually only referring to “Lama-la” or “Rimpoch-la” could be very confusing to me too.
laywomen see it. When I asked two neighbours in their sixties whether they also experienced life as over at forty, they started to laugh.

Are you crazy? Then it only begins. Then your children are grown up. Your daughters are married or big enough to take care of things in the house. Your son has married, and brought a wife into the house. When you are forty, life becomes more easy. You have much more time for leisure, to visit family, to see your children who live in Nepal [i.e. Kathmandu]. When you are really old and you cannot do anything anymore, because your body aches, and you feel helpless and fully depending on your children, then you are old, and death can better be soon.

Nuns, having renounced motherhood and family life, did not experience such phases in their life. Theirs were connected to the different positions they were to hold within the community but, in general, life as an ani was felt as ongoing, repetitive, to a large extent boring. “What happened around here?” our young monastic friends would reply, shrugging their shoulders, whenever Dawa and I returned from a short break in Kathmandu. “Nothing. The only thing that happens is that we die sooner or later.” And the first sign of this “sooner or later” was the greying of their crew-cut, the first and most obvious sign of the decay of their body, and, more important, of the mind’s slowing down.

Anis over forty years of age did not welcome new knowledge, but when forced upon them they would accept it reluctantly. “When you study in this life, but you don’t have the talent, or you are too old to understand or to memorise it, it doesn’t matter. It will be of use in your next life”, Ani Sonam Dolma explained. Upon which Dawa remarked, “it sounds like a bank deposit.” When, however, the Tulku asked Dawa and me to organise courses in Nepali and English, Ani Sonam and other anis reaching middle-age refused to take part. They said their minds were already too full with pechu. They were afraid they would lose their memory of the religious texts when learning something entirely new. Others complained of fatigue when having to read too much. This attitude was clearly initiated, and stimulated, by their abbots. When discussing which nuns were to join our classes, Lama Kelsang said, “well, you ask all the younger ones, except those who have duties. Not the older anis, because it is better for them to prepare themselves for death. They better do tsam.” The preoccupation with death and rebirth, and past and future lives forms the essence of what Samuel called the “Karma Orientation” (Samuel 1993:26). In order to ensure a good rebirth, one has to get rid of sins (digpa) committed in former lives and in this life, and subsequently to accumulate more merit (sonam). In Lama Kelsang’s words, “it is like dyeing cloth. You first have to wash the material, before colouring it. Otherwise, the dye won’t stick properly”. Dorje Sempa tsam - introduced by the Guru Lama” - for instance, aims specifically at the extermination of accumulated sins. Nyungne tsam - also performed by the Drugpa Rimpoche during the last years of his life - focuses particularly on the accumulation of merit, to secure a rebirth as a human being and, when repeated, is believed to bring one even to the level of a Rimpoche or a heavenly being.

The older anis I questioned about their hopes for a next life often wanted to be reborn as a man, and hopefully one with the opportunity to become a monk; others’ ultimate desire was to be reborn “as a God in heaven”. In order to achieve a state of being such as these, they had learned they had to meditate as much as possible. However, the duties they had to perform in and for the community held them from extended retreats. They only could devote themselves to tsam between the subsequent offices they were to hold and after their umse term. For the first generation anis, however, time became pressing. At the time they had finished the duties of tungba, chöben, kutum and niermu, they were already approaching their forties. The umse term of seven years then had still to be gone through. No wonder nuns like Ani Dorje Dolma tried to get away from this obligation.

See also Ch.VI, The Guru Lama and the karma orientation.

The youngest generation of anis expressed during my fieldwork yet another, significant, alternative. See Ch.VIII.

See Ch.VI, The community’s internal organisation.
In 1967, the position of umse as the right hand of the Guru Lama then still seemed to be a desirable position. Those in turn were still in their early thirties. By 1973, however, Ani Dorje Dolma and Ani Sange Gyelmu already started to feel the forty-year itch. They wished to intensify their life as a monastic renunciate, by renouncing the outside world as much as possible, by going into retreat. This inward focus, however, was diametrically opposed to what the position of umse requested of them, especially from 1970 onwards. Not only did the Guru Lama’s involvement in Sailung Gomba’s establishment render the next umses more responsibilities than were used to, and felt capable of. Also, the changing outside world asked for more interaction between the social and the monastic realm. In addition, the introvert interpretation of the older anis countered the expectations the younger generation cherished of nunhood. The ground was cleared for a true generation gap.

A new generation
Without the Guru Lama present, Ani Hishi Dolma had to bear the responsibility over the nuns’ community to a large extent alone. Of course the Même Lama took care of the gomba’s financial affairs, particularly concerning the guthi (gomba loans) and the management of the gomba land, but probably also advised in ritual requests by lay people, so the umse found in him a prop and stay. Or perhaps one might state that the Même Lama was the one largely in charge of the gomba, and she merely his voice towards the anis. Ani Hisi Dolma was not remembered as a strong, authoritative woman, but rather as sickly and reserved. The decision of the Tulku (or Kusho Tsatsu or the Guru Lama) to make her umse, however, was not surprising. Before she joined Tashi Gomba, she had been on pilgrimages to monasteries in Tibet, and had learned to read, and also write a little, Tibetan. As such, of the three nuns in line for umse she must have been the most qualified; for the religious tasks of a head nun, that is. However, a year after the Guru Lama had left to spend most of his time in Sailung, the Même Lama went to India, leaving Ani Hishi Dolma and the anis all by themselves.

In 1971, Bigu and surrounding areas had experienced a serious famine (cf. Kunwar 1986:89). Dor Bahadur Kharka, who was Bigu’s pradhan panchayat at the time, managed to organise food aid by the government. Wheat, rice and potatoes were transported from the Terai to Kathmandu over the new Arniko Highway, that had become ready only a year before (in 1969). From Barabise, the bags were carried up to Bigu. The potatoes especially turned out to be of such a better quality than those cultivated in Bigu, that the Même Lama decided to import its seeds. On his quest he first went to the Terai, but ended up in the Punjab. Only a year later, he returned and made a small fortune with seeds he had obtained at British agricultural development farms.

The year without both the Guru Lama and the Même Lama must have highlighted the necessity of a decisive umse, one with the authority and self-confidence to manage the community. During my stay, I witnessed several arguments between the head nun, the disciplinarian and the kitchen nun, about appointments for rituals to be performed at lay people’s homes, about the division of labour during harvest, for threshing, for fetching fire wood for the gomba kitchen, for taking care of the cow, and so on. Their disagreements could lead to each side swearing like fisherman’s wives on the gomba square, or calling on other anis to take their side. Constant gossip could be heard about their functioning. Ani Tserap Sangmo, for instance, who was umse in 1992, was much criticised for her inability to speak proper Nepali and to negotiate with officials and village council members. Whenever the Même Lama was not there to receive them, she preferred to hide away in her own room, her uchung to act in her place. Ani Urken Palmo, who followed up Ani Tserap Sangmo up as an umse, was much respected by the nuns, but still complained.

20 The Même Lama had not returned to the robe yet.
21 She also refused to talk to me the very first time I went to see her for an interview. Although not hiding from us, she told us Ani Sonam would do the talking because her Nepali was not good enough. Only during my return in 1994, when her umse term was over, she dared to invite us without an “interpreter” and jabbered away.
Whatever you do, it’s always wrong. There is always someone complaining ‘you should have done
d this, you should have done that’. There is always someone who knows better. The Rimpoche [i.e. the
Tulku] shortened the umse term to only one year last year [in 1993], and I begged him to let it start
with me. That would have made me done already last year. But he didn’t let me. He said I had to finish
the whole term of three years, and that the change would only start after me. But perhaps, I can
reduce my term to two years. One year less. Being an umse is very difficult. We also have to start
the chanting, we always have to be in good voice. No, I want to quit as soon as possible.

I could extend these kind of complaints with those of disciplinarians and kitchen nuns as well who
felt bullied by the umses. Also in the 1970s. Tsering Dolma’s brother recalled his sister’s stories,
the older ones told the young ones to do all kinds of hard work, and then the young ones said: ‘why
don’t you do it yourselves?’ And then the older ones replied that they had done much harder jobs than
that before, that it was their turn to concentrate on dharma and that their [i.e. the young ones’] time
would come later.

The younger generation, however, did not feel like waiting until “later”, that is until they were umse
themselves and thereafter. Already from the onset of their life at Tashi Gomba they felt disappointed in
their lives as anis. Because their main motivation to become a nun was not to avoid a life of marriage and
motherhood, as had been the older nuns’ drive.\textsuperscript{12} Theirs was a desire for learning, inspired at first instance
by the image of Tashi Gomba as promoted by the anis themselves. Ani Urken Palmo, the umse also
quoted above, explained her disappointment during the years following her taking the vows in 1964.

I thought it would be like a school. Everyday reading and teachings. That was what I grasped from the
stories the nuns told me when they stayed overnight at our house in Dolangsa whenever they went to
fetch the rice from the fields near Barabise. They told stories about the Guru Lama, and how they had
to read \textit{péchas} everyday. Besides, we heard that Bigu had a school [since 1955], but in Dolangsa the
council had only one a couple of years ago [1985]. I always thought it was the same, the nunnery and
the school. Only when I was here, I learnt they are two different things. Anyhow, there was one ani,
we became good friends, but she was much older than I was. Now, she is dead already. One day, I
decided to come here, to become an ani. I had to run away from home, because my parents didn’t
allow me, they needed me in the house. This ani took care of me. She also went back home with me
later, to ask my parents’ consent. She taught me. But it was not like a school at all here. It was hard
work. First, the building of the new \textit{simsung}, then the kitchen.

Ani Genden Dolma, a Sherpa from Sailung, recalls

When I was very young, I already didn’t care about parties, music and dancing. Everybody was eagerly
looking forward to festivals, to the gatherings and entertainment, but I didn’t. Already as a little girl,
I was always intrigued by pujas, on funerals, at gyewas. I always went to watch the [village] lama or
other lamas come to perform a puja. Sometimes I hid myself, to peep, to look anyway, when it was at
someone else’s home. As long as I could hear them, I was happy. I loved the sound of prayer, of the
reading of the puchas, immensely. And I always dreamt of being able to read the \textit{péchas} myself, and to
sing as beautiful and to perform such pujas myself.

Then the Khamko lama, the Guru Lama, came to Sailung, with a couple of monks and nuns. One of
those nuns was my mother’s sister, and I adored her. She was so pretty in her red dress. I wanted to

\textsuperscript{12} See Ch.V.
wear a dress like hers as well. I just run away from home to Bigu, to the Guru Lama (in 1969). He called my father and told him it would be a sin to object me becoming a nun. Then I was allowed.

Already a year after her becoming an ani, however, she was sent back to Sailung together with the other anis from her home area, like the Tamang anis and her mother’s sister (Ani Sange Gyelmu), where they were to work on the construction site of the new gomba. They only returned to the nunnery during the monsoon and the cold winter months, during which she was taught the basic pèchas.

Ani Sange Gyelmu must have told her young niece similar stories of a studious ani life as Ani Urken Palmo’s friend, Ani Sangesomu, had done. The reality of Tashi Gomba, however, showed a different picture. It should be not surprising, then, that in 1973 the anis - especially after the agitated early seventies - tried to leave Ani Dorje Dolma and Ani Sange Gyelmu to their path of retreat and pushed Ani Sherap Omu forward as the next umse.

Ani Sherap Omu was the illegitimate daughter of Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Tsetsu’s brother, who left his monastic lover pregnant and moved back to Tsum Gomba in 1942. Ani Sherap Omu became an ani in 1961, at the age of eighteen. Her being the daughter of Kusho Tendzen gave her opportunities other nuns did not have, for she regularly goes to Kathmandu to visit Kusho Tsetsu, to accompany him all over Nepal to perform rituals, and to listen to teachings of high lamas during these occasions. Besides being a very intelligent woman, she learned much more about the scriptures than any of the other nuns, and was much more triggered to study than the other Bigu anis. Since Ani Sherap Omu was, in addition, also known as a strong personality, she would have made the perfect loben (religious teacher) and umse in 1973. Nevertheless, the Tulku (or the Guru Lama) decided to stick to the rule of succession, and appointed Ani Dorje Dolma as umse for the next seven years, with Ani Sherap Omu as her right hand.

Ani Dorje Dolma was remembered twenty years later as a good and sensible head nun. Still, she was not able to control the growing dissatisfaction among her anis.

The Dharamsala conflict

Based on the nuns’ travel stories, and the postcards and photographs of pilgrimage sites they had visited, which they treasured in their private shrines and in little albums, the Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya in 1973, led by the Dalai Lama, was their first pilgrimage. While the Guru Lama remained at Sailung, and Ani Dorje Dolma in her first year as umse had to stay at Tashi Gomba, the majority of the anis went in the company of the Tulku, Kusho Tsetsu and Ani Sherap Omu.

Mullin describes how for this tantric initiation he “joined a crowd of a hundred and fifty thousand Himalayan Buddhists” from “Ladakh, Lahoul, Spiti and Kinnaur on the west, to Sikkim, Bhutan and upper Arunchal Pradesh on the east, all of whom practice Tibetan Buddhism” in the winter, late in 1973 (Mullin 1991:15-16,27). To give an idea what kind of event the Kalachakra is I render here his account, since I never participated in one myself.

Most public Kalachakra initiation ceremonies are preceded by five or six days of essential Buddhist teachings. These usually begin at about noon and continue until dusk, with everyone sitting on blankets in the sun, the children playing games between the islands of adults. Mothers breast feed their babies while older people snooze discreetly in the shade, the steady melody of the Dalai Lama’s rich voice flowing over them in waves from a network of loudspeakers. [...] After these fundamental teachings have been given the actual initiation process commences, beginning with a day of lama dances, in which the place of initiation is claimed and consecrated. This is then followed by either two or three days of initiations, and generally a day of spiritual celebration in the form of a gurupujna.  

In 1992, she borrowed my walkman to listen to tapes of teachings, she had attended at various initiation ceremonies and Monlam, “Wish Prayers”. In 1994, I brought a walkman as a gift to the nunnery for general use, but she soon confiscated it. “They [i.e. the other anis] can come and ask me for it.”
ceremony, in which the lama gives his parting advice to the crowd. Finally the entire group of however many thousands of initiates lines up and files in single column through the temporary chapel in which the Kalachakra sand mandela has been constructed, and then past His Holiness in order to receive an individual hand blessing.

[...] The entire event traditionally takes place over a period of ten or twelve days [...] (Mullin 1991:28-9).

It is not difficult to imagine how impressive this event must have been to the Bigu anis. For many of them it had been the very first time they had left Nepal’s foothills. The trip to India by bus from Kathmandu, all those pilgrims gathered at one site, to be at Bodh Gaya as such - the place where Gautama sat under the bodhi tree and reached the state of Enlightenment, “where the Buddha became a Buddha” the anis would say. Friendships for life were made (mitini), especially with nuns from nunneries in Pokhara, Chitwan and Tsum (Nepal). The apex, of course, was to see the Dalai Lama, to hear him speak and to get his blessing by the touch of his hand.

You know Hishi Norbu (“Wish fulfilling Gem” as the nuns call the Dalai Lama) is Avalokitesvara? They say that when you touch his shadow you can be sure to be reborn as a human being. His shadow is already so powerful that it melts away all your sins. Have you ever met him?

an ani asked me. “Yes”, I said, “by coincidence. He was in Holland once for a big meeting with all kinds of business people. The tickets were horribly expensive. But then, one day I nearly bumped into him on the street, when he was exploring the Red Light District with a guide and two monks.” Fortunately, she did not know, and did not ask, the meaning of “red light”. “Then you are saved by his shadow too.”

When I asked an ani who had financially supported approximately twenty anis to go to Bodh Gaya, who had paid for the bus and their food, she said “the Rimpoche”. “Which one, the Tulku or Kusho Tsetsu?” “Both, I guess. I don’t know. But for the food we didn’t have to pay anything. People would come and give us food. Everyday.”

When three years later, in late 1976, a similar Kalachakra ceremony was organised in Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama’s place in exile, in India. Of course all Bigu anis wanted to go. The choice of who was allowed to go, however, caused a lot of resistance. The gomba had to remain staffed, not only by those holding an office, but also an additional group of anis was needed to perform puja both within the gomba as outside, on request of lay people. The ani who was to make the selection was, of course, the umse Ani Dorje Dolma. She tried to be reasonable in letting go those for whom it would be their first Kalachakra, and telling those who had already been at Bodh Gaya to stay. Objections were raised by the latter, as well as by those anis who, after three years, again were holding an office. If not now, when would they finally get a chance to meet the Dalai Lama?

In 1994, I witnessed similar dissension among the anis, this time on whether they were allowed to go to a big Monlam ceremony in Lumbini, Nepal. The Tulku, who was visiting Tashi Gomba over the winter, gave about thirty nuns leave to go to Lumbini. Three nuns were visiting relatives outside the valley and eleven were in charge of the gomba, which left another fifteen nuns in case lay people came to ask for a puja. As I was told, however, the Tulku had promised them that in case no request for a puja was

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44 In Nepal, this kind of friendship between men (who become each other’s mit) or women (mitini) is accompanied by a ritual of an exchange of gifts and a kata (ceremonial scarf). Interestingly, the individuals involved should be of different jat (caste or ethnic group), but become “siblings” with the ritual. In practice this also means that the mutual parents have to treat a mit or mitini of their children as if they were their own children. In addition, a mit or mitini is not allowed to marry his friend’s biological brother or sister. Cf. Fürer-Haimendorf, who mentions this “system of ceremonial friends (thowna)” (Tib. thokpo) as a confirmation of a trade relationship (between men, 1964:15), who “regard each other as brothers and their children are forbidden to marry” (ibid.148).
made within four weeks, they were still allowed to go to Kathmandu where a bus would take them to Lumbini.

When Dawa and I returned from a short interval in Kathmandu, the fifteen nuns were still there. The tensions were rising as the day the last bus was leaving was coming closer and closer, but without the Tulku's giving his word of release. A couple of nuns accused the nunse and the others in charge for not letting them go out of envy. The Tulku observed the slanging matches of the two parties from behind his window, on theimsung's second floor, but restrained from any interference as if he was testing them. Finally, he called all nuns present into theimsung, and told them it would be better for all of them to stay as Dawa and I were going to teach Nepali and English. He promised, however, that they would be the first to be selected for Lumbini next year. Dawa and I felt rather awkward about this situation, feared being blamed for giving the Tulku reason to hold them back. Indeed, for a few days there was a lot of gossip going on behind our backs. However, the classes started the day the last bus left Kathmandu, and the subject “Lumbini” was not touched upon again.

It turned out that two anis used the trip to Lumbini to leave Tashi Gomba altogether. They disappeared after the ceremony, to join two Bigu anis who had already headed for Mysore after a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in 1993. This “tradition” of running off originated with the Dharamsala Kalachakra in 1976. According to the brother of one of the anis who did not return from Dharamsala to Tashi Gomba, the tensions between the older anis and the young ones built up. The anis in charge tried to soothe them by saying that would get plenty of other opportunities, but the younger anis refused to accept this.

That is when they decided to leave for Dharamsala, a whole bunch of them. But that wasn’t easy either. After some time their money finished and they had to do some work. Then you can marry as well, it makes no difference.

The brother’s sketch makes us believe that all twelve nuns had left nunhood after the Kalachakra, and had intended to do so from their very onset, but this was not the case. His sister volunteered afterwards.

We went with a small group. Some stayed, others went back [to Bigu] again. I have stayed there nine or ten months, but in the meantime I ran out of money. I had taken seven thousand Rupees with me. After that, I stayed for three months in a gomba with only foreign nuns. With one of them I became close friends and she took me into her room and she paid everything for me. But she had to go back home and I was back on the street again. That's when I went to Chö Pema. I knew people from Bigu living there, but they were not relatives. I wanted to work there and save money to return to Dharamsala after about two years. But then I met my husband. I married him. My husband was also from Bigu.

"Why did you all wanted to go to Dharamsala so badly?", I asked her.

"Oh, we wanted to see more of the world. We were young. Now, I think I wouldn't do it again, but we wanted to see more. We had heard life was much better there, more possibilities and so on. And we were young."

I told her of the young nuns who had left Tashi Gomba recently, after Bodh Gaya and Lumbini, and that they had written to me their motivation as being a quest for more education.

"Was that also the case with you?"

"Sure, also. More teachings, more pecha to read, more lamas, more rituals. Yes, of course."

It was impossible to question the anis who were already around in 1976 about the Dharamsala event, who had gone, who had left. Ani Urken Palmo, who, despite the fact that she was mentioned as one of the Dharamsala group, denied her participating,
Why do you keep asking about Dharamsala? Only because Tsering Dolma left? There was nothing special about it, except for her not coming back. We went three times to Dharamsala, once every few years. For Kalachakra. I never went there. The first time I was ill, the second time I was niørmu, and the third time there was something else, I don't remember. The first time, Ani Sherap Omu and Ani Tashi and others went. Only the second time, Tsering Dolma went. And she stayed.

Ani Thupten Chuckey, when I found out that she was Tsering Dolma's youngest sister, shrugged, "why should I have told you? Is it of any importance now she left?" She herself became an ani in late 1974. After a while she returned to the subject, showing me pictures of her sister with husband and son.

It was not good news. So, why should I tell you. Look, this my sister. She was only eight years old when she became ani. Until she was about thirty or thirty-two. She went on pilgrimage to Dharamsala, together with another sixteen anis from Bigu. There is where she met this man from Pari. The others came back, Genden, Kanchi, Urken Palmo, Pema Dolma. But she didn't. But she is still doing a lot of pujas, you know. From inside, she is a very good person and does a lot of dharma. Only her clothes changed. She is very talented, and it was her who took the initiative to go to Dharamsala, to get books and teachings. Fifteen anis supported her and they left. Only when they were on their way, the Rimpoche [the Tulku] gave them his blessing and permission.

Both Ani Thupten Chuckey and Ani Urken Palmo stated that only Tsering Dolma choose to stay. Her brother, however, as well as Tsering Dolma herself, gave the impression that more anis did not return to Tashi Gomba. When checking Fürer-Haimendorf's list of anis of 1974, not only the Tamang anis were missing, but three Sherpa anis too. Chembal Chindu, Kusho Pema's daughter, had become a child nun in 1963. The anis were only willing to say that she left for India some years ago. Her elder brother was already in the service of the Dalai Lama in 1974 (Fürer-Haimendorf 1976:142). She may have joined him in 1976. Karsang Dolma from the Jiri area (ani in 1959) had a father who disappeared to India after she was born. She had no relatives who supported her, but had to depend “on alms and fees for ritual services” (ibid.:143). Dharamsala may have offered her more security. Sange Chiring (ani in 1970), whose father was a village lama close to Bigu. Her brother was a monk who stayed with the Tulku in Bhutan in 1974 (ibid.:144). Karsang Dolma and Sange Chiring were said to have left for marriage, but none of the anis seemed to remember when. In 1976, perhaps? And the Tamang anis, released from their construction work at Sailung Gomba during winter, did they choose neither to return to Bigu nor to Sailung? A Sherpa villager, who had been taught to read pecha with Ani Dorje Dolma (the umse) as the time, gave his view on the Dharamsala event.

Only three came back, as far as I can remember. Pema Dolma, Kanchi, and Genden Dolma. The others married. They went away. The rules at the gomba are very strict and many of them could not handle it. And then the others started to abuse them. That's when they left. And also, the gomba had much land here and there, and they had to go there to fetch the harvest. Perhaps they thought it too heavy work and they left and got married.

Naturally the Dharamsala event was discussed much in the village as well. Even after twenty years, a father who refused his daughter permission to become an ani rendered his motivation as follows.

Nowadays, when the girls grow up they understand better what life is all about. That's why they want to spend the rest of their life to dharma. Although I don't think dharma has much to do with it. They think, from outside, that it's a kind of school. But when they are ani they are disappointed and run away with a boy friend. Once, ten anis ran away. Eight of them got married and only two came back.
During the late 1970s, many parents may have, like this father, deterred their daughter's desire for nunhood based on the Dharamsala event. Using their interpretation of the anis having run away to Dharamsala for marriage in particular, they rather liked to keep their daughters at home than to see them marry someone far away and, therefore, out of their control. The figures Kunwar offers, however, show an increase of the community to thirty-two nuns in 1979 (Kunwar 1986:57); from which I may conclude that Tashi Gomba had not lost its appeal among young women themselves. Unfortunately, it is irrevocable how the Guru Lama and the anis explained the recent drop-outs to them. If there was any past event that was definitely considered a non-topic, it was exactly the Dharamsala issue. Because only a couple of months before, the anis had been given a tough lesson in discipline - if we accept the story Tsering Dolma volunteered - which was to vow in front of Mahakala never to share any disturbing information about their community with any outsider again. The outsider, who had caused the Tulku's displeasure with the anis' frankness was, of course, Furër-Haimendorf whose essay on Tashi Gomba appeared earlier that same year. One might even speculate whether there was a cause-and-effect relation between the Tulku's reprimand and the Dharamsala conflict. I can imagine that his criticism enforced feelings of responsibility and authority among the older anis, and influenced their decision of which anis were disciplined enough to be allowed to go so far away from their base. For sure, the Mahakala vow must have caused weeks of gossip and accusations, of who had actually told too much to these foreign, curious people; rumours that not only went on within the gomba walls but, as we have seen, also in the village. In the light of the already existing dissensions between the older and the younger generation, however, the older anis' selection for Dharamsala may only have fuelled rebellious feelings among the younger ones. Anyhow, whatever happened, the Dharamsala event seemed a true black page in their history.

A growing awareness of the outside world

In 1966, the construction of a paved road was started along the Bhote Kosi (“Tibetan river”), between Kathmandu and Khasa (Tib.Dram) with Chinese aid. A bus service was set up that shifted its terminal with the progress of the construction. In 1969, the bus came as far as Barabise, a small town easily reached from the Bigu valley although still a two-day hike. A year later, this road became crucial in the transport of food aid for the people in the foothills suffering famine.

The famine, and the Arniko Highway, urged a growing amount of young men to seek new opportunities. They went to “Nepal”, that is Kathmandu, and further to India. Some found seasonal employment, and returned with a small fortune, like the Meme Lama. Others migrated permanently to Kathmandu, Calcutta, the Punjab. Some came to fetch their family, others left them behind ignorant of their whereabouts.

Unlike Solu Khumbu, Bigu had not known an Edmund Hillary who initiated hospitals, schools and airstrips (Fisher 1996). Only in 1981, development aid, in the form of the Swiss Development Cooperation, came to Bigu to build an extension to its school, to construct cesspits, and to renovate footbridges along its ways. Its mountains did not attract “large scale visitations by foreign tourists” (Sacherer 1981:160). In fact, the first groups of tourists were only led through Bigu to Dolakha by Kathmandu trekking agencies from the early 1980s onwards. During the 1970s, “Nepal” dripped only in through its language. The panchayat was now to be elected, but requested a proper knowledge of Nepali. Also those who had sought employment in Kathmandu had been confronted by their inadequacy in the national language, especially in writing. The school, already founded in 1955, had merely attracted children from a Hindu background. In 1979, the illiteracy rate among the Sherpas of Bigu was still 66.77%, with another 5.96%
who could “write a bit but have no formal education” (Kunwar 1989:130). From 1976 onwards, however, half of the school-attending children were Sherpa, that is, Sherpa boys.

Women stayed behind, while husbands and brothers sought employment in the city and abroad. As the main pillars of the household, they were to take care of the children, the fields and the herds. While more and more sons were sent to school, daughters had to remain at home to help their mother. Anis, on the other hand, were thought to enjoy similar opportunities as men. They said they learnt to read and write at the gomba. And they travelled, first to Bodh Gaya, then every so often to Kathmandu, and to Dharamsala. Whatever their parents brought up against nunhood, for a growing amount of young women it promised them a freedom and education they were not to get as daughters and wives. This process only set in during the 1970s, but when the intrusion of the outside world increased in the next decade, so did the influx of novices. By 1994, Tashi Gomba consisted of sixty-two anis.

Reflection

The generation gap between the nuns of 1952 and those who entered after the arrival of the Guru Lama reveals a difference in expectations of a nun’s life. After decades of hard labour and poverty at Tashi Gomba the older generation wanted to sit back and enjoy the fruits of their work, and put into practice what their guru lama had been teaching. They wanted to follow the path of tantra, of meditation and retreat. The younger generation, however, still had plenty of years ahead before they would feel death approaching. They did not wish to retreat yet from a world that was asking for exploration, a world that was changing and offered them opportunities they had never dreamt of before. It would be going too far to state that during the 1970s the young nuns already desired to follow the path of sutra. Their desire for knowledge was not yet directed towards a more profound knowledge of dharma texts, but merely at more - as Tsering Dolma said “more teachings, more pecha to read, more lamas, more rituals”.

The Tulku must have acknowledged the problems that arose between the two generations. In 1978, for Ani Dorje still three years to go, the Tulku decided to shorten the period of umse from seven to three years. Considering the ages of the umses to come, also this measure would not prevent anis from becoming umse when already in their forties, but it did shorten a long and heavy duty which asked more and more for an interaction with the social world outside.

The changing social world was not just a blessing, although it seemed to push more young women towards the gomba. Sailung Gomba failed, not only because the death of the Guru Lama, but also because he obviously did not manage to attract a substantial amount of monks to populate it. Lopez jr. reports that in large Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India during the 1980s young men only became novices, often renouncing their vows before full ordination on their parent’s advice, returning to lay life to work on the farm. The great monasteries were becoming, in effect, boarding schools (Lopez jr. 1996:264-5).

Sailung Gomba, however, did not even reach the status as a kind of boarding school. The political changes and the onset of (temporal) migration streams to Kathmandu and India asked for a different kind of schooling than the Guru Lama had to offer. Sailung Gomba, one might conclude, came too late. By 1986, its community was too trivial for its next abbot to be continued. As such one might conclude that Sailung Gomba went down in the same stream of disinterest as the monasteries in other Sherpa areas.²⁸

²⁸ According to March’s figures, monasteries in Solu Khumbu experienced a particularly high influx of celibate monastics between 1945 and 1960. “Much of the growth [during the 1960s] can be accounted for by the immigration of refugee Tibetan monastics” (March 1979:129-30). During the 1970s, the monastic communities decreased, in Rolwaling (Sacherer 1977:179), in Khumbu (Fürrer-Haimendorf 1975:102-5; Fisher 1990:18-9), in Yelmu and in Tsum (the Tulku and Lama Kelsang, personal communication), due to new economic (tourism) and educational opportunities.
Tashi Gomba, however, stood on the eve of flourishing; that is, when measured by its amount of anis. The reason behind this, as I will claim, is the gender difference in opportunities the changing social realm has been offering. In this chapter, I could only offer a glimpse of this development, since this process had also only begun. By the 1980s the impact of a modern world, however, became really tangible.