

A NUNNERY IN NEPAL

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The study of Buddhist institutions among the Tibeto-Burman speaking populations of Nepal has been the concern of both Tibetologists and anthropologists, and the past two decades saw the publication of a number of works dealing with specific aspects of the practice of Buddhism in various parts of the kingdom¹. In my book *The Sherpas of Nepal* I discussed in some detail the constitution of the Nyingmapa monastery of Tengboche, but had little to say about the complementary community of nuns living at Devuche at no great distance from Tengboche². Other authors too paid more attention to the life-style and the practices of monks and lamas than to that of nuns, even though in some Buddhist societies, such as for instance among the Thakalis of Thak Khola³, nuns now greatly outnumber the dwindling number of monks. Yet nuns are an important element of Buddhist communities, and if we ignore them we forego the possibility of gaining an insight into the women's role in Buddhist religious life. When in August 1974 I decided to undertake a study of a community of nuns in Eastern Nepal, I was following a lead which had come my way twenty-one years earlier. At that time I had encountered two nuns from Bigu while camping in the Tamang village of Risingo through which I passed on my way to Khumbu. The nuns were collecting funds for the enlargement of their *gompa*, and my small donation was rewarded by some information on that nunnery lying some five days' walk to the north of Risingo and close to the Tibetan border. I was intrigued by the statement that in Bigu *gompa* Sherpa and Tamang nuns lived side by side, for I had been under

¹ David Snellgrove, *Buddhist Himalaya*, Oxford 1957.

Himalayan Pilgrimage, Oxford 1961.

Four Lamas of Dolpo, Vol. I, Oxford 1967.

Friedrich Funke, *Religioses Leben der Sherpa*. Khumbu Himal Vol. 9.

Innsbruck-München, 1969.

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *The Sherpas of Nepal. Buddhist Highlanders*, London 1964.

L.G. Jerstad, *Mani-Rimdu: Theatrical Festivals of the Sherpas of Nepal*. Seattle 1969.

² Op.cit. pp. 134, 138, 139.

³ Cf. "Caste concepts and status distinctions in Buddhist communities in Western Nepal", in C. von Fürer-Haimendorf (editor), *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*. London & Bombay, 1966.

the impression that these two ethnic groups, though both professing Buddhism, seldom joined in the creation of religious communities. Concentration on the study of various other populations prevented me then and in the subsequent years from visiting Bigu, but when in the summer of 1974 my wife and I found ourselves in Kathmandu with some weeks to spare we decided to devote the time to a micro-study of a nunnery of which we had heard for so many years. Unlike the most other centres of lamaistic monastic life, Bigu is now relatively easily accessible. Three hours' drive along the motor-road linking Kathmandu with Lhasa brings one to the small market town of Barabise, and from there Bigu can be reached on foot in three days' walk involving the crossing of the Tinsang La, a pass of some 11,000 feet altitude, but offering otherwise no natural obstacles.

The valley east of the Tinsang La in which Bigu is situated contains a mixed population of Sherpas, Tamangs, Thamis, Magars and a few families of Chetris, the latter being relatively recent settlers. Administratively the village of Bigu belongs to the Dolakha district, but economically the inhabitants are linked with Barabise and since the establishment of motor-traffic even with Kathmandu, rather than with the district headquarter at Charikot.

The *gompa* which on the map and in the parlance of the people of the more distant villages is described simply as Bigu *gompa*, is locally known as Tashi *gompa* and its full name is Tashi-chime-ga-tsel bikung (Pleasure garden of deathless good fortune). It lies at an altitude of 8,250 feet on a south-facing slope surrounded by cultivated fields, pastures and some scattered houses of Sherpas. The Sharpa village and an older and much smaller village temple, situated on a lower ledge, existed long before the establishment of Tashi *gompa*, and we shall see presently that some prominent Sherpas of the village were instrumental in the construction of the *gompa* and the foundation of a convent under the leadership of a Bhutanese lama.

THE HISTORY OF TASHI GOMPA

Tashi *gompa*, like many monastic institutions in Nepal, is a relatively recent foundation. The circumstances of its establishment are hence well known to people still alive, and while I was unable to obtain any documentary evidence, I gathered much information from villagers and nuns personally involved in the construction of the *gompa*.

The story goes that some forty years ago, in the year of the great earthquake of 1934 remembered throughout Nepal, a Drukpa lama from Bhutan passed through Bigu in the course of a pilgrimage. This lama, whose name was Ngawang Paldzen, is now referred to as the Tulku (or Autari in Nepali) because after his death he was reborn and in his new incarnation continues to head the four *gompa* which he founded in his earlier life. Ngawang Paldzen was known as Geshe Sherap

Dorje, but neither his original name nor the latter name is normally used by either villagers or nuns.

Nim Pasang, the *misar* (headman) of Bigu, and father of the present *misar* Tsiring Ngundu was often travelling in Tibet, and there he had been to numerous monasteries and convents. Greatly impressed by their role as centres of religious artistic activities, he conceived the idea of promoting in his own village the foundation of a *gompa* similar to those of Tibet. Once, when he stayed with one of his sons who was a lama living in a house near the site of the present *gompa*, he had an auspicious dream in which he saw gods and temples. This gave him the idea that the place was a suitable site for a *gompa*. Some time previously he had met a Drukpa lama whose charismatic personality had aroused his admiration. The lama had meanwhile gone to Bagan in Yelmu, but the *misar* Nim Pasang and his lama son set out to find him there and ultimately invited him to preside over the foundation. The lama accepted the invitation and promised to raise some of the funds required for the construction of a *gompa*. As the Drukpa lama Ngawang Paldzen had already founded two *gompa* for monks, namely those of Bagan and Tsum, Nim Pasang requested him to establish a *gompa* for nuns, where women anxious to lead a religious life, and widows or deserted wives in need of a place of refuge, could find shelter and inspiration.

Nim Pasang provided a suitable site and as much land as would annually yield 3 *muri* (i.e. circa 202.5 kg.) of wheat. He also contributed substantial funds and persuaded the villagers to give unpaid labour for the construction of the *gompa*.

Yet the resources of the village of Bigu in men and skills were insufficient for building a *gompa* such as the Drukpa lama and his patron envisaged. Hence they recruited helpers and craftsmen drawn from Lapche, a village north of Lama-bagar close to the Tibetan border. Ngawang Paldzen had stayed there for some time before coming to Bigu, and it must have been his influence which caused men from that relatively distant village to co-operate in the construction of a *gompa* at Bigu. The news of the proposed foundation of a *gompa* had also attracted a large number of monks and nuns, and they all helped in the collection of building materials. The first year was spent with the gathering of timber which was obtained from the forest on the hill-slopes surrounding Bigu. When the construction began there arose the need for skilled carpenters and later of painters capable of painting the frescoes in the interior of the *gompa*. The carpenters, who produced the carved doors and door-frames came mainly from Tibet, but painters were called from Bhutan as well as from the Solu region of Nepal, and from Khasa, a nearby Tibetan market-place often visited by the people of Bigu. The greater part of the painting work was done by two Bhutanese artists, the younger of whom later settled in Bigu, where he still lives with his Sherpa wife, who was a nun in Tashi *gompa* but gave up the religious life to marry the Bhutanese painter.

The older nuns, who witnessed those early stages in the *gompa's* history, tell of the hardships they then suffered. There were as yet no quarters to house them. Ngawang Paldzen and some of the nuns were given shelter in the houses of villagers, but did not stay in any house for more than a few days at a time. Other nuns lived in temporary sheds roofed with mats such as herdsmen use in their camps at high pastures. Monks and nuns laboured side by side with the villagers, carrying stones and dragging heavy beams to the building site.

At first many laymen too gave their labour freely without expecting payment. But skilled craftsmen had to be paid, and when it came to the construction of the roof of the *gompa*, the headman Nim Pasang and the Drukpa lama ran out of funds. Determined that the project should not come to a standstill, Nim Pasang sold a large portion of his land and his entire herd of yak and cross-breeds (*dzo*). The Drukpa lama also helped in the raising of funds by touring the surrounding villages and asking for contributions.

Thus the construction of the main building could be completed and the Bhutanese painters paid wages for decorating the interior and the porch of the *gompa* with frescoes. The *gompa* is a rectangular building to which access is gained by a flight of stone-steps. This leads into an open porch, 32 feet long and 11 feet deep, which can be protected against rain by heavy yak-hair curtains. The three walls of the porch are decorated with frescoes including pictures of the "guardians of the four quarters" and a wheel of life. A heavy, richly carved double door, usually kept locked, leads into the great hall (*duang*), the roof of which rests on two rows of stout wooden pillars, painted in several colours. The arrangement of the seats for the nuns along the two rows of pillars is conventional. At the far end of the left row of seats, there is a raised carved and painted throne for the founder of the *gompa* and his reincarnation, which in the Tulku's absence remains vacant. Opposite this throne is a lower, but also raised seat for the Guru Lama.

The centre piece of the altar is a statue of Pawa Cheresi. To the right of this there is a small wooden case containing a sculpture of Srungma Chundin, and three alcoves are filled with statues of Opame, Tsepame, and Chitin Drolma, while a statue of Milarepa is free standing.

On an altar to the left of the main altar there are statues of Temba Rimpoche, Guru Rimpoche and Pawa Cheresi, each standing in a carved alcove of its own. There is also a closed *Srungma* shrine, and a shrine containing the books of Bum. Tashi *gompa* is not rich in ritual scriptures and possesses neither the Kangyur nor the Tengyur.

There are extensive frescoes of good quality on the wall to both sides of the entrance door, but the side walls are devoid of frescoes and painted in a reddish brown. Compared to the decoration of some of the monastery halls of Khumbu and Solu, the frescoes are modest in extent and quality, but the general impression of the *duang* is dignified and pleasing, and thanks to the effort of the present sacris-

tan (*konier*) the hall and its furnishings are still kept in excellent order.

At the time of the foundation of the *gompa* only a small house was built for the Drukpa lama. The quarters of the nuns and a double-storeyed house used as a store and cook-house were constructed in later years, and the paving of the courtyard was also done more recently. Indeed the extension of the paved area surrounding the *gompa* is still continuing, and in August 1974 I watched some young nuns fetching stone slabs suitable for paving and laying them.

At the time when the Drukpa lama stayed at Tashi *gompa* there were about 60 nuns and several monks in residence. After his death some five years after the completion of the main building those nuns who had come from Yelmu, Lapche and Lapthang returned to the places of their origin, and in subsequent years the number of permanently resident nuns steadied at a figure of about 35.

Originally the *gompa* had a roof of wooden planks but when this began to leak, it was decided to replace it by a roof of tin sheets which ultimately were to be painted red. Again funds were collected in the villages of an area extending as far south as Risingo, and when sufficient funds had been gathered tin sheets were purchased in Kathmandu. The transport of these heavy sheets was undertaken by the nuns themselves. At that time the motorable road to Barabise was not yet in existence, and the nuns carried the sheets the entire way from Kathmandu to Bigu, each nun carrying three sheets at a time, and making two or three journeys. The older nuns tell about the arduous work they had to do during the early of development of the *gompa*. They point out that nuns had then little leisure to read books and meditate, but had to carry heavy loads and give a hand to the workmen constructing the various buildings.

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Three years after the arrival of Ngawang Paldzen and the foundation of Tashi *gompa*, he was joined by three youths who were the sons of his elder brother referred to by the people of Bigu simply as a "Drukpa Lama", his personal name having been forgotten. All the three youths were *thawa*, and their names were Kusho Tendzen, Kusho Pema and Kusho Tsetsu. Ngawang Paldzen did not take on the day-to-day direction of the new *gompa*, but installed a lama from Kyirong as head of the community. It would seem that he intended to put his nephew Kusho Pema in charge of Tashi *gompa*, just as later he appointed Kusho Tendzen as head of Mu *gompa* at Tsum and Kusho Tsetsu as head of the monastery at Bagan. But at that time Kusho Pema was still too young for such a post and hence the lama from Kyirong was invited to take charge of Tashi *gompa*. The latter left after a few years and Ngawang Paldzen, who had retained the overall control over the four *gompa* he had founded, selected one of the numerous Drukpa lamas who had come with him from Bhutan to be the new head of Tashi *gompa*. He must have been an old man for he is remembered as Drukpa Meme—*meme* being

the word for grandfather. Through he stayed for eleven years, he was not popular with the nuns and the villagers. He was addicted to drinking liquor and used to beat the nuns if they talked during rites in the *gompa*. By that time Kusho Pema had taken over the management of the accounts and business affairs of the *gompa*, and held a position of considerable influence and power. But he had no vocation for a celibate life, and got involved with a nun, who bore him three children. According to monastic rules he had to leave the *gompa* precincts and moved to a nearby house where he lived with his family. He still had a say in the management of the *gompa* and he participated in the performance of the major rituals. He died in early middle age and one of his two daughters is now a nun in Tashi *gompa*, while his son became a lama and joined the establishment of the Dalai Lama in India. Kusho Pema's elder brother Kusho Tendzen also had an affair with a nun, and their daughter is now a nun at the *gompa*. Subsequently he went to Tsum and is said to hold a high position in Mu *gompa*. Kusho Tsetso, the youngest and most gifted of the three brothers, retains close contact with Tashi *gompa*. He lives at present at Maharajgunj in Kathmandu, and is co-ordinating the practical affairs of the four *gompa* founded by Ngawang Paldzen until such a time when the latter's reincarnation, the young Tulku, will be experienced enough to take over their management.

Ngawang Paldzen spent his last two years at Phuma, a hermitage in the mountains above Deodunga. He had one attendant with him, and when in 1941 he died his corpse was carried to Tashi *gompa* and cremated nearby. In his memory a large *chorten* was built in the courtyard. Some six years after his death a boy born to Tibetan parents in Tarkartasso near the village of Shak, in the Dzongka district of Tibet which is not far from Kiyrong, evinced signs of being a reincarnation, and spoke of a *gompa* in Nepal where he had lived in his previous life. The news reached the lamas in Tsum and ultimately Kusho Tsetso. The child was exposed to the usual tests of having to identify some of the possessions of the late lama, and unhesitatingly picked out the correct objects rejecting all others with which they had been mixed up. Kusho Tsetso provided the young Tulku, who is known as Tshutul Rimpoche, with a horse and good clothes, and when he was eleven years old, he visited Tashi *gompa*. Later he stayed at Bagan *gompa* and studied under Geshe Rimpoche. In 1974 he was invited to Bhutan, and spent there a number of months. It is expected that ultimately he will take over the position now held by Kusho Tsetso.

For the past 18 years the direction of Tashi *gompa* has been in the hands of the present Guru Lama. He was born in Kham and for some years he was a monk at Sera monastery in Tibet. Then he came on a pilgrimage to Nepal, and there he heard of Ngawang Paldzen. As he was looking for a spiritual guide he sought him out at Tashi *gompa*, and then went to live at no great distance at

Changdze Mendok, a hermitage above the village of Bulugpa. When some years later the Drukpa lama in charge of Tashi *gompa* received an invitation from a monastery in Bhutan and, much to the relief of the nuns, decided to leave Tashi *gompa*, the villagers of Bigu suggested that the lama from Sera might be offered the headship of Tashi *gompa*. They had been impressed by his piety and seriousness of purpose, and approaching him with gifts of ceremonial scarves (*kata*) invited him to take charge of the *gompa*.

The fact that the Guru Lama had been trained in the Gelugpa monastery of Sera was apparently no obstacle in the way of his appointment to the headship of a Kargyupa *gompa*. He has neither difficulties nor conscientious objections to conduct the ceremonies according to the Kargyupa ritual traditional in Tashi *gompa*. When he took over the position of abbot, Kusho Pema was still alive, and continued to look after the accounts and the business side of the *gompa* administration.

THE ECONOMIC BASE

Tashi *gompa* is not well endowed, and most of the nuns depend for their maintenance largely on their own resources. The land donated by the headman of Bigu provides the nuns with kitchen gardens and small orchards, a few plots on which they grow maize, and pasture for a few cows. In addition the *gompa* owns land which was donated by a wealthy Thakuri, i.e. the member of a high Hindu caste, who held the rank of captain in the Nepalese army. The Thakuri's wife was childless and he hoped to be blessed with a son by dispensing such charity. Though his efforts were in vain, he remained in close touch with the nuns, and when his wife died, the inmates of the *gompa* performed a memorial rite (*gyewa*) which was attended by the deceased woman's relatives. The land donated is in the villages of Latu, Budipara and Marsekarka, all of which are in the Sunkosi valley some two days' journey from Bigu. In Latu and in Marsekarka the *gompa* owns also small houses in which the nuns can stay when they come to collect their share of the crops. In Budipara they have only rice-fields, and these they let out on rent. Among their tenants there are Brahmans, Tamangs and Thamis, and the tenancy is of a type known as *kot*, according to which the quantity of produce to be delivered as the owner's share is fixed, however good or bad the harvest may have been. If in a bad year the tenant is unable to deliver the agreed amount of paddy, the deficiency has to be made up in the next year.

In Latu and Marsekarka mainly maize and wheat are grown, and in these villages the land is hired out on the understanding that whatever the yield may be the owners receive half of the crops harvested. When the maize has ripened

two or three nuns supervise the division and strip the grain from the cobs. One of them then goes to Tashi *gompa* and calls other nuns to fetch the maize.

The grain produced on the land owned by the *gompa* is divided between the Guru Lama and those nuns who fully participate in the activities of the *gompa* and are known as *thiba*. The Guru Lama gets two shares, and 23 nuns are given one share each. There are 7 nuns, who although living within the *gompa* precincts, do not hold any of the posts connected with the *gompa* ritual, and do not participate in the common work of the community. Such nuns, described as *surba*, do not receive shares of the *gompa* income in grain. If a *surba* wishes to join or rejoin the active body of nuns she must entertain the other nuns at a tea-ceremony (*mang-se*) and promise to accept the work discipline of the *gompa*. The Guru Lama will then give her a ceremonial scarf (*kata*) and admit her to the community of active nuns (*thiba*).

The grain yield of *gompa* lands lasts the nuns only about two months a year according to the nature of the harvest. For the rest of the year they depend for their subsistence on the contributions of their families and the charitable offerings of devotees.

The basic yearly needs of a nun are approximately as follows :

4-6 *muri* of grain, one *muri* being the equivalent of 67.5 Kg; 10-15 *dharni* of clarified butter, one *dharni* equalling 2 1/2 Kg; 3 *pathi* of potatoes, one *pathi* equalling 3 1/2 Kg; 3-4 bricks of Tibetan tea, each worth about Rs. 20, and Rs. 100 worth of clothes.

Each of the 23 *thiba* nuns gets normally one *muri* of grain from the *gompa* land at Latu. In 1974 the net income of unhusked rice from the Latu fields was 18 *muri*. Until some years ago the tenants gave the *gompa* 30 *muri* of rice, but since the tax payable to the government has increased, the share due to the *gompa* has diminished. The yields of maize and millet (*Eleusine coracana*) are 8 *muri* and 4-5 *muri* respectively.

Another source of *gompa*-income are the donations of devotees who come to Tashi *gompa* to commission ceremonies for specific purposes or to consult the Guru Lama in regard to personal problems. When doing so they usually bring gifts of grain, butter or money, and the maintenance of the *gompa* ritual depends to a large extent on such donations. Laymen make such donations either in order to acquire religious merit or to benefit deceased kinsmen. If the Guru Lama is not in residence, the senior nun (*umse*) notes the requests of devotees arriving at the *gompa* and receives their donations. On his return the Guru Lama says prayers for the intended purposes or performs the required rites. In some cases commissioned rites may also be performed in the Guru Lama's absence. Small donations are usually pooled and used to hold a ritual benefiting several

devotees.

A system of loans given to villagers from *gompa*-funds is an important means of securing regular support for the ritual performances in the *gompa*. The *gompa* has built up a fund derived from cash gifts by devotees, and from this fund the Guru Lama gives loans of up to Rs. 1,000 to trustworthy villagers. In lieu of interest they provide the wherewithall for the performance of certain seasonal rites. A borrower who takes a loan of Rs. 200 may have to contribute 10 *pathi* rice, 3 *dharni* butter, and 6 *pathi* wheat for a specific rite. The value of these commodities is much greater than the commercial interest would be, and borrowing from a *gompa* is not only a convenient way of obtaining cash at short notice but has also the purpose of gaining merit by the sponsorship of ritual performances.

The capital at the disposal of the *gompa* for such purposes is divided into a number of funds described as *guthi* in Nepali and *ten-ma* in Sherpa. There is a fund known as Niungne *guthi* which in 1974 stood at Rs. 4,000; in that year ten people had taken loans for Rs. 400 each and were to provide the materials required for the celebration of the Niungne rite.⁴ Another fund known as Bum *guthi* stood at Rs. 2100. Three persons had taken loans of Rs. 100 each, and a fourth man had taken the remaining Rs. 1,800. The purpose of this *guthi* is to finance the performance of a *tsho* known as Dukpa tsetsu (which is centred on the recitation of the volumes of Bum, one of the canonical books). Another fund known as Diksha *guthi* stood in 1974 at Rs. 1,200. Some 25 people had taken small sums from that fund, and before the performance of the Diksha rite, the debtors arrange among themselves what contribution to the performance each of them would make.

There is a separate fund, the yield of which is used to provide butter for the four lamps burning continuously in the main *gompa*, the *mani*-building, housing the great prayer wheel, and the Guru Lama's house. The Rs. 800 of that *guthi* were distributed to equal parts among eight cattle owners, each of whom provided annually one quarter of a *dharni* of butter, i.e. 5/8 Kg.

Whenever a devotee visiting the *gompa* makes a donation either in cash or kind the Guru Lama enquires for what specific purpose it is to be used, and the donor may specify that it is to be utilized for the performance of a *tsho*, a *diksha* rite or a *niungne*.

The system of loans given to laymen who undertake the responsibility of

⁴ Cf. *The Sherpas of Nepal*, pp. 180-185, for a detailed description of the Niungne rite.

providing the materials required for ritual performances is not confined to Tashi *gompa*, but the village *gompa* of Bigu has two similar *guthi*, the funds of which are lent out to members of the village-community. These persons make the arrangements for the celebrations of the Narak rite (which corresponds to the Dumje of the Khumbu Sherpas) and provides butter to be used as fuel of lamps burning at certain *gompa* rites. These funds of the village *gompa* were set up a long time ago by two wealthy men, and later increased by further donations.

Casual contributions to Tashi *gompa* are offered for a variety of reasons. People approach the Guru Lama or individual nuns with the request to say prayers for the cure of sick kinsmen or for other intentions of a personal nature. Thus during my stay in Tashi *gompa* a young Sherpa brought a small pot of butter for the burning of lamps. The *gompa* hall was specially opened and the young man prostrated himself in the aisle and then bowed to all the statues and the seats of the founder and the Guru Lama. He and two companions then filled some of the lamps with the butter he had brought. He explained that some 20 years ago his father had lent Rs. 250 to a Sherpa of Lapthang, a village in Tibet, but that after his father's death the debtor had disclaimed any knowledge of the loan. The offering to the *gompa* was done for the benefit of his mother with the express intention that *in her next life* she should get repayment of the loan. Even Hindus sometimes give offerings to the *gompa* for the purpose of redressing a grievance. Those who have been wronged by someone in this life believe that by giving a donation to the *gompa* they may be able to obtain satisfaction in the next world where the roles will be reversed and their adversary will be in their power.

Occasionally the *gompa* also receives donations from persons who do not link any special request with their gift. Thus during my presence a Sherpa of Laduk village presented to the *gompa* a whole tin of butter, containing eight *dharni* (i.e. 20 Kg.), without commissioning any specific rite. He had lost some money in gambling and his father had reproached him, and pointed out that as he lived near the *gompa*, instead of gambling it would profit him more if he gave an offering to the *gompa* and thereby acquired merit and gained some benefit for his next life.

Besides the income from their land and the charitable donations of devotees the *gompa* community receives a small annual government grant. Many religious institutions in Nepal enjoy such support, and in the days of the Rana regime it was fixed at Rs. 300. Even though it has been raised to Rs. 550 its real value is being eroded by inflation. At one time this grant was distributed among the nuns, but it seems that nowadays it is being used for the upkeep of the *gompa* or other purposes decided upon by the Guru Lama.

Until some years ago the *gompa* owned a herd of some 13 *dzomu* (female

yak-cow cross-breeds). They were kept mainly for the sake of the butter which was needed for burning in the lamps of the *gompa*, but as such animals have to be kept on the high pastures the nuns could not look after them permanently. Hence paid herdsmen had to be entrusted with the *dzomu*, and owing to their negligence several animals died. As the arrangement was altogether unsatisfactory and the herdsmen were dilatory in the delivery of butter, the Guru Lama decided to sell the *dzomu*. Nowadays the *gompa* only owns a few cows. Two of these are looked after and milked by the nuns, but some others have been given into the care of a Thami neighbour, who gives the *gompa* part of the manure and half of the number of calves born, but keeps the milk for himself.

The *gompa's* sources of income are clearly not sufficient to maintain the Guru Lama and the nuns resident at Tashi *gompa* for more than part of the year. While the Guru Lama has no personal income other than the gifts of devotees, most of the nuns are largely maintained by their natal families, or own some land which they can let out on rent. Among Sherpas and Tamangs a family whose daughter has entered a nunnery is expected to contribute substantially to her maintenance. If a nun's parental home is within one or two days' walking distance, she visits her parents frequently and is furnished with provisions and usually also with clothes. If her parental home is far from Tashi *gompa* she may visit it only once a year, and in that case her family will contribute to her upkeep in cash rather than in foodstuff. When her parents grow old or die, her brothers or other close relatives are supposed to take over the responsibility of continuing a nun's support. However, there are cases of nuns who have no more living kinsmen able or willing to contribute to their maintenance. Such nuns, who are usually old, have to resort to begging for alms in the villages within reasonably easy reach of Tashi *gompa*.

Nuns have moreover the opportunity of adding occasionally to their income by rendering ritual services to laymen. Such services include the performance of *kurim*, i.e. the reading of appropriate sacred scriptures, in the house of a sick person for the purpose of effecting a cure. Similarly *kurim* may be performed for the benefit of a man setting out on a long or supposedly dangerous journey. In all such cases the nun or nuns reciting the books are fed on the day or days of the performance and in addition given a small honorarium.

While fully established nuns, capable of performing rituals, have such subsidiary sources of income, for the first two or three years a newly recruited nun is neither entitled to support from *gompa* funds nor is she likely to be asked to perform ritual services. During this initial period such a nun has to rely entirely on parental contributions or the income from such land as she may have inherited.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE GOMPA-COMMUNITY

Buddhist monastic communities are basically egalitarian but this does not mean that they are unstructured. Though all monks in a monastery and all nuns in a nunnery have equal chances of attaining positions of responsibility there is a long and arduous way from the status of novice to that of the major *gompa* officials. In *The Sherpas of Nepal* (pp. 145-149) I have outlined the organization of Tengboché, a monastery in Khumbu, and familiarity with the structure of that community made it easy to understand the structure of the small community of nuns in Tashi *gompa*. So far the leading position in that community has always been occupied by a lama selected and appointed by the founder of the *gompa*, and as this pattern is now firmly established it is unlikely that one of the nuns could rise to the substantive headship of the *gompa*. In this respect Tashi *gompa* differs from nunneries such as Devuché in Khumbu where there is no resident lama, and the nuns elect from time to time a headnun, known as *loben* (literally: 'teacher') from among their own numbers.

In Tashi *gompa* there is at present no *loben*, and the Guru Lama, though spiritual head of the community, is never described as *loben*, but as *kempu*. Until six years ago there was a nun who held the position of *loben*, but was nevertheless subject to the authority of the Guru Lama. Her name was Tsiring Yangdzum and she was a native of Tsum in Western Nepal. She started her religious career in Tsum *gompa*, and at one time came to Tashi *gompa* in the company of the Tulku, but then returned to Tsum. However, Kusho Tsetso as over-all controller of the four linked *gompa*, realized how learned and potentially useful she was and persuaded her to join Tashi *gompa* where she was entrusted with the special task of teaching the nuns. She lived there for a long time and acquired a high reputation and great popularity. When the Guru Lama asked the nuns whether he should appoint a *loben*, the majority supported Tsiring Yangdzum, and welcomed her promotion. The story goes that in the course of the years she performed one thousand *niungne* rites, but this is obviously a vast exaggeration. When Tsiring Yangdzum died the other nuns performed in her memory seven *melam* rites spaced out over seven weeks.

Ever since the death of Tsiring Yangdzum, there has been no *loben* in Tashi *gompa*, and the senior-most position among the nuns is held by the *umse*. The main function of the *umse* is to lead the chanting and recitations of the nuns at *gompa* services. To discharge this function she must possess a good knowledge of the scriptures used in the liturgy and should also have a good voice and diction. In the absence of the Guru Lama the *umse* presides over all ritual performances, and decides matters regarding the performance of *gompa* ritual. She is also res-

possible for teaching the younger nuns the meaning of ritual texts, for while the Guru Lama occasionally expounds to the nuns problems of doctrine, he does no routine teaching. Apart from the prestige inherent in the position of *umse* the incumbent has few concrete advances. The only traditional privilege of the *umse* is the right to have her meal of rice served on a brass plate when she and other nuns sit together during a retreat (*tsam*); the other nuns get their rice served in a cloth on such an occasion.

Unlike most other *gompa* offices, that of *umse* is not filled according to the principle of seniority. However, the manner of selection seems to vary from time to time. Normally the *umse* is chosen by the nuns in an informal meeting where each nun is free to express her preference and there is no resort to written ballot papers. But when Hishi Droma (House 26), who was *umse* for seven years from 1967 till 1973, was appointed there were three candidates of about equal seniority and accomplishments, namely Hishi Droma, Dorje Droma (House 7) and Sange Gyelmu (House 25). As there was no consensus among the nuns, 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 Droma's name came first, and I was told that the two other candidates wept from disappointment.

After the expiry of Hishi Droma's seven year period of office, neither Sange Gyelmu nor Dorje Droma wanted to become *umse*, and the latter canvassed the name of Sherpa Omu (House 3), 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 Sherpa Omu as *umse*. But the Tulku was not convinced of the wisdom of appointing so junior a nun and proposed that two *umse* should be chosen and the senior one take over the position first. He argued that as Hishi Droma had often been ill of late, and could conduct the *gompa* services only with difficulty, it was advisable to have two *umse* so that the junior one could deputize for the senior one in times of need. As Dorje Droma and Sherpa Omu were the favourite candidates he decided that Dorje Droma should be appointed *umse*, and Sherpa Omu be regarded as *umse*-elect, succeed Dorje Droma after seven years and meanwhile act as *umse* in the event of Dorje Droma's absence.

Next in rank to the *umse* is a *gompa* official known as *kutum* or *gerku*. This post is held only for one year and is usually filled according to seniority. The *kutum* is responsible for discipline and has authority to punish nuns for breaches

of the *gompa* rules. For a minor offence a nun may be suspended, i.e. excluded from *gompa*-services and communal activities for a limited time. To be re-admitted she must prostrate herself 108 times, offer *mang-se* (i.e. the ceremonial serving of tea in the *gompa*) to all nuns, and present the Guru Lama with a scarf (*kata*). Causing dissension among the nuns by telling tales is an example of such a minor offence. For serious offences, such as theft, a nun may be expelled permanently. If a nun is caught in a love-affair with a man the *kutum* will force her to wear a torn cap and circumambulate the *mani* and *gompa* three times. The torn cap is called *tsapani* and is donned in such a way as to hide the face like a mask. After having been shamed publicly in this way the guilty nun may be fined as much as Rs. 1,000 and will be expelled from the *gompa*. She may run away without paying, but unpaid fines are sometimes recovered even after two or three years. Most fines are not as high as Rs. 1,000, but many ex-nuns who have married and live in the vicinity of Bigu have paid a fine to the *gompa*. The *kutum* has also the responsibility of ringing every morning a bell and in this capacity she is known as *tilbu*.

The third *gompa* official in the order of seniority is the *niermu*, whose position is equivalent to that of *nierwa* in communities of monks. But whereas the *nierwa* of a monastery such as Tengboche deals not only with domestic affairs but manages also the trading activities of the *gompa*, the *niermu* of a convent deals mainly with the management of the household, the farm-work and the maintenance of buildings. Her daily duties include the supervision of the kitchen and the pouring out of tea at *gompa*-services. After having been *niermu* the incumbent automatically advances to the position of *kutum*. Normally a *niermu* services only for one year, but at the time when the *gompa* was still under construction and continuity was desirable there were exceptions. Thus Tsangdzum Sangmu (House 19) served for 17 years as *niermu* and supervised many of the building operations.

The *niermu* has an assistant known as *nieryok* who serves in this capacity for one year.

There is no one *gompa*-official solely responsible for the supervision of the communal grain stores. *Niermu* as well as *umse* and *kutum* must be present when grain is to be taken out from the store and transferred to the kitchen for current consumption.

Another post held in rotation is that of *chorpen*. There is a *chorpen* in every *gompa*, whether part of a monastery or belonging to a village. The incumbent is responsible for the organization of ritual performances during which the person acting as *chorpen* has certain priestly functions.

The remaining ranks through which all nuns have to proceed to the higher

offices are named according to the instrument a nun plays at *gompa*-rituals. Thus the players of oboes (*geling*) are called *gelingba*, the players of conch-shells, *tungba*, and the players of telescopic horns, *sangdungba*.

A position of some importance which stands outside the rank-order of nuns is that of the *konier*, the sacristan responsible for keeping *gompa*-hall and altars clean and in good order. The *konier* is appointed for an unspecified number of years and as the work is burdensome and without specific rewards there is little competition for this position. The present *konier*, Tuchi Droma (House 11), has been working in this capacity for 12 years, and has repeatedly expressed the wish to being replaced. The *konier* keeps the keys to the *gompa*-hall, opens it in the early morning and replaces all the water in the many bowls on the altar. This necessitates several trips to the spring. There the *konier* fills a large narrow-necked brass or copper pot with water and then carries it on her back to the *gompa*. Altogether 56 bowls standing on the altar have to be filled every morning and emptied in the evening. 28 of them are large and take a very considerable amount of water. Behind this daily filling and emptying of bowls lies the idea that the water offered at the altar symbolizes all the various offerings which according to Buddhist belief are the dues of the deities worshipped in the *gompa*. For the post of *konier* the nuns usually choose a woman of no great intellectual ability, but strong and dependable, and above willing to take on what is undoubtedly the most onerous task in the maintenance of the *gompa* as a tidy and dignified place of worship.

The integration of a girl or older woman into the community of nuns is a fairly lengthy process. Except for nuns who have taken vows in other *gompas* and come to Tashi *gompa* with recognized credentials, every candidate has to go through a period of training and testing before she can attain the status of a fully privileged nun .

Anyone seeking acceptance as a novice has to approach the Guru Lama. Usually she offers him a ceremonial scarf and perhaps a token gift of money. The candidate and any of her relatives accompanying her also visit the *gompa*, bows to the images and place a small offering on the altar or bring butter to be burnt in the lamps.

The next step is the cutting of the candidate's hair as a symbol of the renouncement of secular life. The hair cutting and shaving of the head must be done by a lama, and in Tashi *gompa* it is normally done by the Guru Lama. The hair is thrown away or burnt and may not be used for any purpose.

For a period of about one year the novice is considered a probationer, and during this period she can withdraw without attracting any opprobrium or be-

coming liable to a fine such as nuns have to pay who leave in order to marry.

Candidates are taught reading and writing in Tibetan. They also have to learn certain basic religious texts which they are supposed to know by heart before they can attain the status of *gyengi* ("living by virtue"). There is no fixed period for the preparation leading to this step in a nun's career. The admission to *gyengi* status is a simple ceremony. The Guru Lama recites some sacred formulae and the candidate undertakes to abide by the rules of the *gompa*.

The next step is the taking of the *rabdzung* vow which signifies total commitment to the religious life. (Cf. *The Sherpas of Nepal*, pp. 143-145). To be allowed to take this vow a nun should normally have an adequate knowledge of the scriptures recited in liturgical performances. It seems, however, that in Tashi *gompa* exceptions are sometimes made in the case of dedicated older women who became nuns in middle age and though unable to master the reading of scriptures are allowed to take the *rabdzung* vow. Such a waiving of rules seems to have occurred in the case of Chiangchup Droma (House 1). The requirement of adequate scriptural knowledge can be waived also in relation to very young girls who entered the *gompa* as children and are living with an older nun responsible for their upbringing. Tashitsiring (House 5), for instance, who after her mother's death came to Tashi-*gompa* to live with her father's sister, was allowed to take the *rabdzung* vow at the age of 10, when she had been for 3 years at the *gompa*. Several lamas of the rank of *gelung* are required to administer the *rabdzung* vow, and there is the possibility of repeating the vow if a lama of particularly high status becomes available to preside over the ceremony.

The rank of *gelung* is attained by many monks of learning, but such advancement is denied to nuns. There is a tradition that in the early times of Buddhism women too could become *gelung*, but in the present age women are not ordained as *gelung* however learned and devout they may be.

Several nuns of Tashi *gompa* mentioned that they were hoping for a reincarnation as men, because as monks they could attain more responsible and prestigious positions than as nuns, and more specifically could become *gelung*.

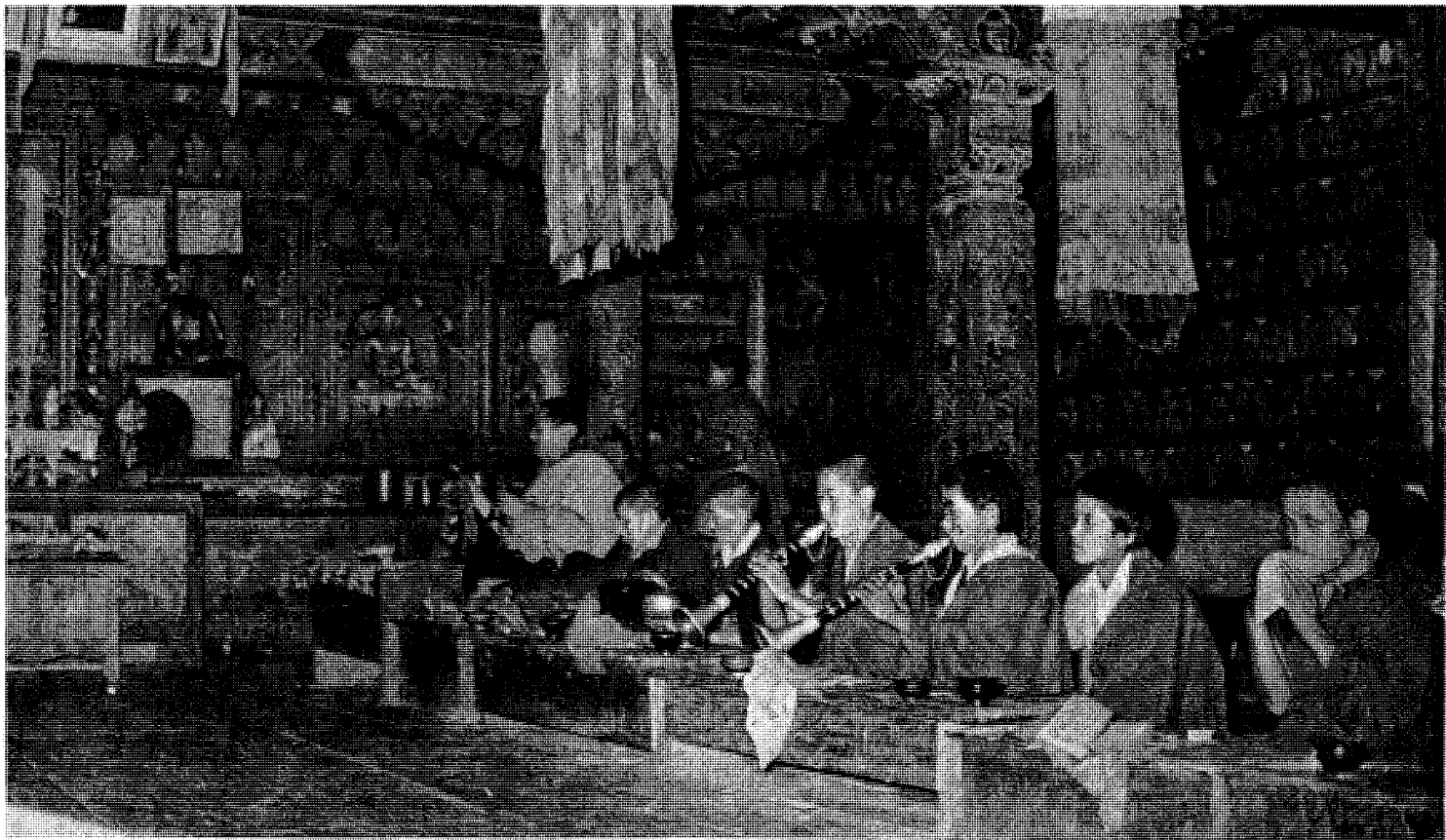
The advancement of a nun from probationary novice to *gyengi*, and from *gyengi* to the stage marked by the taking of the *rabdzung* vow, is not subject to a rigid time-table. Some nuns take the *rabdzung* vow early in their career while others take many years to acquire the necessary qualifications. There is no definite correlation between the position of *surba* and *thiba* on the one hand and the attainment of scholarly and spiritual status signified by the admission to the *rabdzung* vow. Nuns such as Sange Chirgin (House 20) have not yet taken the *rabdzung* vow but enjoy the status of *thiba*, whereas some of the *surba* living outside the *gompa* precincts have taken the *rabdzung* vow.



1. Tashi *gompa* with the house of the Guru Lama in the right foreground



2. Part of the line of nun's quarters facing the vegetable garden.



3. The Guru Lama and nuns during a *tsho* rite in the main hall (*duang*)



4. Nuns reciting scriptures during a *tsho* rite in the *duang*.

The composition of the community of nuns living at Tashi *gompa* is fluid. As nuns die or leave the *gompa* because they lack vocation or get involved in a love affair, which will usually lead to marriage, others apply for admission, and if acceptable, join the *gompa* in the first instance as novices and ultimately as fully privileged nuns. The motivation and circumstances of the individual nuns vary widely, and rather than attempting any generalizations I propose to give brief case-histories of all the nuns who were resident at the time of my stay in Tashi *gompa*. Most of them were very willing to talk, but a few proved somewhat reticent, and this accounts for the uneven character of the following notes. The information is arranged according to the situation of the nuns' small houses which stand in two lines, enclosing a fruit and vegetable garden. While most of the nuns have individual households, a few share their house with a close friend or kinswoman.

Houses 1-13 stand in a line, broken only by the covered entrance which leads from the *gompa* courtyard to the nuns' quadrangle. They are built wall to wall with the doors facing the garden, in which the nuns have small individual plots. Houses 14-27 form an unbroken line at the lower end of the vegetable garden, and their doors and small verandas face the garden and the upper line of houses.

Each house consists of a single room in which the occupant or occupants sleep, cook, study and receive guests.

House 1. is inhabited by Chiangchup Droma, known also as Karma Dzolpa, the name she adopted at the time of taking the *rabdzung* vow, a Sherpa of Salaka clan from Dolongsa. Age 40 years. She shares her small quarter with her daughter Teshi Chuti (alias Chiamu Karma Chopal Droma), age 20 years.

Chiangchup Droma was married in Dolongsa, and some 6-7 years her after husband's death she entered Tashi *gompa* as *surba* (lay-nun). Her avowed purpose of becoming a nun was the gaining of merit. She cannot read the liturgical texts, but her daughter has learnt to read. Neither mother nor daughter have the status of *thiba*, but when the Tulku next comes to Tashi *gompa*, they both intend to become *thiba*, i.e. fully committed nuns.

Mother and daughter get all the supplies required for their maintenance from Dolongsa. Chiangchup Droma's husband had no brothers, and when he died his land passed to her and she has let it out, receiving as rent a share of the maize, wheat and millet grown on it. Her share of the crop is carried to Tashi *gompa* partly by her and her daughter, and partly by hired porters.

One of her brother's daughters is also a nun at Tashi *gompa* and lives in House 15.

House 2. Tashi Droma, a Sherpa of Salaka clan, age 51, came from Changku, and is the father's brother's daughter of Tashi Droma (House 11). She was married and was pregnant when her husband died. Ten years later, when she was 35 years old, she came to Tashi *gompa*, and brought her daughter, then 10 years old, with her. The daughter did not become a novice and died in the year of her arrival at Tashi *gompa*.

House 3. Sherpa Omu, also known as Hishi Omu, age 31, is the daughter of a Drukpa father and a Sherpa mother. Her father was Kusho Tendzen, one of the three nephews of the founder of Tashi *gompa*, and now lives at Tsum. He did not marry her mother and left her when Sherpa Omu was six months old. Her mother subsequently married a Sherpa of Choitang, a village near Bigu, but he too left her and is supposed to live in India.

Sherpa Omu entered Tashi *gompa* at the age of 18, and has since acquired a good knowledge of Tibetan scriptures and *gompa* ritual. Her mother's mother's sister was also a nun, and is believed to have been reborn as a man and to be now a monk at Bagan.

Sherpa Omu who had a hard childhood, and met her own father only once when she was 18, became a nun by her own volition. She receives material support from her mother, who is a daughter of the younger brother of the *misar* (headman) of Bigu village.

Thanks to her experience in ritual performances and outstanding personality she was put forward as candidate for the position of *umse*, and as the result of a compromise was chosen as *umse*-elect and deputy of the present *umse*.

House 4. Tserap Sangmu, age 32, is a Sherpa of Gardza clan from Lhonsa near Dunge. At the age of 18 she came to Tashi *gompa*, where her father's sister Sange Gyelmu (House 25) was a nun. Once when Sange Gyelmu visited her natal village, she followed her to Tashi *gompa*, and decided to become a nun. By that time her parents had died and she was living in the house of her father's younger brother. She twice took the *rabdzung* vow; once it was administered by a lama of Sun *gompa* and the second time by the Tulku of Tashi *gompa*.

Ever since she became a nun her mother's brothers, who live in Dunge, have supported her. Once a year she goes to Dunge, and is given money and *ghi*.

- House 5.** Ngawang Chutin, age 61, one of the two seniormost nuns of Tashi *gompa*, is a Tamang from Choitang village in the Charikot area. She came to Tashi *gompa* at the age of about 30, and before that time she had spent many years as a maid in the royal palace of Kathmandu. Her brother was a friend of the present Guru Lama, and from him she heard of Tashi *gompa*, which was then in the process of construction. She became interested and requested the king's permission to leave the royal service and to become a nun. Her request was granted and after spending two months in her home village she came to Tashi *gompa*. There she learnt to read but never mastered the art of writing. In 1973 she went on pilgrimage to Badogarai and there met the Dalai Lama.

Ngawang Chutin shares her house with her brother's daughter Tashi Tsiring, aged 17, whom she had brought to Tashi *gompa* at the age of seven after the death of the child's mother. Tashi Tsiring took the *rabdzung* vow at the age of 10. Ngawang Chutin's two brothers live in Choitang, and they send her cash, grain and butter. She has two sisters, one in Choitang and one living in Calcutta.

- House 6.** Urken Droma, age 36, a Sherpa of Lama Sherwa clan from Jiri village, came to Tashi *gompa* at the age of 20. She had no relatives among the nuns but came with a friend on her own initiative. Her friend abandoned the idea of becoming a nun, even before she had cut her hair, but Urken Droma stayed on, and after two years took the *rabdzung* vow, administered by a lama of Sun *gompa*. Six years ago a reincarnated lama of Thimphu in Bhutan administered the *rabdzung* vow once more. She has a mother, an elder brother, and an elder as well as a younger sister. Once a year she visits her family in Jiri, and her brother gives her money as well as *ghi*. She never asks for lama from other people, and does not even beg food when travelling. Her sister's husband, who owns some 20 yak cattle cross breeds, rents a high pasture near Bigu and she sometimes goes to see him there.

Urken Droma has held the *gompa* positions of both *chorpen* and *niermu*.

House 7. Dorje Droma, age 40, is a Sherpa of Salaka clan, Her parents lived in the Maising settlement of Bigu, and both died within 15 days when she was 13 years old, her sister 9, and her brother 5. Earlier her parents had lived in Darjeeling, where her father worked in a bakery, and where both she and her sister were born. They had returned to Maising five years before their death, and had farmed the land they owned there. After their death Dorje Droma, let out their land and stayed on in their house with a Thami servant, living on the income from her land. She never married and at the age of 18 she entered Tashi *gompa* and became a nun. Her younger brother now lives in Bhutan and her younger sister is married in Garlate near Choitang.

She holds the *gompa*-post of *umse* and is expected to remain in this position for 7 days. Dorje Droma has landed property of her own, and lets her house and fields on share to Thamis.

House 8. Sangesomu, age 63, is a Sherpa of Gardza clan from Thibutang near Chautara. She has been at Tashi *gompa* ever since its foundation. Before that she was married, and had four children, two of whom died. Her husband went to India and died there. Leaving her small son, then 5 years old, with her parents'-in-law, she came to Tashi *gompa* taking her daughter with her. Both she and her daughter became nuns. Sangesomu applied herself to the study of Tibetan scriptures, and rising rapidly in the rankorder of nuns, ultimately became *umse*, a position she held for the usual seven year period. But her daughter, who is now 40 years old, left the nunnery and went to India, where she disappeared without trace.

Sangesomu had some land, but it was registered in her husband's name, and when she became a nun she gave it to her parents-in-law to preserve it for her son. When that son also went to India and her parents-in-law died, kinsmen of her late husband took over the land. Since then she has no income of her own, and depends entirely on alms. Every two days she goes to one of the houses of Bigu to beg, and sometimes she also goes to neighbouring villages, such as Bulung, Arampur and Dolongsa to collect food. When she is on one of those extended begging tours, she stays away for 4 to 6 days. She used to go also to Barabise to exchange grain for salt, which no doubt had come from Tibet. Previously she also visited *gompa* in Tibet, such as for instance Sun *gompa*.

Though Sangesomu is materially less well off than many of the younger nuns who receive regular support from their families,

she enjoys a respected position in the monastic community, is often to be found in the general kitchen drinking tea and eating with the nuns who look after the bodily needs of the Guru Lama. It is obvious that the other nuns would not allow her to suffer any hardship even if the frailty of old age should prevent her from going on her begging rounds.

House 9. Sange Droma, age 25, is a Tamang from Temal village near Balauti. She came to Tashi *gompa* 8 years ago, when she was 17 years old and unmarried. In her home village there is a small *gompa* and she had already become a nun when in the company of some older nuns from Temal she first visited Tashi *gompa*. Her companions occasionally came there and stayed from one or two months with friends in their quarters. Some time after that first visit Sange Droma came alone to Tashi *gompa* and asked to be admitted as a regular nun.

Her parents are still alive and she has one elder brother and four elder sisters, none of whom is a nun. The decision to come to Tashi *gompa* was her own, but she had the consent of her parents who continue to support her. At least once a year she visits her home and stays for some time with her family.

House 10. Lobsang Droma, age 36, is a Sherpa of Kambadze clan from Bigu, and a younger sister of the mother of Sherpa Omu (House 3). Her father, who died when she was an infant, was Kusho Lama, the younger brother of the *misar* Nim Pasang. She never married and entered the *gompa* at the age of about 20. Her mother died some four years ago, but she has there elder brothers, who support her, and two sisters.

House 11. Tuchi Droma, age 52, is a Sherpa of Salaka clan from Changku (near Ulag) some 3 days' walk from Bigu. For the past 12 years she has held the post of *konier* (sacristan). Before she became a nun she was married and she has one daughter. But when her husband died she became a nun, and 21 years ago she took the *rabdzung* vow at Tashi *gompa* through the person of its founder. All those nuns who took the *rabdzung* vow at that ceremony repeated it some 7 years later when the Tulku came to Tashi *gompa*. The ostensible reason for this repetition was the fact that on their own admittance they had eaten pork and onions and drunk *rakshi* when being entertained on their travels.

- House 12.** Chembal Chindu (alias Tsiring Llamu), age 20, is the illegitimate daughter of Kusho Pema, a Drukpa Lama from Bhutan, and a Sherpa woman of Salaka clan of Bigu. Kusho Pema was a brother's son of Ngawang Paldzen, the founder of Tashi *gompa*; Chembal Chindu's mother, Nim Droma, who is still alive, was a nun, but had to leave the *gompa* because of her association with Kusho Pema. She later married a Sherpa and now lives with a younger daughter in a house of her own not far from the *gompa*. Chembal Chindu entered the nunnery when she was 9 years old, and at first stayed with her mother's elder sister who was a nun. The latter died some years ago. Chembal Chindu now receives grain and clothes, but no money, from her mother. Her elder brother is in the service of the Dalai Lama, and said to be currently in Malaya.
- House 13.** Genden Droma, age 22, is a Sherpa of Gardza clan from Sailung, and the elder sister of Lobsang Chundu, one of the two monks acting as attendants to the Guru Lama. Genden Droma entered Tashi *gompa* 5 years ago together with Tamjen Droma (H. 24), and has already taken the *rabdzung* vow. Her parents are alive and supporting her, and she has also 3 younger brothers, and one younger sister.
- House 14.** Urken Palmu, age 29, a Sherpa of Kambadzen clan, from Dolongsa, shares the house with Pem Droma, age 16, of Chiawa clan, also from Dolongsa. Urken Palmu came to Tashi *gompa* 10 years ago. She was friendly with Sangesomu (House 8) and had been there on visits before becoming a nun. Her parents are alive and support her. As Dolongsa is near she goes there about once a month and fetches supplies from her home. She has one younger brother, two elder sisters, both of whom are married in Dolongsa, and one younger sister, Pem Droma, who is not yet a fully privileged nun, but has the status of *surba*. Her mother died when she was about 6 years old, and her father suggested to her to become a nun at Tashi *gompa*, where she has a kinswoman, Chiangchup Droma (House 1), who stands to her in the relationship of father's sister. She has one elder and one younger sister, but her only brother died. She visits her father about once a month and gets from him grain and clothes.
- House 15.** Sange Chensum, age 22, a Sherpa of Gardz clan from the Jagat settlement of Bigu, entered the *gompa* one year ago of her own free will

to acquire merit; there is no kinswoman of her among the nuns. She is still a *gyengi* (novice) and is being taught by Sherap Omu (H. 3) whom she regards as her guru. Her father died but her mother, four elder sisters, all married, and two elder brothers, support her. Sometimes she goes to help her family with the work on their fields. When the Tulku next visits Tashi *gompa* she will take the *rabdzung* vow.

House 16. Karsang Droma, age 35, a Sherpa of Lama Sherwa clan from Dunge (east of Jiri), came about 16 years ago. She was never married and came by herself and had no friends or kinswomen among the nuns. At that time her mother was still alive, but she has neither brother nor sister. Her father went to India after she was born, and was never heard of again, Till her death her mother stayed with her own brothers. Karsang Droma's only relatives are her father's brother's sons, and she sometimes stays with them at their *goth* (herdsmen's settlement) at Rali, but they do not support her and apart from her share in the *gompa* income, she depends on alms and fees for ritual services.

House 17. Chembal Sangmu, age 22, a Sherpa of Lama Sherwa clan from Choitang (near Bigu), holds the important *gompa* post of *chorpen*. She was sent to Tashi *gompa* by her father 14 years ago, to join her mother's sister who was a nun there and whose quarters she shared until her death 3 years ago. At the age of 13 Chembal Sangmu took the *rabdzung* vow. Her parents are still alive, and she has two younger sisters, and one elder and one younger brother. From her parents she gets all necessary supplies of food and occasionally also cash. Her home is only one hour's walk from Tashi *gompa* and she often goes there.

Chembal Sangmu now shares her quarters with a novice, Tensing Droma, a Sherpa girl, 20 years old, from Dolongsa, who came only recently and is still *surba*. She has no kinswomen among the nuns, but was acquainted with several of the nuns whose home-village is also Dolongsa. Tensing Droma's parents are alive and support her; she also has one elder and one younger sister as well as a younger brother.

House 18. Pema, age 32, a Sherpa of Lama Sherwa clan from Dunge. She was married and came to Tashi *gompa* 1 1/2 years ago after her hus-

band's death. She had two children, but both of them had died too. As she joined the *gompa* only recently she has not yet taken the *rabdzung* vow and has still the status of *surba*. She has no relatives among the nuns of the *gompa*, and arrived accompanied by her elder brother. Her parents are still alive, and support her, and she has one elder and 4 younger brothers as well as 4 younger sisters.

House 19. Tsangdzum Sangmu, age 55, a Sherpa of Salaka clan from Jiri, is one of the oldest residents. She came 40 years ago, and remembers the time when the Guru Lama's house was being built. She has never been married, and after first coming to Tashi *gompa* and having her hair shaved off, she returned for some time to Jiri and lived there as a nun. Even after finally settling in Tashi *gompa* she remained for several years *surba* and was given the status of *thiba* on the same day as Sange Gyelmu (House 25) and Hishi Droma (House 26). Her seniority in the *gompa* counts only from that day. For 17 years she held the position of *niermu* (manager) and for some years she was *kutum*.

She receives support from her relatives. She has many brothers' daughters who are very wealthy.

House 20. Sange Chiring, age 26, a Sherpa of Kambadzen clan from Kartele Dulugpa (near Bigu). Her father is a village-lama and her brother is a monk staying at present in Thimpu (Bhutan) with the Tulku, i.e. the reincarnation, of the founder of Tashi *gompa*. Sange Chiring was never married and has been in Tashi *gompa* for the past four years. Although she has not yet taken the *rabdzung* vow she has the status of *thiba*. Her parents are alive and support her; she has an elder and a younger sister.

House 21. Da Droma, age 32, a Sherpa of Gardza clan from Chongku (near Ladu), holds the position of *niermu*, and as such manages the kitchen and general household affairs of the *gompa*. She is the elder brother's daughter of Tuchi Droma (House 11) and is also related to Tashi Droma (House 2). She was never married and came at the age of 19. Her two cousins were already at Tashi *gompa*; they had come there 4 years earlier, and when she saw them becoming nuns and being happy at the *gompa*, she joined them of her own free will. Her parents are still alive, and she visits them at least once a year; they supply her with grain and also give her some money.

- House 22.** Kerab Droma (alias Tames Dzangmu), age 23, is a Tamang from Sailung. She came to Tashi *gompa* 5 years ago. The Guru Lama and Kusho Tsetso had visited her village and had accepted her as a nun, cutting off her hair then and there, and bringing her with them to Tashi *gompa*. Her father's sister, Samden Droma (House 23) came at the same time. Kerab Droma has already taken the *rabdzung* vow. She has three brothers, who support her, and one elder and three younger sisters.
- House 23.** Samden Droma, (alias Damje Omu), age 42, is a Tamang from Dorumba is the Sailung area, and related to Kerab Droma (House 22). Eight years ago she came to Tashi *gompa* of her own accord. She has been married and had one son. Her husband died and when subsequently her son, aged 8, also died, she sold all her property and brought the money with her. She has neither parents, nor brothers or sisters. But her father's younger brother and her father's sister support her, and she visits them once a year. As her home-village is 5 days' journey from Tashi *gompa*, her relatives give her money rather than grain. Only after coming to Tashi *gompa* did she learn to read, and when she had progressed sufficiently she took the *rabdzung* vow.
- House 24.** Tamjen Droma, age 30, is a Tamang from the Sailung area. She was never married and six years ago she came to Tashi *gompa* with the Guru Lama, who has visited Sailung. Three years later she took the *rabdzung* vow. Her mother is alive and she has an elder brother who supports her. Once a year she visits her home and stays there for one month. Her brother gives her grain and hires porters to help him carry the grain to Tashi *gompa*.
- House 25.** Sange Gyelmu, age 38, is a Sherpa of Gardza clan, from Lungsamba (near Jiri). When she was about 16 she and two of her sisters came to Tashi *gompa*. While her sisters, who had no desire to become nuns, returned home, she decided to stay and seek admission to the *gompa* community. In this decision she was not influenced by her parents, who are alive and give her material support. She has one brother and six sisters, all of whom are married. Once a year she visits her home, and returns with gifts of grain, butter and cash.

House 26. Hishi Droma, aged 49, a Sherpa of Lama Sherwa clan from Tarkeyang in Yelmu, had become a nun before she had even heard of Tashi *gompa*. When she was a young girl, Lama Ngawang Palzend, who became the founder of Tashi *gompa*, came to Gerung above Tarkeyang. She went to visit the place and was so impressed by his personality that she became a nun without even telling her parents. Later she went back to her village and her parents provided her with clothes and provisions. Then she went on pilgrimage to several *gompa* in Tibet. On her return Lama Ngawang Paldzen advised her not to continue going on pilgrimage but to join the nuns at Tashi *gompa*. By the time she did so she was about 25 years old, and there were only about 12 nuns at Tashi *gompa*, all much older than Hishi Droma. She had learnt some reading and writing in Yelmu, and she continued her studies at Tashi *gompa*. Finally she went to take the *rabdzung* vow at Bagan; it was administered by Kusho Tsetso and eight *gelung*. For seven years she held the position of *umse*, and whenever the Guru Lama went on tour she was the effective head of the *gompa*. She held this post until 1973. Her family always supported her and when she recently had a serious illness her sister sent her money via Lama Kusho Tsetso. She has one brother and 3 younger sisters, and her mother, aged 79, is still alive.

House 27. Sange Chegi (alias Bakti Ama), age 20, is the only Thami in the nun-nury, and is the daughter of a local *jankri* (shaman). As a young girl Sange Chegi was ill for a long time, and her father thought that her illness might be caused by his work as a shaman which involved the sacrificing of animals. He approached the Guru Lama, vowed to follow Buddhist teaching, went to meditate in a hermitage, and sent his daughter to the *gompa* to become a nun. The Guru Lama accepted her and when the reincarnate lama came to Bigu he ceremoniously cut her hair. Sange Chegi's health improved, but even now she is not strong. Her father relapsed into his practice as a shaman, but the girl continues to live as a nun in Tashi *gompa*. The quarters in which she lives has been empty ever since the death of the previous occupant 3 years ago. Sange Chegi often visits her parents' house, which is close to the *gompa*, and gets from them all necessary supplies.

The data contained in the above house-list demonstrate clearly that the great majority of nuns entered Tashi *gompa* as young unmarried girls. While 23 of the nuns have never been married only 6 nuns are widows who came to Tashi *gompa* after their husbands' death. The numbers of those who have or had relatives among the nuns are equally balanced; 14 of the nuns have kinswomen among the members of the community, and 15 came to Tashi *gompa* without finding a relative among the nuns. The latter category, however, contains nuns who have co-villagers among the other inmates of Tashi *gompa*. The information obtained in the course of the compilation of the house-list also shows that with the exception of five nuns who came as children or adolescents to stay with older kinswomen, all the nuns entered the *gompa* on their own initiative, or at least of their own free will.

It is difficult to determine what causes a young Sherpa or Tamang girl to leave her own village and renounce all prospects of marriage and motherhood and accept the many restrictions of a nun's life. One of the basic motivations for such a decision is undoubtedly the conviction deeply ingrained in Buddhist ideology that the attainment of religious merit is a path to future good fortune through favourable reincarnations as well as to peace and contentment in this life. There is moreover the undoubted fact that in Sherpa and perhaps to a lesser degree Tamang society the status of those associated with a major *gompa* is still surrounded with prestige and a certain glamour. This stems at least partly from the impressive splendour and artistic sophistication of *gompa* services, which form the main focal points for cultural creativeness. One can well imagine that the more sensitive among young people of both sexes are attracted to the participation in rituals, the performance of which arouses the awe and admiration of laymen used to the simplicity of daily life in their small mountain villages. Though nuns as well as monks live under a discipline which imposes stringent sanctions on lapses from the chosen path of celibacy, most Buddhist clerics are neither puritanical nor unduly sanctimonious. Inmates of a monastery or nunnery are not cut off from the life and normal pleasures of lay-society. Nuns are free to accept hospitality in village houses and may pay extended visits to their families. They are allowed to attend weddings and other domestic celebrations, and though the drinking of alcoholic beverages by monks and nuns is frowned upon in practice many nuns partake of beer and occasionally even distilled liquor in modest quantities.

Watching nuns at their domestic tasks and communal activities such as work on the fields one cannot help being impressed by their amiability and good humour. Particularly among groups of young nuns there is always laughter and hilarity, and one feels that the girls really enjoy life in the *gompa*-community and do not pine for the even freer life in their home-villages.

Some of the more articulate nuns voiced the opinion that it was better to become a nun than to marry. "If one marries," said an old nun who had been married and was widowed, "one is happy at first, but later many troubles arise, and one is likely to become unhappy;—in the long run nuns have a better life than married women. The worst a nun can do is to leave the *gompa* and get married. Such a breach of one's vows inevitably results in a painful fate in one's next reincarnation." The latter view is by no means generally held, and married women, who had been nuns, believe that they can gain merit by good works and are clearly not in fear of a bad incarnation.

Sherap Omu (House 3), one of the most intelligent younger nuns suggested that those nuns who came from a difficult family background and had experienced hardship as children appreciated the peaceful life in a *gompa* whereas young nuns who had happy memories of home often craved for family life and were more likely to leave the *gompa* in order to get married. Sherap Omu nevertheless thought that it was preferable to be a nun rather than a wife: "As a married woman, one has to worry about one's husband, one's children and one's parents, and whether they had all enough food. As a nun one may have to care for one's old mother but when she dies one is quite free". Her hope is to be reincarnated as a god or at least as a human, preferably as a man. "As a woman one is always inferior", she argued, "however much one learns one is never given as much respect as a lama. Even corrupt lamas are still treated with some respect; a man can lead a sinful life, and yet later become a lama and be considered superior to any woman".

Despite the rule that nuns leaving the *gompa* have to pay a fine, no great obstacles are placed in the way of those wanting to get married. However, Sangesomu (House 8), who has been at Tashi *gompa* ever since its foundation remembered only three cases of nuns being expelled because of love-affairs and all three married the man with whom they had associated. In addition to paying fines into the *gompa* funds they had to offer tea to all the nuns, burn butterlamps, and bow 108 times to the nuns "because they had left the *dharma*." One of these ex-nuns is the wife of the Bhutanese painter Teshi Ongdi who lives in a house close to the *gompa*, and she told me that in her case the fine for leaving the *gompa* was only Rs 70. She is on excellent terms with the nuns and is not made to feel guilty about her defection.

This attitude towards nuns who return to secular life coincides entirely with the treatment of ex-nuns and ex-monks in the Sherpa society of Khumbu. (cf. *The Sherpas of Nepal*, p. 278.)

GOMPA AND VILLAGE COMMUNITY

Most monastic communities of Nepal have close links with the lay-folk of nearby villages and Tashi *gompa* is no exception. Without the initiative and efforts of the village-headman Nim Pasang, the father of the present *misar* Tsiring Ngundu, Tashi *gompa* would never have come into existence, and its inmates enjoy up to this day the moral and material support of the villagers of Bigu.

The settlements comprised within the administrative unit of Bigu are spread over the slopes and ledges of a wide valley, and within each settlement the individual homesteads are also widely scattered, interspersed by fields and pastures. The total number of households within Bigu panchayat is 337, but among these only Sherpa households are directly concerned with the affairs of the *gompa*, though Magars, Thamis and Chetris may make occasional donations and certainly consider the Guru Lama and the nuns with respect and affection. The settlements topographically closest to Tashi *gompa* have the following composition in terms of households :

<i>Tashigaon:</i>	13 Sherpa (clans : Gonba, Khambachen, Salaka and Gardza)
	3 Thami
<i>Jagat:</i>	2 Sherpa (Gardza)
	3 Magar
<i>Sisarkhani:</i>	2 Sherpa (Khambachen)
<i>Maising:</i>	4 Sherpa (Khambachen, Gonba, Salaka)
<i>Donko:</i>	3 Sherpa (Salaka, Khambachen)
<i>Pankharma:</i>	6 Sherpa (Salaka)
	1 Drukpa
	2 Thami
<i>Tsemkharka:</i>	4 Sherpa (Salaka, Gardza)
<i>Jimthang:</i>	15 Sherpa (Salaka, Khambachen, Chaba)
<i>Babung:</i>	1 Sherpa (Salaka)
	1 Thami
<i>Darkha:</i>	1 Sherpa (Gardza)
	1 Kami
<i>Kaptang:</i>	2 Sherpa (Gardza)
<i>Chutapdara:</i>	5 Sherpa (Salaka)
<i>Chuidak:</i>	3 Sherpa (Khambachen)
<i>Usthali:</i>	3 Sherpa (Salaka, Khambachen, Gonba)

In the settlements on the lower slopes, and hence at a greater distance from Tashi *gompa*, Thamis, Magars and Chetris predominate, although there too a few

isolated Sherpa households are found.

Long before Tashi *gompa* was founded Bigu had already a village *gompa*, situated several hundred feet further down in the settlement of Jagat. This *gompa*, which is surrounded by a profusion of ancient *chorten* and *mani*-walls, retains its function as the focal point of village rites, and its care is in the hands of a set of *gompa* officials entirely distinct from the personnel of Tashi *gompa*.

The village *gompa* is a small, rectangular building painted white like all the dwelling houses. The widespread custom of painting religious buildings pink does not extend to this area. The decorations in the interior are simple but comprise some quite competent frescoes painted by the Drukpa painter, living in Pankharma settlement, who assisted also in the painting of Tashi *gompa*. As the village *gompa* is Nyingmapa a statue of Guru Rimpoche occupies the central place on the altar. The statues are primitive but well maintained.

A Sherpa living in a nearby house serves as *konier* (sacristan) and two lamas, married men who otherwise lead the life of ordinary householders, preside at the seasonal rites. The most important of these rites, known as Narak, resembles in many ways the Dumje festival of the Khumbu Sherpas. The arrangements for this rite are made by five villagers, referred to as *jintak* who correspond to the *lawa* of Khumbu.⁵ But unlike the *lawa* of the Khumbu villages they are not appointed in strict rotation from among all the householders. The *jintak* are villagers who have volunteered to provide the food and materials for the celebration, and to pay the fees of the ministering lamas. There are moreover two *guthi*, funds donated to the *gompa*, and these are used for the giving of loans to villagers, who in return contribute provisions for the *gompa* celebrations. Unlike the Dumje, which is held during the monsoon, the Narak is celebrated in the autumn at about the same time as the Hindu Dassain festival, and according to one of the lamas in conscious opposition to the Dassain ritual of other ethnic groups which involves the sacrifice of goats and sheep objectionable to the Buddhist Sherpas. The nuns of Tashi *gompa* are not in the habit of attending the whole of the Narak rites, but on the last days of the festival the organisers usually ask the nuns to play oboes (*geling*) because there are not sufficient lamas in the village to provide the full complement of musical instruments required for the ritual.

Apart from the two married lamas associated with the village *gompa*, there are two other lamas living at Bigu. One of them is Gelung Lobsang, a young celibate local Sherpa, who built himself a small house above Tashi *gompa* but spends much of his time at the Kargyupa monastery of Chulungkharka in Solu. There a Tibetan reincarnated lama has established a monastery with some 30 monks and 15 nuns, and Gelung Lobsang considers him as his guru.

⁵. Cf. *The Sherpas of Nepal*, pp. 185-188.

The second lama not attached to Tashi *gompa* is Mingma Lama, a Sherpa of Gazrdza clan, who also built a small house in Tashigaon. He was married and had two sons. After his wife's death he divided his property, giving one third to each of his sons, and keeping one third to maintain himself. However, the latter share is being managed by his younger son, who gives the produce to his father. Thus Mingma Lama, can devote himself mainly to religious practices.

It thus seems that the religious life of the Sherpa community of Bigu is by no means concentrated exclusively in Tashi *gompa*, but that there is room for the continuance of ritual performances based on the village *gompa* and for religious practitioners unattached to the nunnery.

This is not the place for an ethnographic account of the Sherpas of the Bigu area, but a brief description of the economy supporting the religious activities of the community is necessary for an understanding of the total situation.

The Sherpas are basically hill-farmers, who divide their energies between agriculture and animal husbandry. Wheat, barley, millet, and potatoes are their main crops, and the climate of Bigu permits the cultivation of winter as well as monsoon crops. Yak and *dzomu* (cross-breeds between yak and cow), favoured for the sake of their ample milk-yield, are kept for most of the year on pastures of varying altitude. On the lower pastures the herdsmen live in temporary shelters of wooden posts and mats. But at higher altitudes they have houses built of stone and roofed with wooden planks like the Khumbu Sherpas. The number of yak and cross-breeds owned by the Sherpas of the Bigu was about 250 in 1974. The high price of *ghi* (clarified butter) and the improvement of communications thanks to the construction of the motor-road leading from Kathmandu to Barabise has increased the profitability of dairy-herds, and cattle owners derive most of their cash income from the sale of *ghi*. The change of the political situation in Tibet, on the other hand, has created difficulties for the movements of herds across the borders. Before the Chinese occupation of Tibet there was an open border between Nepal and the neighbouring districts of Tibet, and the Bigu Sherpas freely used pastures on the Tibetan side of the border. Even today they are still able to use some pastures inside Tibet, but these are limited and the Sherpas have to pay grazing fees to an office in the Chinese border town of Khasa.

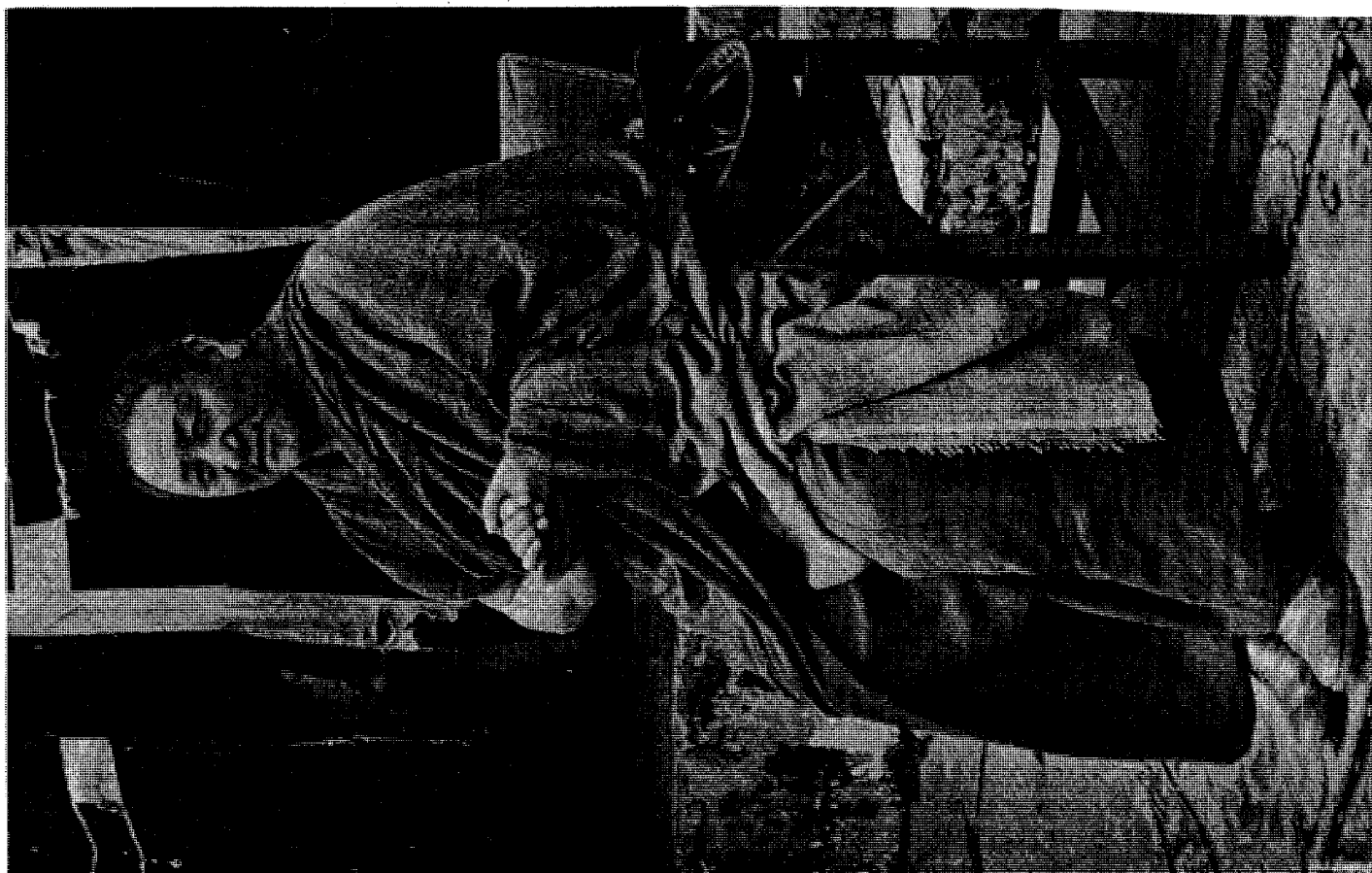
The Sherpas' trade with Tibet has been severely restricted by the Chinese authorities, though some border trade continues. Before the Chinese intervention in 1959 the headmen of Bigu and other wealthy Sherpas traded widely in Tibet, travelling as far as Kuti, Tingri and Shigatse, and travelling via Tibet to Gangtok. In those days some of the Sherpas concentrated mainly on trade and dairy-farming, while others devoted themselves mainly to agriculture. Nowadays the nature of

the trade has changed, because the Sherpas of Nepal may go only as far as the Chinese trading post close to the border. While in the old days the Tibetans were mainly in need of grain, and bought also Nepalese handmade paper, dyes, sugar and hides, the Chinese controlling the trade are mainly interested in obtaining fruit, vegetables, fowls as well as some rice and wheat. Oranges, which the Sherpas obtain from the Nepalese population of the lower regions, are now an important item of trade, and for 100 oranges the Chinese pay 4 *pathi* (4 gallon) salt. A strong porter can carry as many as 1,000 oranges, and as the men going to trade in Tibet cannot carry all the salt back, they exchange some for shoes, matches and cigarettes which are available in the border villages. The Chinese seldom pay in cash, but for the commodities they want for their own consumption they pay relatively high prices in salt. Thus one chicken is bartered for 6 *pathi* salt, and good prices are paid for pumpkins and other vegetables.

Some of the nuns of Tashi *gompa* still go to trade in Tibet. Recently four of the younger nuns went to Khasa to trade with the Chinese. Each carried 2 *pathi* of maize and exchanged it for twice the volume of salt. They told me that the Chinese officials encouraged them to come again and said that they had no objection to nuns entering China for the purpose of trade. Buddhist monks from Nepal also go for trade to Khasa.

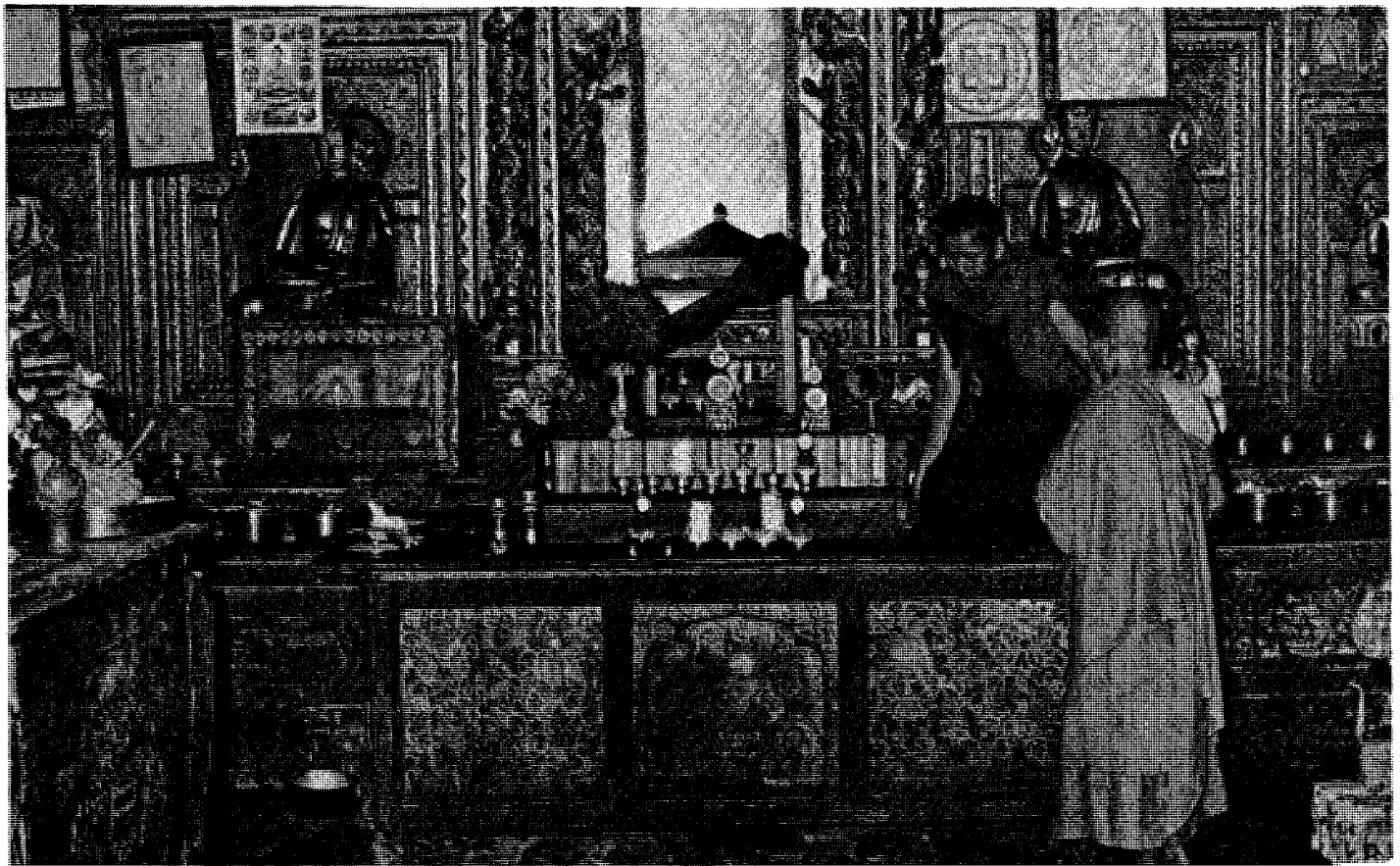
Though conservative and traditional, particularly in the pursuance of their religious practices, the people of Bigu are by no means inward-looking. Lamas and nuns go on distant journeys, mainly to visit centres of pilgrimage but also for trade, and laymen travel widely in search of work and commercial opportunities. One of the wealthiest Sherpas of Bigu, who now keeps a shop in his house in Maising hamlet, started life as a monk in Bagan, but after nine years of monastic life, joined one of the Gurkha regiments of the British army. Subsequently he went to Darjeeling where he ran a vegetable business. This commercial interlude was followed by a period of service in the Indian police, and after this he worked as a contractor in the Punjab.

Finally, however, he returned to Bigu and bought land with his savings. Of his five sons only one is with him in Bigu, while the others are in the Punjab, in Dehra Dun, in Kathmandu and in Chiapu. While this may be an extreme case, many of the Sherpa laymen and also 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 contented 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.





7. The Guru Lama with a group of nuns on the steps of Tashi gompa.



8. The main altar in the *duang* of Tashi gompa.

Only the future will show whether Tashi *gompa* can survive as a centre of religious devotion and culture, but for the time being it certainly offers the opportunity of observing the functioning of a small Buddhist community unshaken in the faith which inspired countless generations of Tibetans and Sherpas, and is now gaining rather than losing ground among the Tamangs of a region extending as far as Risingo and Sailung. Indeed there are indications that the influence of Kusho Tsetu, 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 the 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 Tsetu, who provided the inspiration and initiative for the plan of establishing a larger *gompa*. The 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. In 1972 Sange Gyelmu of Tashi *gompa* went to Sailung, but at that time the *gompa* was not yet completed. Sange Gyelmu and Genden Droma stayed for a year at Sailung, and other nuns of Tashi *gompa* went there for some months at a time to help with the establishment of the new *gompa*. Now the images have been transferred from the old to the new *gompa* it is essential that at the very least one nun is permanently there to care for the images and also the small garden which has been laid out. 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. If successful it might come to play among the Tamangs a role similar to that of Tashi *gompa* in the Bigu area.

As far as one can judge from fragmentary documents and local traditions Buddhism has experienced various periods of expansion as well as of contraction all along the southern fringe of the Tibetan culture sphere. In regions such as the upper Arun valley or some parts of the Gurung country it would seem to have has a short-lived efflorescence and has now taken a downgrade course, whereas in Khumbu and Solu several new monasteries were established within the past half century. Tashi *gompa* provides an example of the recent foundation of a new religious centre, and the history, structure and operation of the small community of nuns therefore seemed worth recording.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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and I concentrated mainly on the community of nuns, my wife and Ramesh Man Shreshta collected information on the social and economic conditions prevailing among the Sherpas of Bigu. Only part of their extensive investigations have been used as background material for the present paper. The study was made possible by a research grant from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

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