

Cultural Change and Remembering: Recording the life of Au Leshey

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Gomchen Au Leshey (1900-ca.1978), a fully ordained monk, was a most exceptional Sherpa *thangka* painter. Tibetan Buddhist clerics as well as Sherpa lay people praised him highly for his artistic skills, but even more so for a lifestyle that was wholly committed to the Dharma. For more than a decade he led the secluded life of a hermit, in the style of Milarepa (1040-1123), Tibet's most famous yogin.

Among Western scholars Au Leshey enjoyed a special reputation due to his collaboration with Khenpo Sangye Tenzin, lama of Serlo Gompa in Solu, in the creation of *The Nyingma Icons*, first published in 1975 in the journal *Kailash*.¹ Whereas the latter had collected the songs of homage from various sources, Au Leshey had done the redrawing of the divinities which were originally included in the *History of the Nyingma Dharma* written by H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche. Moreover, Hugh Downs has devoted a considerable section of his famous book *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village* (1980) to the memory of Au Leshey.² Unfortunately this text presents only the period which Au Leshey spent as a hermit and *thangka* painter, while the rest of his life remains unmentioned.

It is a sad fact, however, that since Downs's work neither the artists nor the painting traditions of the Sherpa region of the Nepal Himalaya have been studied again.³ Today, more than two decades after his death, Au Leshey, his biography, his studies and achievements, and his services to Buddhism seem to be almost forgotten even within his own locality in Solu. In this context it is of particular interest that Au Leshey's individual life history reflects crucial aspects of the last century of Sherpa history. He lived in an era during which traditional Sherpa religion and culture, economy and society were confronted with fundamental changes.

For several months in the fall and winter of 1999 and again in the early spring of 2000 I worked with seven informants, all of them male clerics, to elicit and record Au Leshey's life story. This entailed travelling in the Junbesi Khola Valley from the monastery where I stayed to the diverse informants' houses, to visit and talk with them. All informants answered my queries with great interest and intensity. They had been familiar with me both as an ethnographer and as a person for almost ten years, and so we enjoyed a casual and friendly relationship. Owing to these favourable

¹ Vol. III (1975). The booklet was subsequently republished by Ratna Pustak Bhandar in Kathmandu.

² Downs 1980: 106ff; 116ff.

³ This observation contradicts D. Jackson's optimistic view concerning contemporary interest in the artists and the recent painting traditions of the Sherpas, see Jackson 1996: 350.

conditions our interviews usually turned into animated discussions of Au Leshey's achievements with special regard to Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society. Conversations were held in Nepali, Sherpa, and English. I asked them a range of questions on Au Leshey's rather unconventional life. It should be noted that to answer my questions they used both the past and present states of Sherpa culture as frames of reference. Thus, through a mixture of languages and the deliberate act of remembering by these informants, traces of Au Leshey's life history eventually assumed shape.

This article consists of two parts. In the first I attempt to give a realistic account of Au Leshey's life history, putting it in the context of Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society at his time. An important point I am trying to make concerns the reason for the Sherpas' encouragement of my endeavour and the particular meaning of his life history for my informants themselves. In the second part I will explore the rather complicated conditions of this anthropological life history research.

I. Recent religious, cultural, and social changes among the Sherpas

The Sherpas are an ethnically Tibetan, Buddhist people who for more than four and a half centuries have lived in hamlets and villages along the upper ridges in Solu-Khumbu, north-eastern Nepal. Owing to their successful engagement in Nepal's booming trekking and mountaineering industry, Sherpa religion and culture, economy and society have changed substantially over the past three decades.⁴ In search of a more comfortable life in the city, many Sherpas moved away from high-altitude Solu-Khumbu to the Kathmandu Valley. There, the majority of them settled in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu, especially in the area around the Tibetan neighbourhood of Baudha.

In the 1990s, young Sherpas and whole families continued to migrate from Solu-Khumbu to the city: young Sherpas were in search of employment while usually the wealthier families were interested in better education for their children and more comfort than could be found in a remote, high-altitude Sherpa village. Hence, Sherpa religion, culture, and society in Solu-Khumbu seem to be threatened. In the majority of villages many houses have been vacant for a long time and, as a consequence, are suffering from decay. The remaining local population consists mainly of elderly people, wives and children of absentee Sherpa men working in the flourishing trekking and mountaineering business, and impoverished Sherpas. In many cases ethnic Rai men take care of a Sherpa farm, dairy, or tourist lodge. Often the menial work is done by low-caste *Kami* people. In their school education, children studying in state schools both in Solu-Khumbu and in Kathmandu have been learning Nepali

⁴ On the dramatic change of Sherpa religion, culture, and society and its consequences see Fürer-Haimendorf (1984), Fisher (1991), Ortner (1995), and Adams (1996).

instead of Sherpa as their first language.⁵ Most importantly, today many young Sherpas are leaving even Kathmandu to look for better jobs in the West, ideally in places like New York City, California, and Oregon.

Sherpa encouragement and the ethnographer's responsibility

Now I shall explain why I was so strongly encouraged to reconstruct and write Au Leshey's life history. In recent years, many Sherpas have become aware of the threat to the future of traditional Sherpa culture posed by these increasing dispersals. Since the beginning of my field research in Solu-Khumbu in 1992, many Sherpas have expressed their deep concern that Sherpa religion, culture and society have been eroding for decades. Indeed, many took the fact that Au Leshey, the once famous Sherpa monk, hermit and *thangka* painter had almost been forgotten in his and their own community as a clear indication that with his passing away the lifestyles and histories of 'the old days' would soon be lost as well.

Owing to these circumstances, several organizations in both Solu and Khumbu were founded in recent years with the explicit aim of preserving traditional Sherpa culture and revitalizing Sherpa Buddhism. As a consequence I did not face any problems in explaining what I hoped to accomplish. My project to record the life history of Au Leshey was well received by virtually all of the Sherpas I talked with. My main informant summarized the Sherpas' wholly positive attitude towards my endeavour: "We highly appreciate your engagement with our culture. You are trying to collect our stories so that our histories and lifeways, which are illustrative of our traditional Sherpa religion and culture, will not be forgotten. If our children don't know about our own history - and this actually seems to be true of a great many Sherpa children - all will be lost."⁶ In these words a respected old *thangka* painter articulated a problem many Sherpas seem to be aware of today: the urgent need to preserve the Sherpas' rich cultural heritage.

Moreover, in the context of the apparent decline of Sherpa culture, the textual inscription of Au Leshey's life history came to be regarded as an important device to counter the threatened loss of their cultural memory at a time when Sherpa culture is being integrated into a globalised economy. The more I learned of what is actually at stake for the Sherpas today, the more I felt that the act of inscribing Au Leshey's life

⁵ Sherpa religion, history and language is presently taught only in the context of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan language in the monastery schools in Solu-Khumbu and in the Tibetan Buddhist boarding schools in the Kathmandu valley. The Hillary schools in Khumjung, Kharikhola and Junbesi introduced Sherpa religion, history and language as distinct subject only about six years ago.

⁶ In a recent article Desjarlais has noted a similar attitude towards his life history project among the Yolmo people of Helambu who are facing comparable problems (2000: 261-275).

on paper implied a certain responsibility on the part of the biographer/anthropologist.⁷

Traditional Sherpa *thangka* painting and Au Leshey, monk, hermit, and painter

During the first half of the 20th century the Solu Valley, the southern part of Solu-Khumbu, has been the home of several accomplished painters of religious art. These artists painted the monastery walls and furnishings and, most important, created *thangkas*, the famous scroll-paintings of Tibetan Buddhism. Like Tibetan *thangka* painters in general, most of them were pious laymen and therefore just ordinary artisans. Like other villagers they usually cultivated some land, and in the case of the Sherpas, they grew wheat, potatoes, and some vegetables to sustain their family. Like most of their Tibetan colleagues who depicted the deities of the four Tantras they had, at least formally, to be tantric initiates.⁸

In many respects, the Sherpa monk and *thangka* painter Ngawang Lekshey,⁹ more commonly called Au or Uncle Leshey, represents an interesting exception from that rule. His life of renunciation and solitary practice, and the gathering of disciples at his retreat, are reminiscent of some crucial events in the life of Milarepa. Since his early childhood he had led a life wholly dedicated to the Buddhist Dharma. In the year 1900 he was born in the village of Gompa Zhung in Central Solu.¹⁰ He spent a long period studying at different monasteries before spending the last decade of his life as a hermit and *thangka* painter. After having suffered from various diseases for some years he died in far away Kharsang in Sikkim in 1977 or 1978. To my informants the story of Au Leshey's life is significant because of the extreme hardship he went through. But most important to them was the fact that by having practiced the Dharma with complete dedication he demonstrated in his religious biography the exemplary path of a perfect practitioner, both to clerics and to lay people.

⁷ Similarly, Desjarlais reflects on what his 'responsibilities might be, in the writing of that (i.e. Meme's) life' and he worries about the 'potential effects' of his writings (2000: 263, 287).

⁸ On the typical features of Tibetan painters see Jackson & Jackson (1994: 12-13). These authors, however, have respected the common misconception that the traditional Buddhist *thangka* artist is not necessarily a yogin who ritually evoked the deities and then painted them.

⁹ Ngawang, < Tib. *sngags* 'mantra', *dbang* 'initiation', is the term indicating a fully ordained monk – or nun – which is bestowed by the lamas of the Dza Rong Phu Monastery; formerly this was done by Ngawang Tenzin Norbu such as in the case of Au Leshey, today by Trulzhig Rinpoche as his successor (see below). Lekshey derives from Tib. *dge-chung Ngag-dbang legs-bshad*, 'good speech'.

¹⁰ According to my informants Au Leshey was born in 1900 whereas according to D. Jackson (1996 : 366, fn. 800) Au Leshey was born ca. 1915-1920.

Early studies and religious education

Au Leshey was the youngest of three sons of poor parents. As a child he had been named Sangye. Lama Lhakpa, his father, was a respected village tantric priest (*sngags-pa*) of the influential Serwa clan in Gshongs-lung or Gompa Zhung (Nep. Junbesi).¹¹ Like all Sherpas in Solu-Khumbu up to that time, Lama Lhakpa received religious instructions from a famous lama who had played a key role in shaping Sherpa Buddhism in its modern form. The then-influential lama Trakar Taso Tulku Choki Wangchuk (1775-1837) lived in Kyirong in the Mangyul region. Since shortly before 1850 some Sherpa village priests had moved to Mangyul to study with this great lama. Choki Wangchuk had instructed Sherpas in a series of ritual and meditational cycles which still are popular throughout Solu-Khumbu.¹² This was prior to the recent rise of celibate monasticism among the Sherpas, which dates from the beginning of the 20th century and started with the construction of Tengboche Gompa in Khumbu in the years 1916-1919. Chiwong Gompa, the second oldest Sherpa monastery situated in the southern Solu region, was built in 1923.

In a small side valley of the Junbesi Khola Valley situated high above Gompa Zhung, Lama Lhakpa had built a simple place of retreat where he used to meditate in solitude. It was here at his 'upper retreat place'¹³ that Lama Lhakpa also instructed his young son Sangye in the Dharma for about eight years. This period came to a sudden end with Lama Lhakpa's death. Sangye, determined to devote his life to the Dharma, moved to Chiwong Monastery, which was not yet completed. There he joined a group of young Sherpa laymen who were determined to renounce worldly concerns, receive full monastic ordination, and join the future *sangha*, i.e. the monk community, of Chiwong.

Before the growth of monasticism in Solu-Khumbu the Sherpas had to leave their 'homeland' in order to receive religious education and to become monks at one of their traditional monastic centres of learning in Tibet. To achieve this the Sherpas, being adherents of the Nyingmapa tradition, had to travel to Tibet. They went either to Mindroling Monastery in the vicinity of Lhasa, the most important monastery-university of the Nyingmapa tradition, founded in 1670 by Terdak Lingpa and the

¹¹ It is noteworthy that members of the Sherpa Serwa clan claim descent from one of the most illustrious lineages of hereditary lamas in the Tibetan Nyingmapa tradition, the Nyang clan. Its most famous member was the treasure-finder (*gter-ston*) Nyangral Nyima Ozer (1136-1204) who is regarded as one of the leading figures in the history of the Nyingmapa School of Tibetan Buddhism (see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 755-759). On the genealogical link between the Sherpa Serwa lineage and the Nyang clan of Tibet see Childs (1997: 23-25).

¹² He was one of three lamas who played an important role in the codification and transmission of Nyingmapa teachings in the 18th and 19th centuries from Southern Tibet to Nepal (see Ehrhard 1993: 81; Kapstein 1983: 42).

¹³ Tib. *mtshams khang teng*, 'upper retreat place' for meditational practice in solitude, is opposed to *poroshe cham khang*, another retreat place which is situated at lower altitude and within eye-sight of Gompa Zhung or Junbesi.

seat of the chief Nyingma patriarch; to Nyingmapa centres of learning such as the monasteries of Shechen and Dzogchen in Kham (where the Sherpas had originally come from); or to Dza Rong Phu Monastery in the Dingri region, situated just north of Mt. Everest. The journey was usually combined with trading activities and a pilgrimage to the holy places. The main religious activities follow traditional religious patterns: Lama Sangwa Dorje, the mythical hero of the Sherpas, had visited many places of pilgrimage in Tibet, and he had gone on many religious retreats in caves where he had practised meditation.¹⁴

After the construction of Chiwong Gompa had finally been completed the group of young men went on pilgrimage to Dza Rong Phu Monastery, situated on the northern side of Chomolungma (Mt. Everest) across the Nangpa La. They went there to meet the Dza Rong Phui Sangye ('The Buddha of Dza Rong Phuk'), Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, the founder (1902) and abbot of Dza Rong Phu Monastery.¹⁵ Their goal was to obtain religious instruction, to receive initiation, and to become fully ordained monks. Ngawang Tenzin Norbu (1866-1940) had been a monk of Mindroling Monastery. This famous Tibetan lama, the fifth reincarnation of Lama Sangwa Dorje, had a strong interest in expanding monastic Buddhism. This inspired him to encourage the establishment of Tengboche Gompa and some other monasteries among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu such as Thame, Takshindo and Chiwong.¹⁶ Actually, the construction of Dza Rong Phu Monastery mirroring the introduction and spread of 'high religion' (Ortner) marks the beginning of the modern era in the development of Sherpa Buddhism.¹⁷

From Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, Sangye received the monk name Ngawang Lekshey. However, this name is not reflective of the artistic skills for which he was held in high esteem among clerics and lay people alike in later years. Whereas most of the other Sherpa monks from Chiwong Monastery left Dza Rong Phu sooner or later after their full ordination, Ngawang Lekshey is said to have remained there for about thirty years in order to continue his studies and improve his religious learning. Finally he moved back to Chiwong Gompa in Solu. It is from this time onwards that he devoted his life wholly to the religious art of *thangka* painting. He spent his

¹⁴ On Sangwa Dorje see Zangbu & Klatzel (1988: 12).

¹⁵ Ngawang Tenzin Norbu was the guru of Trulzhig Rinpoche - who is his successor as abbot of Dza Rong Phu Monastery - and of Au Leshey.

¹⁶ On the biography of Ngawang Tenzin Norbu and the history of Dza Rong Phu Monastery see Aziz (1978: 209-211); Macdonald (1987a: 1-10); on the rise of monasticism within the realm of Sherpa Buddhism see Fürer-Haimendorf (1964, chapter 5); Ortner (1989a: 99 - 149, 178-192); Ortner (1989b, 1990).

¹⁷ According to Aziz (1978: 209) it represents "... the finest example of institutional growth and the force of independent enterprise. It is also a reflection of the general economic expansion the area has been experiencing."

apprenticeship as a *thangka* painter in Surkyema, a small hamlet far below the massive rock on which Chiwong Gompa is situated.¹⁸

Hermit and *thangka* painter

It was during this time that Au Leshey, in association with the monk community of Dza Rong Phu, practised a meditation which is related especially with the religious biography (Tib. *rnam-thar*) of Milarepa. In the course of the *ras rkyang*, the practitioners are dressed in only one simple cloth made from cotton, following the example of the cotton-clad Milarepa.¹⁹ This meditational practice generates inner warmth while at the same time protecting the practitioner from unfavourable weather conditions outside.²⁰

The meditation was practised in a retreat just above Phungmoche, a small monastery which is situated in the upper part of the Junbesi valley in Solu. It was presided over by Trulzhig Rinpoche (born in 1915 in Dupthay near Taklung Monastery in central Tibet), Ngawang Tenzin Norbu's chief disciple, who had succeeded him as abbot after his death in 1940.²¹ In 1959, the year in which China consolidated its occupation of Tibet, causing the exodus of more than 100,000 Tibetans, Trulzhig Rinpoche escaped with most of the monks and nuns of the Dza Rong Phu monastic community across the Nangpa La into Solu-Khumbu. In Solu-Khumbu he sought a suitable remote place in which to rebuild his monastery, which had been devastated by the Chinese. Later, after stopovers at Thame and Chiwong Gompa, the Dza Rong Phu community stayed for some time at Sengye Phuk, a place situated high above the small temple of Phungmoche which had special mythological importance for the Solu Sherpas. This was their last stay before they settled down at a nearby site which was finally chosen for the construction of their new monastery called Thubten Chöling.

After this meditational practice in the company of the monk community of Dza Rong Phu, Au Leshey lived for a short time at Trulzhig Rinpoche's newly built monastery. It was at this time that Trulzhig Rinpoche came to appreciate the artistic skills of this Sherpa monk-painter of simple and poor origin. Au Leshey was already known and respected as a *thangka* painter, but he had developed a strong dislike of

¹⁸ Unfortunately it was neither possible to find out the name nor to learn about the biography of the Sherpa artist who taught Au Leshey the art of *thangka* painting.

¹⁹ See Das (1989: 78): *ras rkhyang*, 'dressed only in cotton cloth'.

²⁰ On the various kinds of meditations Milarepa practiced in his life see his religious biography translated by Lhalungpa (1977: chapters 4 – 7); on the practice of *tummo* (Tib. *gTum-mo*) see p. 117.

²¹ Trulzhig Rinpoche is one of the leading hierarchs of the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism. He is known to have incarnated in numerous identities. The earliest of these incarnation lines goes back to ānanda, the favourite disciple of Buddha *oākyamuni*. On Trulzhig Rinpoche's biography see Aziz (1978: 212-214).

the normal monastic way of life.²² Instead, the deeply religious monk-painter strove to adopt the kind of life for which Milarepa had become highly revered by Tibetan Buddhist clerics and lay people alike. Thus, when leaving the monastic community of Thubten Chöling in 1963 or 1964 Au Leshey took a vow never to cross anyone's threshold again. At the beginning of his sixties he removed himself from the monastery to spend the end of his life in the forest practising the Dharma in the solitude of the mountains in accordance with the yogin way of life exemplified by Buddhist saints such as Milarepa. Au Leshey retired to the small, remote meditation retreat (*mtshams khang*) where Lama Lhakpa had once practised and given his young son his first religious instruction. There he spent about ten years, a period which turned out to be the most creative part of his life as a *thangka* painter.

As the structure built by Lama Lhakpa had almost disappeared, Au Leshey initially lived in a tent. His small tent provided space for one person only; in fact, it offered just enough shelter for him to sit upright for meditation. His simple diet consisted of various plants, mainly stinging nettles (following the example of Milarepa) which he used to collect in the surrounding forest. As to his valuables he possessed only one cooking pot, and there was not even a store of grain. He led this sort of life for some months, just as his father had done before him, and as many other pious Sherpa men and women had done at certain points in their individual biographies.²³ By chance, he was discovered by a woodcutter. The Sherpas respect those who renounce worldly concerns and practise meditation in solitary retreat. The news of the hermit's presence on the side of a steep cliff under a large overhanging boulder, high above but not so far away from the village of Gompa Zhung, attracted many visitors: clerics, laypeople, and eventually also some foreigners. Although Au Leshey never asked for anything, the pious visitors brought him many offerings.

The hermit becomes a teacher of a gathering of disciples

Gradually, Au Leshey's retreat evolved into a widely known centre of learning for *thangka* painting. Among the diverse visitors were two young monks who were studying at nearby Serlo monastery.²⁴ They asked him if he would teach them the art of *thangka* painting, and Au Leshey gave his consent. As they needed some

²² Unfortunately it was not possible to clarify the reason for his strong dislike as well as for his consequent decision.

²³ According to the information I have collected over a decade it seems that it was common at certain periods, in particular at certain periods of 'crisis', when Sherpas were more prone to donate part of their wealth to support a lama or a monastic community, to devote one's life to the practice of the Dharma or even to undergo the hardships of a hermit's life. The recent period of revitalization of Tibetan Buddhist tradition see Aziz (1984) that can also be witnessed among the Sherpas - as well as in the Tibetan diasporic community in Nepal - is reflective of a crisis that has emerged in the context of the ongoing encounter with modernity and certain forces of globalisation.

²⁴ Serlo Gompa was founded in 1959 by the highly learned and widely respected Sherpa Khempo Sangye Tenzin. On his biography see Macdonald (1987b: 87-99).

accommodation, the two disciples offered to build a small and very simple house as a more permanent structure. That house was built onto the face of the cliff. As more people came to ask him for instruction and guidance some small houses were constructed at a nearby site. Even some Westerners showed up and joined the group of disciples of both laypeople and monks which had gathered around Au Leshey as their guru. On the same spot on the side of a cliff under a large boulder an American disciple finally built a tiny three-room house for Au Leshey. Its ruins are still visible today.

Although Au Leshey spent these years teaching various disciples he also managed to lead a hermit's life, practising meditation in retreat and painting *thangkas*. In the narrations of my informants special importance was attributed to the fact that there was no bed in the house: Au Leshey was said to have slept cross-legged and erect in the same place where he used to read, eat, and paint. He usually got up at three in the morning, read scriptures until around daybreak, and then performed a service for all sentient beings before he started to paint. He used traditional mineral colours, ground from stones brought from Tibet, whenever they were available, but he was also known for his very pragmatic use of modern synthetic poster colours, contrary to the conventional norms of *thangka* painting. All my informants showed their greatest admiration, however, when they elaborated on the simplicity of his needs: during certain extended phases of meditation he lived on only one pill of Tibetan medicine per day.²⁵

According to them, Trulzhig Rinpoche had always actively encouraged Au Leshey to follow his chosen way of life as a forest hermit and *thangka* painter. After the death of Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, Trulzhig Rinpoche became Au Leshey's guru; he also supported him in various other ways. Most importantly, however, Trulzhig Rinpoche acted according to an influential Tibetan cultural pattern as his main *zhindak*, i.e. patron/donor/sponsor (Tib. *sbyin-bdag*).²⁶ Accordingly, Trulzhig Rinpoche commissioned Au Leshey mainly to paint *thangkas* for his new monastery and also for his personal use. Moreover, it was Trulzhig Rinpoche who gave "to the hermitage of the Bhiksu and Yogin Leshi" the name *Pinnacle of Supreme Paradise*.²⁷ In a poem which sums up the most characteristic features of the monk, hermit and *thangka* painter Au Leshey, the Tibetan hierarch of the 'Old School' expressed his deep respect for him. There he wrote:

... In this natural rock-nest
lives a sage, austere yogin:
he is an object of worship,
a bhiksu in manner,
with hair in long locks,

²⁵ This practice is called *rden bcud len*. See Das (1989: 394).

²⁶ On the history of the important relationship (Tib. *mchod yon*) of a lama acting as spiritual adviser (*mchod gnas*) of his royal or princely lay donor (*yon bdag*) in Tibetan Buddhism see the recent work by Ruegg (1995). On the meaning and the importance of the *zhindak* in Sherpa culture see Berg (forthcoming).

²⁷ See Downs (1980: 170).

a descendant of the clan of Nyang.
 His small size is not disagreeable,
 and though he acts as an artist,
 these icons are not for sale,
 but for spiritual accumulation.²⁸

In their book on Tibetan *thangka* painting, D. and J. Jackson have emphasized that painting and sculpture "... was crucial to the religious life of Tibet because it was a medium through which the highest ideals of Buddhism were evoked and brought alive. A sacred painting was for the Tibetan a 'physical support' - in other words an embodiment - of enlightenment."²⁹ In the case of ordinary lay people who came to visit Au Leshey, the commissioning of *thangkas* depended on sad and unavoidable events in their lives. Sickness or trouble, death in the family, and the need for an image in connection with a particular necessary religious practice were the three main reasons for Sherpas to request the painting of a *thangka*.³⁰ Every Sherpa home has an altar, for which a family orders images according to its financial capacity. It is believed that the commissioning of religious art, like any other virtuous act, brings merit (Tib. *bsod nams*), and only this can give rise to future benefits. Apart from asking for the painting of a *thangka*, people visited Au Leshey in order to request blessings, memorial service, or simply for advice. It was painting, however, which occupied most of Au Leshey's time. Although he asked for nothing in return, people who had money gave him a little, whereas those who did not have money gave him some butter or milk, potatoes, wheat or barley.

The life of the flourishing community finally reached its peak when still more students arrived and there was no place for them to stay. As a consequence, some disciples built another cave complex not so far away from Au Leshey's hermitage. For some years, however, Au Leshey's health had been in a bad state. In 1975, when he could barely move his arms and knees, he finally accepted a doctor for a medical checkup. The latter provided him with some medicine and a crutch, and he even convinced the monk-hermit to leave his retreat, which meant nothing less than committing the sin of breaking his vow.

After a short stay of one or two months at Thubten Chöling Monastery, Ngawang Tengye, the older of his two nephews, who represented the last surviving members of his family, carried the sick Au Leshey on his back all the way to the Solu air strip at Phaplu. Via Kathmandu, Ngawang Tengye took his uncle to Kharsang in Sikkim. There he had a job at All India Radio as the announcer of the Tibetan programme. Au Leshey never recovered in this unfamiliar new place in faraway Sikkim; he died there in 1977 or 1978. The community of disciples had dissolved, and Trulzhig Rinpoche ordered the valuables of his retreat to be taken to Thubten Chöling. Since that time only few ruins and a small *chorten* (Tib. *mchod-*

²⁸ In Downs (1980: 169); translation of the poem by Kapstein (1983 or 1997).

²⁹ Jackson & Jackson (1994: 9)

³⁰ Jackson & Jackson (ibid.)

rten) nearby containing his ashes testify to those who know that once there had been a Sherpa monk-hermit's retreat and a centre of learning for *thangka* painting.

II. Dealing with the 'death of memory'

Over the last fifteen years much research and debate within the social sciences has focused on the constitution of knowledge. Since the debate on 'writing culture', which has resulted from a 'crisis of representation', anthropologists have been seriously rethinking anthropological theorising and reworking ethnographic practice.³¹ In this context I am concerned with an important issue of the ongoing debate. In the following I want to elaborate on the 'micro-politics' (Behar 1993: 149) of the situation in which Au Leshey's life history was obtained. This includes information on both the particular conditions of fieldwork and on the ways in which the anthropologist/biographer was personally involved as an 'active, situated, participant' (Turner 2000: 51) in the conversations as well as in the construction of the resulting representation.³²

When trying to elicit the life history of Au Leshey among the Sherpas of Solu I did not face any difficulties from the side of my informants. Neither did I meet with polite reservation nor direct resistance as were experienced by J. Gyatso, for instance, when she tried to collect information from a high-ranking lama on the practice of diary writing in the context of her research on Tibetan autobiography.³³ This resistance is due to the conflicting attitudes towards diary writing that persist amongst Tibetan Buddhists. On the one hand one should be humble regarding one's own achievements and virtues, whereas on the other there is the Buddhist insistence that "... only 'nirvanic', as opposed to samsaric, activities are valuable ..."³⁴ - However, the obstacles I had to face were of another sort.

Life history research in anthropology usually deals with living personalities such as in Crapanzano's *Tuhami* (1980), Shostak's *Nisa* (1981), Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (1993) or Desjarlais' *Echoes of a Yolmo Buddhist's Life, in Death* (2000). In anthropological research the life history is understood as the result of a narrative process leading toward the construction of a self.³⁵ In this realm it is the privilege of the narrator to act as both the storyteller and the main character at the same time.³⁶ However, when I started

³¹ See e.g. the recent anthologies by Gupta & Ferguson (1997), Appadurai (1997) and by Marcus (1998).

³² Abu-Lughood has emphasized "that we must constantly attend to the positionality of the anthropological self and its representations of others" (1991: 141-2).

³³ Gyatso (1997: 162ff).

³⁴ Gyatso (1997: 176). For a more detailed discussion of this aspect see the next chapter.

³⁵ For a recent review of life history research in anthropology see Peacock & Holland (1993).

³⁶ Crapanzano (1994: 873) describes the two different characters in one as "the controlling internal narrator and that narrator's subject."

collecting data on his life in 1999 Au Leshey had been dead for more than twenty years. In the course of my research I had to realize that his death involved what Behar has called 'the death of memory' (1996: 42). My aim in this context is to convey a sense of the complexity of the situation with which I had to come to terms.

In contrast to the usual subjects of life history research, my main character, Au Leshey, did not have the chance to construct a particular image of himself by narrating his own life history. Although he is the main character he is not his own storyteller. In other words, Au Leshey's life history as I have presented it above is not a self-portrayal, but one constructed by others who had actually had some personal contact with him in historical retrospect.³⁷ Gradually, the life history of Au Leshey emerged in a series of conversations with my different informants. And it was the biographer/anthropologist who combined the bits and pieces he obtained and inscribed the life history on paper.

Indeed, I never met Au Leshey personally. Instead, I had a substantial previous knowledge dating from the time when I began my ethnographic research among the Sherpas in 1992. This knowledge was mediated mainly by a few Westerners. Some of them had been living in Kathmandu for many years and had known Au Leshey personally, while others had just heard of him by way of Downs' book *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village* and/or the drawings of Nyingma icons published in *Kailash* in 1975. Such informants mentioned a community of Sherpa and Western disciples who had gathered around Au Leshey as their *guru*, centred on his hermitage, high up in the mountains of remote Solu-Khumbu. In this context it is of interest that their accounts depicted the community in a way that was strongly reminiscent of the Western counter-culture of the late sixties.

Such was the situation I was confronted with when I undertook my research on Au Leshey's life history. The only living members of Au Leshey's family, his two nephews (his elder brother's sons), had emigrated 'a long time ago': the older to Sikkim, the younger to an unknown place. His simple house in Junbesi was in ruins; about one fifth of Junbesi's 84 households was deserted; and many of his generation had either died or moved away from Solu-Khumbu to places in the Kathmandu Valley such as Baudha.

Some of the few surviving members of his generation in western Solu had heard his name, at least. However, most of them did not know much more about him, because none had known him personally. But things were even more complicated. Sherpa society is characterized by a deep cleavage between the religious élite and the laity. Accordingly, there is a marked disjunction between spiritual and secular knowledge. It is due to this cleavage that lay people generally feel uncomfortable

³⁷ As to the act of 'construction' in this context Bruner's statement still holds true that "... a life history is still a story, a representation of life, not life as lived or experienced." (1988: 8). Peacock & Holland (1993: 368) prefer the term 'life story' because it does not connote that the narration is true.

when asked to serve as informants on religious matters, including their religious specialists. In this context Sherpa lay people are usually quick to emphasize without hesitation that they themselves don't know. Thus, instead of engaging in the art of social remembering themselves, they politely send the ethnographer to their experts in religious matters.³⁸

Hence, my group of informants amounted to a very small number of persons. All of them were educated male religious specialists who had studied for a short time at the same monastery as Au Leshey: one *thangka* painter, two monks, one lama (an abbot), and one *sngags-pa* (village Tantric priest). And there were two who had once been members of the gathering of Au Leshey's disciples at his hermitage. Whereas the informants of the first group remembered only very vaguely, simply because so many decades had passed, the two other informants were the only ones who had lived with Au Leshey and studied under him for more than a year each.

Unfortunately, two personalities who were of crucial importance in Au Leshey's life were out of reach at the time of my investigation. The Sherpa artist who had introduced Au Leshey to the religious art of *thangka* painting had died in the 1950s; today not even his name is remembered. Also, Kapa Par Gyalzen, one of the most prominent Solu Sherpa *thangka* painters of the late 20th century, had passed away in 1994. In close cooperation with Kapa Par Gyalzen, Au Leshey had painted the *thangkas* and murals of the newly built Thubten Chöling monastery in 1962/63. Unfortunately Kapa Par Gyalzen's two sons, who would have been a valuable source of information, had been living in Japan as *thangka* painters for more than a decade and were therefore out of reach.

Generating a religious life history in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition: *namthar*, the literary genre of religious biography

What does it mean to elicit a life history in the context of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition? There is an apparent contradiction between life histories and the Buddhist system of thought, practice, and belief, because the 'self' is regarded as being ultimately nonexistent.³⁹ Moreover, a life is viewed simultaneously as impermanent and illusory but also highly consequential.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, written religious biographies of accomplished practitioners form a distinct genre of religious literature.⁴⁰ It is called *namthar* (Tib.

³⁸ In the course of her research among the Sherpas S.B. Ortner encountered a similar pattern of behaviour on the part of the laity (1978: 136; 1989: 7-8). - J. Draper has done specific research on this aspect; according to him there is a 'widening cleavage' which he attributes to "... the increasing control by the monastic establishment of [...] spiritual knowledge and power" (Draper: 1994: 79).

³⁹ On this aspect see Collins (1982).

⁴⁰ In a recent anthology the great range of genres actually represented in Tibetan literature has been highlighted by a group of scholars (Cabézon & Jackson 1996).

rnam-thar) which literally means ‘liberation’.⁴¹ As its name suggests, whether it is actually self-written or written by devout disciples, the central concern of this literary genre of Tibetan sacred biography is to portray an individual master’s religious practices, spiritual development, and attainment of liberation.⁴² At the same time, it offers a teaching as well as instructions for spiritual practitioners.⁴³ Thus, hearing or reading how revered saints such as Marpa or Milarepa overcame their own personal obstacles can inspire others in their own efforts to attain complete liberation. In his introduction to the life and songs of ‘Brugpa Kun-legs (1455-1529), R. A. Stein cites the famous yogin’s ironic statement concerning the particular value attached to remembering the lives of esteemed Tibetan Buddhist masters. Provided it is ‘useful’ for religious practice, his life is worth remembering. But, as to the profane aspects of his life — the ‘stupid history of my life’ — these are regarded as being not valuable enough for them to be written down on paper.⁴⁴

Lay Sherpas are not accustomed to telling their own profane life histories in any form, and certainly not in an intimate and confessional way. However, when I was researching Au Leshey’s life history among the Sherpas of Solu all respondents understood what I wanted. This easy understanding is due to the fact that Sherpas have some culturally patterned ideas of religious life histories. Like other ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people, most Sherpas are still familiar with many of the details and episodes which colour the sacred biography of Tibet’s most famous yogin, the great Milarepa (1040-1123).⁴⁵ A disciple of Marpa The Translator (1012-1097), the first Tibetan patriarch of the Kagyu lineage,⁴⁶ Milarepa is regarded as the archetype of the perfect disciple, practitioner, and teacher. Moreover, Milarepa epitomizes the style of the ‘crazy yogin’ (Tib. *smyon-pa*, also rendered as ‘divine madman’ in tibetological literature): unconventional, uninhibited, full of humour, skilled in teaching through story-telling, and possessing great insight into the nature of the world through his

⁴¹ As to the origin of this literary genre J.B. Robinson has emphasized that biography and history are “.. genres more characteristic of Tibetan than Indian Buddhist literature” (Robinson 1996: 57).

⁴² On the separate genre of Tibetan religious literature called *rnam-thar* see Tucci (1949 I: 150-151); Willis (1985); Kapstein (1997: 180). Western translations of Tibetan Buddhist *rnam-thar* of esteemed religious figures, both self-written and disciple-written, have been available for several decades. The most recent ones are by Ricard (1994), Willis (1995), and Gyatso (1998).

⁴³ Ricard (1994: XVII) refers to the important fact that a *namthar* leaves a “deep impression” on the reader’s mind.

⁴⁴ Stein (1972: 14).

⁴⁵ Milarepa’s sacred biography was compiled and written some centuries after his death (1488) by Tsang Nyon Heruka (1452-1507), another great yogi; see Lhalungpa (1977: XXX-XXXI). On the biographical tradition of Milarepa see Tiso (1996). At the beginning of the sixteenth century a whole school of biographical literature came into being.

⁴⁶ On the sacred biography of the great eleventh-century Tibetan master Marpa of Lhotrak (Tib. *Mar-pa Chos-kyi-blo-gros*) collected and written by the ‘mad yogin’ Tsang Nyön Heruka (1452-1507) see Chögyam Trungpa (1999).

extensive practice. Milarepa is therefore highly venerated among the Sherpas who are adherents of the Nyingmapa order.

The informants' narratives concerning Au Leshey's life history and the process of remembering

As Au Leshey had chosen the lifestyle of a yogin instead of a monk's existence⁴⁷ the association of his life history with that of Milarepa is inevitable. Accordingly, the narratives I collected were subject to a considerable degree of cultural standardisation. His life history was seen as a shining example of a devout Buddhist practitioner. Hence the diverse narratives mirrored the informants' deep admiration of the exemplary nature of Au Leshey's life history which they perceived and moulded according to Milarepa's *namthar*. Often I had the impression that when an informant began narrating the details and episodes of Au Leshey's life history it was only in the process of remembering and narrating that he became aware of the fact that his local Sherpa community had nurtured a religious figure of such standing. This could be sensed in a certain pride that coloured the vivid narratives.

Indeed, in this context there were several voices, but no 'multiplicity of voices', and there was no negotiating of 'multiple viewpoints' between the different informants.⁴⁸ Instead, I had to realize that the narrations of Au Leshey's life history actually amounted to a single view point. In contrast to this, in the case of Buddhist saints such as Milarepa there are various accounts of their deaths. These are consistently presented as a teaching and not solely as historical events that are significant for the writing of a biography. And, as F.V. Tiso (1997: 987) notes, such teaching "... is subject to the modifications introduced by successive authors in a process of editing and rewriting, i.e. redaction."

It is interesting that the diverse narratives focused primarily on Au Leshey as a hermit and *thangka* painter: this in fact only represents the latter part of his religious life history. Those years are described in great detail, while very little information was offered concerning the fifty-five years Au Leshey spent as a monk at different monasteries. In short, the suffering and hardship of the hermit and *thangka* painter constituted the key topos of all narrations of Au Leshey's life history. What remains to be emphasized, however, is the fact that although their narratives depicted Au Leshey as a truly outstanding religious figure among the Sherpas, he nevertheless retained his normal human character. For instance, the narrations never mentioned enlightened dreams and visions or the performance of miracles, which are often

⁴⁷ As a fully ordained *gelong* he deliberately broke away from monastic life for ever. He took a special vow and since then he considered himself as a yogin as opposed to a monk-recluse who is still somehow related to his monastery.

⁴⁸ On the 'multiplicity of voices in the field' see Hüwelmeier (2000), on the process of negotiating multiple viewpoints in the field see Shokeid (1997).

found in the religious biographies of Tibetan yogins.⁴⁹ Au Leshey did not live the life of a wandering mendicant teaching by means of spiritual songs such as the famous Tibetan yogin Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol,⁵⁰ for example.

As for the question of agency, my informants emphasized that from a very early age Au Leshey had shown a strong inclination towards the undertaking of a contemplative life in the mountain solitudes that he had experienced with his father. According to them, the crucial steps Au Leshey took in his religious life - such as the vow never to cross anyone's threshold again - can only be understood as the logical self-chosen way of a religious person of his kind. Being the third son, however, his choice follows traditional patterns: in case there were more sons in a family, the second or third was encouraged to become a monk.

Moreover, their deliberate remembering of details and episodes of Au Leshey's sacred biography made my informants aware of two important aspects of their culture and society at large. Repeatedly, my informants noted that Au Leshey the hermit represented a longstanding tradition in Sherpa Buddhism that has suffered from a severe rupture in the recent decades, and that now this had been lost, because there simply are no Sherpa hermits any more. This was attributed to the recent dramatic change which the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu have to face and come to terms with. My informants also referred to the fact that Au Leshey had practised *thangka* painting according to the principles of Tibetan Buddhist sacred art within a traditional Buddhist setting, but not for a capitalist market. The point they all wanted to raise was that Au Leshey never took any money for his fine pieces of sacred art. This sober comment can be properly understood only with special regard to the current commercialization of Buddhist sacred art, upon which the life of my main informant, the *thangka* painter, for instance, has been more or less wholly dependent.⁵¹

Thus, through their deliberate remembering my informants came to believe that the individual life history of Au Leshey was reflective of important aspects of Sherpa Buddhist tradition which nowadays are simply lost. According to my informants, Au Leshey's individual life history mirrored two issues which are of special importance for contemporary Sherpas. First, he lived his religious life at a time when the Sherpa Buddhist tradition, which he seems to epitomize to my informants, was still fully alive. And second, his death was perceived as symbolizing the end of the living Sherpa Buddhist tradition because of the Sherpas' current encounter with modernity. Accordingly, Au Leshey's life history is indicative of the last phase of traditional Sherpa Buddhism and the historical border line that clearly separates it from

⁴⁹ On this see, for example, the biographies of *Four Lamas of Dolpo* translated by D.L. Snellgove (1992).

⁵⁰ In Ricard (1994).

⁵¹ The recent commercialization of Buddhist sacred art in the Kathmandu Valley is analyzed by Bentor (1993) and by Teague (1997); the commodification of *thangkas* in Dharamsala is described by McGuckin (1996).

modernity. As such, his life history provided a common time frame around which my informants discussed the Sherpas' past, present, and future. It should also be mentioned that their remembering and reconstruction of Au Leshey's life history seems to have made my informants more aware of several historical facts: Sherpa religion, culture, and society have changed profoundly, the ongoing change brought not only visible individual gain (although not for all) but also considerable loss of their Sherpa Buddhist tradition, and that there is an urgent need for the Sherpas to do something to counteract the current erosion of their traditional heritage.

Conclusion

From Au Leshey's life history we may derive certain broad insights into the socio-economic conditions of Sherpa religion and culture during the first three quarters of the 20th century. Au Leshey lived in an era when many aspects of Tibetan Buddhist culture (not only in Tibet proper but also in the border areas of traditional Tibetan culture in the Himalayas) started to fade away or at least to undergo profound changes. In Solu-Khumbu, it was a period when Sherpa religion, culture, society and economy reached another stage in their history with the growth of monasticism. In fact, this happened just before the Sherpas' encounter with modernity and the forces of globalisation, a process which began in the middle of the 20th century after the first climbing of Mt. Everest by Sherpa Tenzing and Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953.

Thus, Au Leshey's individual life history mirrors important aspects of the last century of Sherpa history. He had received his religious education at the traditional centre of learning of Sherpa Buddhism that was situated in Tibet just north of Solu-Khumbu. Since the Chinese occupation in 1959 these religious, cultural, and economic ties with Tibet do not exist anymore. Among others, the important monastic centres of learning such as Dza Rong Phu have been destroyed by the Chinese. In consequence the Tibetan cultural area underwent a process of reorientation of Himalayan peoples, such as the Sherpas, toward the south.⁵²

Moreover, as a monk, Au Leshey witnessed the rise and growth of monasticism in Solu-Khumbu in the early years of the 20th century, which was possible mainly due to the success of the Sherpa business community. Au Leshey practiced *thangka* painting according to traditional Buddhist values as religious art; in other words he never 'sold' his art 'on the market'. From the beginning of the eighties (after his death, in other words), *thangka* painting among Sherpas and Tibetans has experienced a rupture in tradition owing to the commercialization of sacred art. Today that process has led to the transformation of the *thangka* genre into 'tourist art'.⁵³

⁵² On the 'general shift of influence' from the north toward the south see Aziz (1984: 76-81).

⁵³ On the history of the *thangka* tradition in Tibetan culture, the various schools and on the different styles see Tucci (1949 II); on the use of *thangkas*, within Tibetan culture, on the specific processes in the current commercialization of Tibetan *thangkas*, and the

Au Leshey has without doubt left a deep impression on posterity, not only due to his personal style but even more so because of the way he led a hermit's life for more than a decade. That happened at a time when the hermit's tradition in Sherpa Buddhism was already fading away. Nowadays, after almost a quarter of a century, the remnants of his hermitage are barely visible. Very few of his *thangkas* still exist. Au Leshey is almost forgotten by the local population, clerics and lay people alike, and particularly by the younger generation.

From the point of view of the Sherpas with whom I had the chance to talk about it, Au Leshey's life history serves a dual purpose. The concern traditionally associated with the literary genre of Tibetan spiritual biography is to portray the spiritual development of a religious person's life. Most important to them, however, is the fact that Au Leshey's life history inscribed on paper constitutes a necessary means for the Sherpas to counter the current, threatened loss of their cultural heritage.

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rationalizations provided by Tibetans for the commercialization of their sacred objects, see Bentor (1993); see also fn. 51 above).

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