House of birds: A historical ethnography of a Tibetan buddhist nunnery in Nepal
van Ede, Y.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

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A Bird's-eye View

Epilogue

Even in my native town,
O birds of passage,
It is but the sleep
of a traveller!
(Kyorai)

"You write down everything", the storyteller said, "because my sons are leaving Bigu to work in Kathmandu. They will forget the past of the Sherpas of Bigu, and not telling their children about it. Now, they go to Kathmandu, and they go to school. Then they can read your book." I was happy with his attitude and cooperation, then, during my fieldwork. But a year later, in the process of writing, I felt worried about his words; especially when I read Vincanne Adams' experience among the Sherpas in Khumbu.

As I interviewed villagers about various events, I was told repeatedly that if I wanted the correct answer to questions about Sherpa culture I should consult Furer-Haimendorf's 1964 book (Adams 1996:65).

The storyteller obviously expected my book to contain the History of the Sherpas of Bigu, similarly to Furer-Haimendorf's work. But how was I supposed to write down "everything" he had told me; which definitely was not yet "everything" he had to tell anyway?

"Write whatever you like", the Tulku said, "As long as you write dharma, it is good. Don't lie, but write the truth." The truth. But whose truth?

We all had our own agenda. The storyteller asked for preservation of the oral history of his people as he would have liked his grandchildren and great grandchildren to know it and to pass it on. The Tulku, as well as Lama Kelsang, wanted me to spread word about the nunnery in that way further the nunnery's ability to collect donations, to secure its existence in the way he thought best. All others who shared their memories and daily life with me, villagers and anis alike, had their own reasons to "construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:27). If, as Dirks argues, history can be seen as "a Sign of the Modern" (Dirks 1990), then the storyteller, the Tulku, the abbot and the other people of Bigu have become "modern" in their want for a historiography of their people, of their nunnery. And they saw me as instrumental to this task, turned me into "a sign of the modern" in my own right.

These men, each of them powerful in their own realm, tried to take advantage of my presence and my work, but also to the anis I was kind of instrumental. I did not remain a role model in some abstract ideational sense, but I had triggered their imagination towards action (cf.Appadurai 1990). I had done so not only by my mere presence, who I was and where I came from, but also actively through my questions, my constantly writing in my notebooks, my teaching them English, and - last but not least - my explicit

encouraging them to pursue their desire for education. During my Masters' fieldwork, I actually had told Ani Sange Dolma to keep looking for a way to accomplish her wish to study because - I said - it was her right to seek for self-development, although I had not been prepared to see her leaving Bigu, the nunnery, and her family for it. On my return in 1994, I at first felt responsible for her departure, but soon heard that her teacher, Ani Karma Sangmo, had stimulated her and her friend to leave for Mysore. Ani Karma Sangmo might have gone herself as well if she could have made herself to leave her home valley - and would have been in good health. Knowing this comforted my conscience, not only in my plea of the importance of education that had eventually made five anis leaving their nunnery and their lamas, but also in my emphasis on the quest for knowledge as the thread in my historiography of Tashi Gomba. As the subject of knowledge and education popped up in nearly every conversation, I realized their quest was not only part of my imagination (and practice), but also of theirs. Hence this historiography is a creation, not only mine, but a shared project, the outcome of our shared time and place; a "historical imagination - the imagination, that is, of both those who make history and those who write it" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:xii).

This book, then, is neither the history the storyteller hoped for - and never could have been - since my focus on Tashi Gomba, as any other focus - imposes restrictions; nor is it the truth as the Tulkus may have wanted me to write. Will I ever be able to explain to him that "ethnography personifies, in its methods and its models, the inescapable dialectic of fact and value" (ibid.:159)? Perhaps it would be better to emphasize his request to "write dharma" and to refer to Adams where she compares the representation of reality in ethnography and Buddhist views on reality, turning ethnography in itself into “something of an exercise in Buddhist practice” (Adams 1996:169). The visualisations of gurus, Gods and demons in meditation practice, to reflect the practitioner's inner state to eventually transcend it would resemble the 'virtual reality she recognizes to go on between Westerners and Sherpas - not to see the Other for what he/she is, but what you like him/her, and yourself, to be - and to make this process transparent through ethnography. “Impermanence and emptiness” (ibid.:169), two other important notions of Buddhist perception of reality, would equally match. Impermanence could be translated into the ethnographic necessity of taking social change, and thus history, into its analysis. The acceptance and realization that there are no such things as (social) stability, fixed (social) structures, or unchanging universal values. There may be repetition, though, recurring themes, repeated strategies, similar motivations, but these always designate a process, a development because the differing contexts in which they occur, are chosen. The “emptiness” - or "voidness", as Buddhologists prefer to translate the Sanskrit sunyata - of an ethnography, I believe, can be understood by its relativity. It holds no truth, can never represent Reality, although its words may have practical purposes and thus be meaningful. What counts is, as I see it, to have the intention at least to offer an empathy, compassion, for the Other, that in fact should transcend this representation of these anis and monks, of the Bigu Sherpa women and men, of their memories and histories.

Since gaining knowledge and insight, cutting through ignorance and reaching wisdom, are the goal of the path of dharma, the theme of knowledge and education was not only an outcome of my ethnographic practice, but in a sense unavoidable when studying a religious community. Nevertheless, as I argued in the introductory chapter, the connection between Buddhist nuns and knowledge did not seem to be an obvious theme to those few who had written about these religious women before I went to the field in 1992. Nor might I have chosen knowledge and education as the main theme of my dissertation if the lay founder of Tashi Gomba, Nim Pasang, would not have stated that he had wanted to initiate "a religious centre of learning and arts". One might suspect that if Tashi Gomba would have been a nunnery, meant only for women, right from the start, its quality as "a place of refuge for divorced and widowed women" would have be given an emphasis; and as such might have led me eventually to concentrate on the position of lay women in Bigu Sherpa society, marriage customs, motherhood, and household responsi-

\* I do not imply a teleology when using the word development (cf.Foucault 1984).
bilities more than I have done here. One could argue then, additionally, that it was the history of Tashi Gomba in itself, the reason of its founding and its later shift from a mixed-sex monastery into a nunnery, that had directed the path of my research. Besides, Nim Pasang's initial aim with Tashi Gomba and its importance to the Drugpa Rimpoche may also have governed the Guru Lama's attempts to turn Tashi Gomba into a flourishing garden of the Dharma, since his efforts suggested that he had been ordered by the Drugpa Rimpoche to take responsibility for Tashi Gomba's development. He did so, or at least did his utmost, despite the fact that the monastery had already been turned into a female community by the time of his return around 1959. He gave Tashi Gomba its image of a place of spiritual and educational development, and as such inspired young lay women and the (especially younger) anis' quest for knowledge.

The theme of education and knowledge may have been obvious against the socio-political background of education in Nepal since the 1950s, but contrary to the anis of Tashi Gomba I did not find any suggestions that education had become a major motivation for women to become a nun in other Buddhist and/or Sherpa regions. In response to a changing world that was given the connotation of being "modern", not nunhood but school education, participation in a kind of Buddhist "Sunday schools" led by a village lama, employment in the tourist and mountaineering business (see Adams 1996), and migration (with their husbands) to Kathmandu were the general trajectories to seek advantages of the new opportunities. As a consequence, nunneries in those regions seem to die out, with the exception of nunneries in Tibetan refugee areas like Dharamsala (see Havnevik 1990) which have been places of refuge in a way Tashi Gomba has never been.

In addition, it also was the specific location of Bigu and its economic base, that stimulated the popularity of nunhood. The valley remained marginal as a tourist attraction, and thus also employment in this sector was not an obvious step. Its growing shortage of land, however, did force young Sherpa men to seek jobs, particularly in Kathmandu. Its short distance from Bigu, particularly after the paved road and the bus connection was established, turned the capital city into their main labour market. This same short distance, however, also kept Sherpa women at home to take care of the few plots their family still possessed. They had to function in a socio-economic sense as a home base, for their temporarily migrated men to return to, the place that still represented the husbands' identity and reputation; and in a cultural sense as "guardians of tradition" in a rapidly changing world. Bigu had shifted, following Samuel's regional categorization (1993:115-6), from a remote agricultural village to an area peripheral to Nepal's urban centre, Kathmandu. But its Sherpa women were held back from taking part in this development until the 1990s, and told to conserve the past.

Based on the above, the thesis which Haddad and Banks Findly propose, namely that women take a more active part in religious and public life in times of social crisis (Haddad and Banks Findly 1985:xii), can also be accepted in the case of Tashi Gomba. The questions following their thesis, whether women's more important roles are

because their traditional roles as maintainers and transmitters of values are threatened, or is it because traditional roles for both sexes have been abandoned altogether and, as a result, women no longer have to act like women at all? (ibid.:xii)
however, have both to be denied. In my view, young Bigu Sherpa women refused their traditional roles by turning to the monastic alternative, exactly because these roles were enforced - and not abandoned - by the social changes that took place. As I have tried to show, nunhood was definitely not seen as one of women's traditional roles, but rather as a way to "modernity". One might argue that anis do "no longer have to act like women", that is by taking up their traditional roles as wife and mother, but this was not because the roles of both sexes were abandoned.

On the other hand, one might argue that many parents did come to see nunhood as an acceptable, traditional alternative for their daughters, based on religious values that had become part of their Sherpa identity since Tashi Gomba's founding. Nim Pasang's attempt to give their Sherpa-ness an institutional base with Tashi Gomba to counter the political domination of the valley by the Kharka family, then, was continued by parents in favouring their daughters to become anis, instead of becoming "modern" city girls; in other words, in attempting to counter the ongoing Nepalisation of their valley through their daughters as representatives of their "traditional" Sherpa identity. As such, Tashi Gomba and its anis became a weapon in a struggle fought during the last two decades that went beyond the valley and the local Hindu threat, to a national plane. Lama Kelsang even brought the nunnery on a transnational plane, again by attaching to both Tashi Gomba and its nuns a "traditional" role: to the gomba, in a still distant and "peaceful" enough environment to be compatible to Westerners' longing to meditate in a Himalayan, Shangri La-like place; and, to the anis to take up women's traditional role of caretakers, now of Western Buddhist practitioners. However, these are perception of others, not of the anis themselves. As a consequence, the restraints that were put upon them to participate actively in a rapidly changing and growing world led to discussions and rebellious activities within the religious community. Because, more than lay women, the anis encountered this larger world through people and travels, and thus saw opportunities their lay mothers and sisters did not have.

Following many a young woman's motivation for nunhood, and their subsequent experiences as an ani at Tashi Gomba, it is not surprising that the younger anis - and others who refused to submit themselves to the doctrine of "preparation to death" - favoured the path of *sutra* above the path of *tantra*. Their curiosity, to explore the world, to learn, and to seek for a better life already in the here-and-now world - and not in a next - ran against the emphasis the path of *tantra* puts on retreat and solitude. These two emphases in gaining religious knowledge were, until the day I left Nepal in 1995, still an issue of discrepancies not only between the anis, but also between their two ruling lamas, the Tulku and Lama Kelsang. The path of *tantra* as the ideal of Tashi Gomba's religious founder, the Drugpa Rinpoche, was already subject to change, due to the social and politico-geographical changes that have taken place in the valley since his arrival. If his successor, the Tulku, will get his way, Tashi Gomba will make another move towards the path of *sutra*, where the anis eventually may have become well-educated women, not only on a religious but also on a social plane. If the abbot Lama Kelsang gets his way, Tashi Gomba will turn into the retreat annex of the new Drugpa Kagyupa monastery on Chipondole hill, next to Swayambu.

Most likely, the outcome will be a little of both. Tashi Gomba will probably become an retreat gomba, mainly for Western Buddhists but also for the older anis. The donations given by these foreigners in return for the anis' hospitality and support, which become more and more indispensable to the nunnery's existence, however, may be used according to the Tulku's wish to educate his young anis. It would certainly have taken this direction with Ani Karma Sangmo as a *nierpa*, the responsible person of the gomba's financial affairs, if her untimely death had not taken her away. I do not know whether young Ani Thupten Dickey has the strength and charisma to come up for the younger anis as her predecessor was. Her role as *nierpa* seemed to me to be crucial. Nevertheless, as I have shown so far, history can be whimsical, turned into a completely different direction by the action of one single individual. Thus, it is hard to tell what the near future of Tashi Gomba will look like. It will depend, not only on the lamas-in-charge, and the possible but not yet enacted cooperation between them, but also of the anis; whether more of them will choose to follow the example of the five anis to "vote with their feet", or to stay and to take part in the development of their gomba.
Whatever is going to happen, this ethnography will inevitably play its part too. I have written a "cause", but cannot take full responsibility for predating its "effects". I can only hope that I did my work with the right intentions.

May by the virtue resulting from this book, a subtle fragrance spreading, happiness increase for Tashi Chime Ghatsal and its inhabitants.1

1 After the last stanza of the charter of Tashi Gomba (see Appendix I).