

## Chapter 3

# Living Practical Dharma: A Tribute to Chomo Khandru and the Bonpo Women of Lubra Village, Mustang, Nepal

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### Introduction

Chomo Khandru was 80 years old when we met. I was 20. She welcomed me into her home for one night, which soon turned into many. It was 1995, and I had traveled to the ethnically Tibetan area of the Nepal Himalayas known as Mustang to conduct research on the lives of *chomo*—female religious practitioners of the Tibetan Buddhist and Bon traditions who live independently in villages, without the support of an institutional monastic setting.<sup>1</sup> Chomo Khandru was the oldest woman in Lubra, a tiny settlement of 14 houses sheltered in a side canyon of the mighty Kali Gandaki river, and she was arguably the senior most *chomo* in the entire area (figure 3.1). She was an old woman with much to teach and no disciples, and I was an eager young student. As I gained her trust, the story of her life as both a celibate ascetic and a worldly trader on the historic Tibet to India salt-grain trading trail unfolded. With an unusually sharp memory for dates, names, and places, and a down-to-earth way of explaining abstract dharmic (religious) concepts, she was a gifted raconteur and teacher. It became clear that the experience of telling her story and explaining her beliefs was important to



**Figure 3.1** Portrait of Chomo Khandru, 1998

her, just as the experience of listening was to me. Together we entered the special space of transmission. I use the word in its spiritual sense, where it implies the ritual passing of knowledge and practice from one generation to another.<sup>2</sup>

Since that first meeting, I have puzzled over how to tell Chomo Khandru's story, an individual life story that recalls the rich collective history of women's religious practice in the village of Lubra, the larger Himalayan region of Mustang, and the countries of Nepal and Tibet. Her story also foreshadows the cultural, political, and economic challenges that Chomo Khandru's descendants now face as Tibetan religion becomes increasingly globalized. When Chomo Khandru died in November 2002 at the age of 87, a chapter of women's history went with her, and my desire to write about her life grew. Here, I pay tribute to her, as well as to the generations of

women who came before her, and to those who will come after. To do so, I move back and forth between the narrative of Chomo Khandru's individual life and a broader analysis of the social dynamics surrounding women's religious practice in the region. Rather than painting a dualistic picture of tradition pitted against modernity, or valorizing Tibetan women's agency in the past while viewing contemporary women as powerless victims, I hope to illuminate the complex webs of spiritual accomplishment and frustration, physical hardship and comfort, gendered and non-gendered experience that have shaped women's religious lives in Lubra over time.<sup>3</sup>

Janice Willis has described women's roles within the Tibetan cultural milieu as "dynamic, bustling, diverse, and fluid" (1989:100). In this chapter I focus on the tension between such fluidity and fixity in constituting women's religious identities in Lubra. In Chomo Khandru's life, this dynamic manifested itself as an opposition between the dharma of action, or "practical dharma," that she saw as her own primary mode of spiritual engagement, and the dharma of study, which she saw as the domain of men within institutional monastic contexts. This opposition was not hard and fast, as Chomo Khandru did have some access to informal religious education, but she saw its role as secondary to meditation and ritual practice in her spiritual life. I suggest that over the second half of the twentieth century, during which Chomo Khandru lived most of her adult life, this local conception of fluid religious identities began to come into conversation with a more static notion of religious identities that has been inadvertently cultivated by several extra-local entities, including the Tibetan monastic establishment in exile, the Nepali state, and foreign charity and development organizations.<sup>4</sup>

All of these players emphasize models of religious authenticity based on institutional power and formal learning, whereas local models historically placed a higher value on noninstitutional forms of individual spiritual accomplishment and hereditary religious authority.<sup>5</sup> Idealized extra-local notions of how Tibetan religion "should" be structured have encouraged shifts in local conceptions of religious authority.<sup>6</sup> These trends tend to marginalize the nonmonastic, nonliterate modes of religious practice that were historically most accessible to women in many Himalayan areas. As an example of the flexibility that female practitioners experienced, during Chomo Khandru's youth, celibacy for *chomo* was valued but not strictly enforced. Although both men's and women's potential avenues for spiritual practice have become less flexible in reaction to the ongoing engagement between these varied forces, I argue that women in particular have found it more difficult to follow in Chomo Khandru's footsteps to lead renunciant lives, despite the widespread rhetorical commitment to improving women's education and economic status on the part of political and religious institutions over the past several decades.

Many of these difficulties have to do that the conflicting sets of social and spiritual expectations that female practitioners face: quite often, the social roles that they are expected to play as women do not allow the development of the qualities that they are expected to demonstrate as spiritually potent individuals. In large part, this disjuncture has to do with the increasing value placed on reading and writing as the exclusive keys to religious development, skills that are gendered as male, in contrast to female-gendered skills such as weaving. Chomo Khandru moved back and forth between these domains with a gender-bending fluidity in a way that is increasingly uncommon for today's women.

### Locating Lubra and the Bon Tradition

Lubra is located in the lower half of Mustang District, Nepal. Part of the larger 19-village community known as Baragaun that stretches along the Kali Gandaki river valley, Lubra is just out of range of the heavily trekked Annapurna Circuit trail (figure 3.2).<sup>7</sup> In this sense, it straddles two worlds: it remains relatively isolated and tourist-free in comparison to other Baragaun villages, but its proximity to them furnishes access to the amenities, trade opportunities, and ideas that tourism and development projects have



**Figure 3.2** View of Lubra Village, 1995

brought to the area. Villagers depend upon a mixture of subsistence agriculture and cash income from seasonal trade for their livelihoods.

The inhabitants of Lubra's fourteen houses (numbering approximately eighty men, women, and children) are descendants of the twelfth-century Lama Tashi Gyalzen, who ventured into the Mustang area from Tibet in search of a spiritual teacher believed to reside there (Ramble 1983). Upon reaching Lubra, he founded a lineage of non-celestial householder priests that continues today (Ramble 1984). Lama Tashi Gyalzen appears to fit the description of the "Himalayan frontier lamas" that Joanne Watkins (1996:200) has described in her discussion of women's religious roles in Manang, the Nepali administrative district that lies to the east of Mustang. Watkins suggests that such eclectic individuals left the rigid religious and political hierarchies found in central Tibet to establish noninstitutional forms of practice in Himalayan borderland areas. Among other things, the religious traditions that these lamas founded tended to enable greater religious participation for women because they emphasized practical aspects of spiritual development, which could be undertaken in the home, rather than formal study that required travel to monastic institutions elsewhere.

Tashi Gyalzen was an adherent of the Bon tradition, and the villagers of Lubra maintain that identity today.<sup>8</sup> This line of Tibetan religious practice has a long and rather unclear history that has defied clear categorization by cultural historians. Bon's adherents claim that it preceded Buddhism as the earliest form of organized Tibetan religion and that the historical figure of Shakyamuni Buddha was a later incarnation of Bon's founder, Sherab Miwo. Bon cosmogony diverges from its Buddhist counterpart in terms of its primary deities and origin stories.<sup>9</sup>

Early Western scholars often tended to reify and legitimize elite Tibetan perspectives that saw Bon as a deviation from "orthodox" Buddhism. For this reason, the Bon tradition often received negative and inaccurate treatment in scholarly works. Geoffrey Samuel offers an explanation for this tendency:

Bon remained a kind of amalgam of early Tibetan religion, contemporary Tibetan folk religion, black magic and sorcery, a generic label for all the aspects of Tibetan religion which did not fit neatly into Western stereotypes of proper Buddhism. The real problem with this approach is that it collapses a very complex historical process, in which Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan Bon religion developed side by side, into an unhistorical model in which pure Buddhism comes from India and degenerates under the influence of the native Bon religion. (1993:323)

Due to prejudices like these, Bon was long marginalized within both the study of Tibetan religion and within contemporary Tibetan cultural politics

in exile (Cech 1993). However, the Dalai Lama has now acknowledged Bon as a fifth sect of Buddhism, and the Bon tradition's high lamas are well respected by male and female Bonpos, and also by Buddhist monks and laity.<sup>10</sup> Noting these similarities, Samuel suggests that "the modern Bonpo are to all intents and purposes the followers of a Buddhist religious tradition, with certain differences of vocabulary from the other four major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, but no major difference in content" (326).

In some ways, Lubra's Bon-ness contributes to a sense of "double oppression" for women like Chomo Khandru, who are not only women but also members of a once marginalized religious sect. Lubra is the only entirely Bon village in Mustang (although there are individual families scattered elsewhere), and this means that there are far fewer alternatives available to Lubra's women for formal religious practice, since all of the nunneries in the area belong to either the Sakya, Kagyu, or Nyingma Buddhist sects. This is one of the reasons why women's religious practice in Lubra has always been particularly fluid and noninstitutionalized: with the closest Bon monasteries located in eastern Tibet before 1959, and in Kathmandu and northern India afterward, women had little access and were therefore compelled to develop their own forms of spiritual practice at home. At the same time, however, Lubra women describe Buddhism and Bon as *experientially* similar, noting only superficial differences such as the direction of circumambulation or the particular words used in mantras. Krystyna Cech has noted that for many Bonpos, "Identity is a fluid rather than a rigid concept; it allows for the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of its aspects" (42). Fluidity is therefore a hallmark of religious identity for both men and women in Lubra, both in terms of the flexibility between Buddhist and Bon identifications and in terms of the particular modes of practice that are available to them. Indeed, many of Lubra's women marry into Lubra from the surrounding Buddhist villages and have therefore experienced both religious traditions. So although Chomo Khandru's life story is first that of a Bonpo woman, I believe it resonates strongly with the experiences of Buddhist women from Mustang and other Himalayan areas as well.

### Life as a Chomo: Birthright or Burden?

As we first began to talk, Chomo Khandru had a difficult time understanding my interest in her as a *chomo*. She would direct me to the male village lamas whenever I inquired about her religious practice.<sup>11</sup> Soon I began to realize that instead of asking questions that focused on her religious activities as a

*chomo*, assuming that this was the primary feature of her self-identity, I did better to ask general questions about her life experiences that did not make her feel self-conscious about her lack of formal religious training. The answers to these questions reflected the virtues of the “practical dharma” that Chomo Khandru was initially embarrassed to admit that she practiced. This English phrase best captures a concept that Chomo Khandru and other village women described in various Tibetan and Nepali terms at different times. In short, they contrasted the “dharma of action” with the “dharma of study,” associating themselves with the former, which they saw as a lower status mode of religious practice, and associating men with the latter, higher status mode. This notion of “practical dharma” resonates with the *kriya yoga* that Hausner notes and the *seva* that Khandelwal also describes for Hindu women renouncers (this volume).

Born into a family with seven daughters and no sons, Chomo Khandru became a *chomo* at the age of 11. In Lubra, she explained, this was the fate of all second daughters in families with three or more daughters.<sup>12</sup> As in Zangskar, which Gutschow describes elsewhere in this volume, various economic considerations compelled families in Lubra to offer their daughters as *chomo*, although unlike in Lubra there was no strict rule by which every middle daughter became a *chomo*. In both places, first daughters were destined for early marriage, and in certain situations they could also inherit property. For the people of Lubra, requiring second daughters to become *chomo* ensured that the family would have at least one member focused on generating religious merit, while also creating a time lag between the marriages of the first and third or younger daughters, which enabled the family to save money in between for later dowries and rituals. The local marriage system relied upon fraternal polyandry—meaning that a single woman married two or more brothers simultaneously—in order to maintain the integrity of small plots of land as they were inherited by each generation through the male line.<sup>13</sup> Marriage prospects for many women were therefore severely limited in this small community, and a tradition of female renunciation was a good solution to the problem of too many unmarried women. Parents could gain religious merit by pledging their daughters as *chomo*, yet maintain the right to their labor rather than lose it to a prospective husband’s family. Many middle daughters slated to become *chomo* cursed their fate for keeping them from married life—it was the rare few like Chomo Khandru who considered themselves fortunate in gaining access to the basic religious training and spiritual practice usually reserved for men.

Chomo Khandru’s identity as a dharma practitioner was confirmed through a hair-cutting ceremony that took place at the village *gompa* (temple), during which she and her family made offerings to a visiting high lama and she formally pledged to devote herself to religious life.<sup>14</sup> However, It is

unclear whether this ceremony included formal vows. In any case, such details seemed superfluous, since the community as a whole was well aware of her role and would treat her as a *chomo* whether she had been ordained or not. From that point on, Chomo Khandru began an informal process of religious training with two well-respected older *chomo*, Tsultrim and Dawa Kunzum, educated by Yeshe Gyalzen, a Tibetan *tulku* (reincarnate lama) from the eastern Tibetan region of Kham who had spent long periods of time in Lubra during these *chomos'* youth, both women were highly literate in Tibetan and accomplished in meditative practices. Chomo Khandru and other Lubra women spoke of Tsultrim and Dawa Kunzum with great respect: they were the only literate women of their generation and the only village women who undertook extended periods of solitary meditation. These *chomos* passed on their Tibetan reading and writing skills to Chomo Khandru, but for various reasons, she felt that she was never able to develop them to the high degree that her mentors had.<sup>15</sup>

Although Chomo Khandru had a great desire to engage in spiritual practice, she was instead compelled to work as a worldly trader for many years. Since there were no sons in the family, and she was the only daughter without responsibilities to her own husband and children, she became the heir to her father's trading business. Instead of fostering her religious practice, her identity as a celibate *chomo* compelled her to serve as the family's missing man, devoting the time she would have spent on religious practice to bread-winning work for the family.

One of her primary responsibilities was overseeing the family's concerns in the salt, wool, and grain trade that Himalayan communities have traditionally relied upon.<sup>16</sup> From about 1935 to 1959, when Chomo Khandru was a young woman between the age of 20 and 45, she worked as a trader. She traveled north to Lo Manthang (the walled city that served as the seat of Mustang's king) at least once a year, carrying Lubra's wheat to trade for Tibetan salt and wool. She would travel with her male relatives and a train of grain-laden *dzo* (yak/cow crossbreeds). Rarely did any other women accompany them. While trading, she was often frightened that men would attack her and abduct her into a forced marriage, thereby compelling her to give up her religious celibacy. In order to protect herself, she dressed as a man, and with her hair already short as a *chomo*, she could usually pass as one. She carried a *khukuri*, a traditional Nepali knife, by her side and took turns with her male relatives keeping guard over their hard-won grain. "Sometimes, I was challenged by groups of drunk men we met on the trail," she explained. "They wanted to know whether I was male or female. They wanted me to show them! Of course I didn't!" she chuckled. "I had to wave my *khukuri* to keep them away!" Sleeping out in the open among men who were away from their wives for months at a

time, she struggled to maintain her celibacy and the religious honor that went along with it.

Not all *chomo* remained celibate, but her personal commitment to this lifestyle was a source of pride for Chomo Khandru. She was the only *chomo* of her generation who had not given birth, but she respected the others for their choices. Her attitude toward celibacy became more sharply defined in her old age, and seemed to highlight a broader social shift on this issue. Due to the influences of both normative Hindu ideals encouraged by the Nepali educational system, and the development of Buddhist monasticism, by the late 1990s it was becoming less and less acceptable for women (*chomo* or lay) to bear children out of wedlock, and Lubra's villagers were just beginning to see celibacy for both men and women as a prerequisite to serious religious practice.

Due to the constant fear that her subterfuge would be discovered and the long periods of time she spent away from Lubra, the trading years were not a happy period in Chomo Khandru's life. At the same time, she was grateful for the freedom from domestic responsibilities that allowed her to travel and visit pilgrimage sites that would have been out of range for most Lubra women, who are generally responsible for maintaining the "home" to which traveling men return.<sup>17</sup> Although she traveled as a businesswoman rather than as a religious mendicant, Chomo Khandru's journeys challenged the existing expectations of women's roles in Lubra. In this sense, her wanderings were not unlike those Hausner describes for female Hindu renouncers elsewhere in this volume. Like those *yoginis*, Chomo Khandru had mixed feelings about the traveling life: on the one hand it allowed her to engage independently with a world that most Lubra women never knew, but on the other hand the constant movement kept her from deepening her spiritual practice in a consistent manner. If Chomo Khandru could have had her way, she often told me, she would have stayed at home. But I always wondered if doing so would have undercut the very foundations on which her reputation as a spiritual practitioner were built—had she stayed at home, she would have been seen as just another woman, without the special, "male" qualities gained through traveling, which gave her the necessary credentials to be well respected as a religious figure in the eyes of the village.

## On Writing and Weaving: Gender-Bending Identities

Chomo Khandru's story demonstrates the fluidity of both gender and religious roles in Lubra. As for nuns in Zangskar (Gutschow 2004) the religious

agency of *chomo* can be limited by their femininity—in many situations they do not have equal access to the formal religious training that their male counterparts receive. At the same time, Chomo Khandru's life history suggests that both gender and religious identities are mutable. A religious role of *chomo* can enable individuals to bend socially sanctioned gender rules. For example, it can enable a woman to become a symbolic male or, as in the case of Chomo Khandru, to take on certain qualities perceived as man-like. Anthropologist Charles Ramble writes that in Lubra's Tibetan dialect, "male honorifics are also used of celibate nuns from any rank" (1984:133). This suggests that Chomo Khandru's gender-bending trading activities were not aberrations; rather women who become *chomo* were perceived to take on male qualities in both the social and spiritual worlds. There is a specific kind of maleness that *chomo* must emulate if they are to command community respect. Ramble continues that although *chomo* should be addressed with male honorifics, "villagers confided to me their reluctance to address nuns in this way if they were not literate" (133). In fact, the male honorific marks literacy skills (traditionally in the Tibetan liturgical script) more than it marks physical gender features or a particular level of spiritual attainment; *chomo* are addressed as men because as religious practitioners they are expected to have literary skills. Reading and writing are generally considered to be male activities, and the fact that few women read Tibetan is one of the primary reasons that they are prohibited from maintaining a more active role in the village's literate religious life. Although young girls now learn Nepali in government schools, they are not proficient in the Tibetan "social script" (March 1984:737). Tibetan is the language that has traditionally encoded social and religious relations in Lubra, while Nepali is a "foreign" language of governance that belongs to a different language family (Indo-Aryan rather than Tibeto-Burman) and has a different orthographic system. One lama made it clear to me that it was necessary to read Tibetan to become a full-fledged Bon practitioner; he continued to explain that women were barred from becoming lamas simply because they could not read texts, not because there was anything inherent in their feminine nature preventing them from taking on that role.

This conflation of gender, religious roles, and literary skills can create confusion at several levels: villagers told me that they sometimes had trouble knowing which pronoun to use when addressing a *chomo* whose level of literacy they did not know, and, conversely, they were confused by the fact that there was no easy way to address a literate woman, *chomo* or otherwise, without calling her a man. Again, these linguistic limitations suggest that *chomos'* perceived gender identities shift back and forth between "male" and "female"—although they are clearly women in the biological sense, their ability to read and write marks them with male-gendered qualities. For this

reason, *chomo* who cannot read maintain the most ambiguous status: as religious practitioners, they should in theory be literate, therefore becoming honorary men, but without Tibetan literary skills, they are stranded between conflicting social expectations and gendered roles.

This state of affairs resonates with Kathryn March's discussion of writing and weaving as gender markers in Tamang society:

For the Tamang, weaving and writing are not only technical skills but dense symbols of gender. They are gender symbols not only because they tell the Tamang about the separate roles of the sexes, but because they are about what transpires between the sexes as each defines the other. Two opposing conceptions of the world emerge as Tamang men and women view one another; gender symbolizes both the opposition and the reflexivity of these world views. (729)<sup>18</sup>

As in the Tamang community that March describes, in Lubra weaving stands in opposition to writing as the exclusive province of women. Women weave brightly colored blankets and aprons, the sale of which provides one of the village's few modes of cash income. Chomo Khandru never learned to weave or, perhaps more accurately, was never taught to weave by her mothers and sisters. Off trading as the man of the house, she was expected to write and read, but not to weave. Although she learned how to spin—an occupation that men and women share—Chomo Khandru's "male" identity as a trader and religious practitioner prohibited her from taking on the "female" skill of weaving. Speaking of a female figure prominent in Tamang myths, March notes that "weaving is associated . . . with the moment of her break with organized religion, her separation from her father, and the cloud of illegitimate pregnancy, all of which hampered her religious efforts" (733). Clearly, since weaving has similar connotations in Lubra, possessing the skill would only have complicated Chomo Khandru's already challenging position as a female religious practitioner.

One of the ironies of the equation made here between literacy, maleness, and the dharma of study (and its inverse: weaving, femaleness, and the dharma of action), is that the goal of orthodox Tibetan religious practice—both Buddhist and Bon—is to transcend intellectualized understandings of the self as objectively real to reach an experience of the ego as illusory and contingent. It is precisely this unintellectualized, embodied aspect of spiritual practice—the dharma of action—that laywomen most often engage in their daily lives. As one feminist observer of Tibetan religion has put it, "the ideals of these religious systems are often akin to the kinds of experiences women have in day-to-day life. This means that their experiences are perceived to fit in with the ideals of the religion, even though these experiences are the ones they wish to change" (Campbell 1996:156). In other words,

although women are identified with the internal spiritual qualities (embodied in their weaving) that male-dominated religious traditions promote as ideals to attain, women themselves are excluded from the associated institutional structures of the religion precisely because they do not possess the learned skills (such as writing) on which the religion pragmatically relies.

Chomo Khandru and many of Lubra's laywomen seemed to be aware of this tension, although they did not speak about it in these specific terms. In statements to me, they always accorded their own spiritual attainments through "practical dharma" less value than those of men who engaged in the "dharma of study." Yet they still believed strongly in the importance of "practical dharma," precisely because it was practiced as part of daily life in the village and therefore generated direct, immediate benefits relevant to them as women who spent most of their time at home. This was in contrast to the ostensibly greater, but abstract and unquantifiable, merit generated by monks in far-away institutional settings.

For instance, I was told by several people that one of the reasons there was no strict rule of celibacy for Lubra's *chomos* was because having the experience of childbearing and rearing enabled *them* to empathize more fully with laywomen's experiences, and therefore to meditate more fully on motherhood as an experience of great compassion as one plank of their spiritual practice. Tsultrim and Dawa Kunzum—the two literate *chomo* who taught Chomo Khandru—both bore illegitimate children (neither of them married, although Tsultrim was the long-term partner of Lama Yeshe Gyalzen), but this did not compromise their reputation as spiritual practitioners. If anything, motherhood strengthened their ability to engage with dharma at the practical level and serve as role models and teachers to other women. They inhabited an intermediary space between male and female identities: they could read and write like men, yet they never received more formal education or institutional support because they were women. When at home they lived and worked with their families and cared for children like women, yet they periodically left for pilgrimage or business trips that took them away like men. This intermediate position was socially acceptable in the village context of Lubra, allowing them to maintain a fluid identity that did not depend upon institutional legitimization.

## Changing Religious, Economic and Educational Landscapes

Chomo Khandru's trading work came to an unexpected halt when the Nepal-Tibet border was sealed after the full-fledged Chinese occupation of

Tibet in 1959.<sup>19</sup> This political shift allowed her to devote the latter part of her life to the religious practice that had eluded her in youth. Finally, she had time to read texts and sit in meditation. Of course, she still had work to do—she became an indispensable help to her sister Palsang, who was raising six children. When I met her, she was still working alongside her sister, serving as a second grandmother to her nephew's two small sons and doing a full share of field work and housework. Domestic labor dominated her days—she once said sarcastically in response to a question about why she had not engaged in more formal religious training: “Every day we have work. Only when we die, we don’t have work!”

Nevertheless, Chomo Khandru could work hard at home or in the fields during the day and spend her evenings reading by flickering candle light. Through her obvious devotion to the dharma, she became a highly respected village figure, the only woman ever called to conduct important rituals in the village temple or individual homes with the village lamas. She memorized basic religious texts and spent the little free time she had meditating, but she was never able to study at the more advanced philosophical level that she desired. By the time she was 50, her eyesight was beginning to fail. At that time, no one wore eyeglasses or knew of any other cure. Slowly, over the next ten years, the world receded into a fog, and she could no longer study new texts. She had committed the most important works to memory and could still chant them with the lamas when she was called. But slowly these too faded. “My dreams of becoming enlightened are still just dreams. I am old now, and cannot undo all of the bad karma I have accrued in this life. It is too late,” she said remorsefully one evening as we sat around the fire. Although venerated by the villagers for her age and experience, her prayers were no longer thought to be as effective as those offered by younger monks trained formally in the new monastic centers of India and Kathmandu that Chomo Khandru had never visited.

Such institutions began to develop after the Tibetan flight into exile after 1959, often with support from the growing numbers of Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon.<sup>20</sup> Although the people of Lubra were citizens of Nepal, the political shifts north of the border had severe consequences for them. The border between Tibet and Nepal was closed, and the itinerant lamas who had provided the focal point of Lubra’s religious life no longer came. As the Dalai Lama and many other Tibetans fled into exile in India, the center of religious authority for the people of Lubra and other Himalayan villages suddenly shifted from Tibet to the exile towns of India and Nepal, where many lamas reestablished their monasteries. The people of Lubra had never previously needed to visit monasteries in Tibet; the lamas had always come to them. Suddenly they were bypassed. The exiled Tibetans had lost their village context and began to build monastic institutions that

were not constrained by village politics and had little place for the non-institutional traditions of village practice. At the same time, Lubra became ever more constrained by its village context. Ironically, the transnational development of Tibetan religion seems to have made Lubra more isolated than ever before from the new religious and cultural centers.

This shift had grave effects for the women of Lubra. No longer could they receive religious teaching from high lamas at home. Instead, they had to travel to far-away places such as Dharamsala or Kathmandu. While boys were now sent off for study, girls rarely were; they were expected to stay at home to provide labor for their families. Menri Gompa, which had been the most important Bon *gompa* in Tibet, was reestablished in 1969 as the seat of the Bon tradition in exile at Dolanji, in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India (Skorupski 1981). Funded in part by foreign donations, the Dolanji monastery began offering full scholarships for studies up to grade eight to children from Himalayan villages like Lubra. Although in theory these scholarships were open to boys and girls, parents rarely felt able to send both their daughters and sons, and ultimately boys received priority.

Instead, girls were left at home and sent to study at the Nepali government school established in the village in the late 1980s. Although this was certainly a positive step forward in the overall educational level of village women, the *type* of education had unexpected effects on women's abilities and motivations for religious practice. Most importantly, although girls gained literacy in Nepali, this opportunity in fact curtailed their ability to learn the Tibetan they would need for serious religious practice. With the time limitations placed on girls by their domestic responsibilities, they could barely manage to study one written language, let alone two. Furthermore, the school provided a false sense of educational security, and the one lama who had previously tried to provide some education in Tibetan for village girls along with Chomo Khandru ceased these activities after the establishment of the school. Most importantly, the education in Nepali provided younger women with access to the world of trade and commerce. To the dismay of many older villagers, many girls, including those intended to be *chomo*, lost their motivation for religious practice and left the village to become businesswomen elsewhere.

From Chomo Khandru's perspective, Lubra's younger generation of women had been converted to the "religion of money," a change that in her view was in large part due to the emergence of secular Nepali language education in the vacuum left after the itinerant lamas stopped coming to teach in 1959. However, Chomo Khandru herself had spent years as a trader and was not untainted by worldly concerns. So what was her critique of the young women? She felt that her own engagement in business was not out of choice but of necessity, whereas the younger women wanted nothing

more than to leave the village for commercial pursuits. This highlights again the tension between traveling and staying in one place, discussed earlier. Chomo Khandru claimed that in her time, trade was a necessary evil that she was pushed into by her family for economic survival, while she would have chosen to stay home to focus on spiritual practice if given the option. At the same time, as mentioned above, traveling did afford Chomo Khandru a certain freedom to visit pilgrimage sites that otherwise would have remained inaccessible to her as a woman. In contrast, the women of her great-niece's generation had no interest in dharma and saw traveling and trading as ends in themselves, often leaving the village against the wishes of their families. Also, they traveled southward to Pokhara and onward to India, rather than northward to Tibet. This shift was in large part due to the disappearance of northern trade opportunities after 1959, but there was no question that Nepali education had also contributed to shifting the younger generation's orientation permanently southward.

At the end of my first stay with Chomo Khandru in 1995, she told me about the dream she shared with many other villagers: to revitalize Lubra by rebuilding the village's historic *gompa*, founded in the twelfth century by Lama Tashi Gyalzen, as a center for religious education that would provide a Bon education for *both* boys and girls. This would reintroduce Tibetan literary skills as an important educational focus, and it would help stem the brain drain—or dharma drain—that the village was experiencing.

### Ideas Become Action: Building a Bon School

By the summer of 2001, this dream was on the way to realization, although in a somewhat different form than Chomo Khandru had imagined. A Western visitor had secured funding from a development agency to rebuild the *gompa*, and by late 1997, the old *gompa* was usable once again for ritual practice, although it had not been developed for educational purposes. In 1999, funding was secured to build a separate Bon school named Chasey Kengtse Bon Hostel. The plan was that the hostel would work in tandem with the Nepali government school to provide morning and evening classes in Tibetan language and religion. The donor organization was a small foreign charity run by several women devoted to advancing education, with a particular emphasis on girls' education. By the summer of 2001, the mammoth school building—with 14 toilets, in a village of 14 houses that previously had no toilets—had been constructed just below the rebuilt *gompa*. However, disagreements over how the school should operate

prevented it from opening until 2002. Even after its opening, infrastructural and logistical problems plagued the school, culminating in the tragic death of one child in early 2004 after part of the school building collapsed. Far from providing the idealized vision of Bon religious education, the project became the terrain for a divisive debate about religious authenticity, which threatened to in fact curtail rather than encourage women's religious and cultural agency in the village.

Much of the difficulty arose due to confusion about the role of women in Tibetan societies and how best to encourage their participation on the part of the donor organization's board of trustees. Familiar only with the highly literate, monastic model of Tibetan religion that was emphasized as Buddhism and Bon moved West, the trustees of the donor organization assumed that developing a school built upon such a model would be the most effective way to encourage girls' education and religious participation. This approach failed to acknowledge the local prevalence of nonformal education for female children, which generated noninstitutional forms of religious agency, such as that which women like Chomo Khandru exercised in Lubra before 1959. Development programs that aim to increase women's access to religious education in places like Lubra must acknowledge the fluidity of women's traditional religious roles in the local context and work to maintain such options, rather than promote participation in male-dominated, newly popular institutional modes of religious practice as the only way forward for women.

This clash between a model of religious fluidity and one of monastic education is behind the drama of the Bon school in Lubra. The new Chasey Kengtse Hostel was designed to replicate in Lubra the monastic structure of education at Menri Gompa in Dolanji, thereby introducing an altogether new form of religious institution to the village. The masterminds behind this plan were the three trustees of a Nepali NGO, Mustang Bon Action, which took on the role of liaison between the foreign donor organization and the village school committee. The Mustang Bon Action board of trustees consisted of one concerned Western visitor to Lubra and two businessmen based in Kathmandu who were often insensitive to local politics and the subtleties of women's needs for religious education. Both men had studied at Dolanji themselves, and they were convinced that the institutional monastic model was the only one that could effect the religious revitalization that Lubra's residents desired. Yet neither of them had spent any of their adult life in Lubra, and they had dismissed alternate models for religious education that might have been more in line with the village's lived traditions. Although some villagers had misgivings from the start, many had been convinced by the trustees' argument that they needed a monastic-style educational institution in order to maintain their religious tradition in the

future. These villagers had visited Dolanji and other such institutions and were impressed by the sheer physical grandeur and the religious power centralized there, both largely thanks to Western financial support. Identifying the monastic aspects of the tradition as the most “genuine,” Western students of Tibetan lamas and aid agencies have donated large amounts of money to such institutions, while until now relatively little has gone toward maintaining local religious traditions in areas like Mustang (Childs 2004; Moran 2004:chapter 4). By the late 1990s, many people in Lubra were very conscious of these inequalities, and they had begun to view their own, non-monastic modes of practice as backward, looking toward the new Western-supported monasticism as the highest source of spiritual authority. As one of Lubra’s older lamas said of his son who was studying at Dolanji for the *geshe* degree—the equivalent of a PhD within the Tibetan philosophical system—“He will be a much higher lama than I have been, because he is a monk, while I am married.” This is additional evidence of the shifting attitudes toward celibacy, as discussed above.

In addition, many villagers thought that the foreign donors who had funded the hostel construction would be dissatisfied if the result was not a grand building on par with Dolanji and the other large monasteries that foreigners were likely to be familiar with. In private, many villagers confessed that they would prefer a smaller building in keeping with existing local architecture, which would then free up more funds for teacher training and curricular development. However, these individuals felt that proposing their ideas to the charity was impossible, because this would expose Lubra’s inability to live up to what the villagers perceived as foreign expectations of Tibetan religion. Western support for, and romanticization of, Tibetan religion was transforming local conceptions of religious authority, even in the very act of providing support for “traditional” monastic training. This created a dynamic that marginalized the non-monastic, nonliterate modes of religious practice that had historically been women’s forte in many Himalayan regions.

So although the villagers were in theory eager to adopt the monastic model proposed by the trustees, in practice, this model often conflicted with their own priorities. Villagers became increasingly dissatisfied with the project as the school building neared completion and value-laden decisions about the school’s curriculum and admission criteria had to be made. A series of disputes arose between the trustees of Mustang Bon Action and the village school committee around how the school should be operated, most of which had to do with competing notions of religious authority: for example, should the head teacher be a local married *tulku* who had not been trained in a monastery, yet commanded respect from many villagers, or a young celibate monk with credentials? The trustees were eager to promote practices and structures they saw as essential to maintaining “Bon culture,”

but which in reality had never been part of life previously in this historically Bon village. Such “inventions of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) served to alter village lifestyles in unintended ways, rather than preserving existing cultural practices.

A case in point was the issue of uniforms: the trustees wanted the students to wear a complicated traditional Tibetan costume with supposedly “Bon” colors and designs for the purpose of “preserving Bon culture,” yet the villagers had never worn such costumes themselves. Instead, they saw such uniforms as an unnecessary expense that could prevent the poorest children of the village from attending school. They also worried that unusual uniforms might in fact alienate their children from the Nepali world around them, rather than giving them a positive sense of Bonpo identity within it, as the trustees had envisioned.

The biggest invention of all was the notion that the only authentic form of religious education was that provided by monastic-style institutions, through the “dharma of study.” In the eyes of the Mustang Bon Action NGO’s trustees, the “dharma of action” that Chomo Khandru had practiced was not a legitimate form of spiritual practice worth transmitting to future generations because it unfolded in the nooks and crannies of daily life, in unpredictable patterns that did not adhere to the principles of monastic discipline. Moreover, it was not structured around textual knowledge. When Chomo Khandru approached the trustees with several suggestions—including a request that children not be required to live in the boarding hostel but instead be sent home at night so they could be with their families—they were dismissed as the follies of an old woman, and she was told that the children would never learn anything properly if they did not adhere to strict disciplinary rules.

Chomo Khandru was not the only woman denied a role in shaping the future of the school. There were no women among the seven members of the village school committee. According to the trustees, there were no women who had enough knowledge of what religious education should be like to participate in the process of shaping it in the village. Village women on the whole were skeptical of the project, and they felt uncomfortable with the monastic model advanced by the trustees. Having never known religious women apart from the non-celibate *chomos* who always lived in the village, rather than in a monastic setting, many women equated the institutional model with men and feared that their daughters would be discriminated against at the school. As one lay woman put it, “Why will it benefit my daughter to go and sit there all day if they only pay attention to the boys? She could be doing better work at home.” The foreign donor organization’s trustees could not understand why women were not more enthusiastic about the project.

In short, by challenging the traditional fluidity of gender and religious identities with the introduction of an educational institutional modeled on Tibetan exile monasteries, both the foreign sponsors of the school and the Kathmandu-based trustees had overlooked the ways in which Lubra's women might be best served. As a symbol of the monastic model of religion, which until recently had remained peripheral to the villagers' own practice, the project imposed a fixed notion of how religious identity should be constructed. In the process, rather than being valued as knowledgeable advisors, elders like Chomo Khandru were cast as unfortunate reminders of the village's "backward" religious past and relegated to the margins of what was constructed as its "modern," monastic future.

### Continuing the Lineage

Over the last ten years (1995–2005), I have returned to Lubra many times. In 1999, I became *mithini* (Nepali), or *drogmo* (Tibetan)—"ritual sister"—with Chomo Khandru's eldest great-niece, a young woman exactly my age named Nyima Putik (figure 3.3). Nyima was one of the young woman traders who spent much of her time outside of the village, selling sweaters in Assam for the months of October through February. I empathized with



**Figure 3.3** Portrait of Nyima Putik, Chomo Khandru's great niece, 1999

Nyima when Chomo Khandru constantly berated her for succumbing to the religion of money; Nyima was just like any other young woman in the 1990s anywhere in the world, seeking new experiences and independence from her family. In many ways, she was just like me.

I began to suspect that Chomo Khandru's harsh attitude toward Nyima's cohort belied a sense of personal responsibility for failing to provide the young women with better religious education, or to inculcate her successors with a greater sense of spiritual commitment. Nyima Putik was in fact very much like Chomo Khandru herself—a strong, self-confident woman who cared about her village and family but did not want to be tied down by them and valued the freedom that travel brought. Yet she was not a *chomo*, did not read Tibetan, and was only nominally religious. Nonetheless, she had taken on many of the gender-bending attributes that defined Chomo Khandru's youth: Nyima was the oldest child of six, and since her father had died young and her mother was chronically ill, Nyima became the honorary man of the family, just as her great-aunt had before her. As of 2005, Nyima was 30 and had chosen to remain unmarried, an uncommon state of affairs, especially since her younger sister had already been married for several years.

When I asked Nyima why she did not become a *chomo*, since I thought this might have added some social legitimacy to her otherwise unusual single status, she chuckled. "The *chomo* tradition is not about the future, it's about the past," she said. "You should know that," Nyima continued,

After all your research, you should know that there is no motivation for us young women to become *chomo*. It's the worst of both worlds: they are not full-fledged monastic practitioners, so no one respects them, but they also don't get to enjoy the pleasures of married life or the freedom and excitement of trade like I do, because they are always worried about if they are doing enough dharma. There is no point in having *chomo* any more—if women want to practice religion they should become proper nuns in one of the big places, and if they want to stay unmarried they can just be businesswomen like me. Why bother to become something that no one cares about?

Nyima's attitude shows that while general social expectations of women have become more liberal—in Chomo Khandru's time it was virtually impossible to remain unmarried without becoming a *chomo*—religious expectations of women have become more conservative. Appreciation for the "practical dharma" that Chomo Khandru exemplified has diminished as the "dharma of study" has taken precedence. Women who could previously gain respect as lay practitioners by taking teachings in their home village and demonstrating their commitment to dharma in action must now leave the village to join a monastic institution elsewhere if they wish to be considered genuine. The problem with this equation is that there are few Bon

institutions that offer formal religious education for women in Nepal or India, so Lubra women who want to be nuns must give up their Bonpo identity to join a Buddhist institution.<sup>21</sup> While some women have done this in recent years, many more have decided to eschew religious practice altogether and take up the trading life like Nyima Putik. While most of them travel only as far as India, the more adventurous among them have migrated to the United States, where they work as illegal nannies and manicurists (Craig 2002). At least in these roundabout ways they can maintain their lay Bonpo identity (which they would have to give up in order to become a formal nun), and, by virtue of their economic successes, gain a status level within the community much higher than that of a *chomo*. For all of these reasons, the highly fluid religious identities that women held in Chomo Khandru's time have given way to a more limited set of possibilities that have been shaped by outside actors like the Nepali state, Tibetan exile monastic institutions, and foreign interests. When Chomo Khandru died in 2002, the Bonpo *chomo* tradition of Lubra went with her.

I sometimes wondered whether Nyima Putik and I were two halves of a whole when it came to our relationship with Chomo Khandru. Despite having a somewhat contentious relationship with her great-aunt, Nyima Putik lovingly provided for Chomo Khandru's material needs in her old age, while I gave the old woman a chance to talk about her life, lending legitimacy to her experiences through my interest. Together, by listening to Chomo Khandru's story, continuing the tradition of trade and travel, and honoring her approach to spiritual life, we have continued her lineage—if not as *chomos*, as independent women of the world who believe in practical dharma.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Sienna Craig, Charles Ramble, Pat Symonds, Mark Turin, and Mark Unno for their invaluable contributions to my work on this topic over time, and the editors of this volume for their insightful comments on this chapter.

## Notes

1. There are two Tibetan etymologies for this word: *chos mo* literally means “woman of the dharma”; while *jo mo* means “noblewoman” or “woman of high rank.” Both meanings inform indigenous understandings of the term. Although the term is often translated as “nun,” I prefer to use *chomo* throughout, since

- “nun” suggests an individual who has taken formal vows within an institutional setting, which is usually not the case for *chomo*.
2. Although my work with Chomo Khandru certainly began as an ethnographic encounter that I initiated in my role as an anthropology student, it took on a more personal, spiritual dimension over time as it became clear that Chomo Khandru began to think of me as the disciple she had never had. While I cannot know exactly what she thought, her actions and words suggested that she experienced our growing relationship as an opportunity to pass on her understanding of the dharma in the hopes that I would find it valuable and share it with others in turn. It is in this sense that I use the term “transmission.”
  3. Western feminist writers on Buddhism have in various ways attempted to revalorize Tibetan women’s history as an inspiration for contemporary Western female Buddhist practitioners, while at the same time distancing themselves from modern Tibetan and Himalayan women’s position within patriarchal cultural and religious contexts (Gross 1993; Shaw 1994; Klein 1994; Campbell 1996). These approaches do not adequately acknowledge contemporary indigenous women as full subjects with their own forms of spiritual agency. See Shneiderman (1999) for the details of this argument.
  4. Academic scholarship on Tibetan religion must be considered as another external entity that has affected women’s religious identities in Himalayan areas, but a thorough discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of the present article.
  5. Although we might assume that this opposition is also one between the the “modern” dharma of study and the “traditional” dharma of action, such a reading is too simplistic. The dharma of study always existed in Lubra—long before the notion of “modernity” did—as an important form of religious practice, alongside the dharma of action. In earlier eras these various forms of religious identity were for the most part seen as equally valuable, while in recent years the dharma of study has eclipsed the others in perceived prestige.
  6. Other authors have commented on these general dynamics. See Sihlé (2002) for a general discussion of the increasing monasticization of ritual practices in the Mustang area. In an insightful analysis of “culture change in the name of cultural preservation” in Nubri (an ethnically Tibetan area in central-western Nepal’s Gorkha district, just east of Mustang), Childs states that, “An unintended consequence of foreign patronage for Buddhist monasteries in exile has been a loss of Tibetan cultural diversity in Himalayan highland communities” (2004).
  7. Baragaun means “twelve villages” in Nepali. The Nepali government officials who gave it that name misconstrued the locally defined boundaries of the larger community, excluding seven of the member villages.
  8. Earlier scholarly works in English generally used an umlaut over the “o”—“Bön”—to approximate the Tibetan pronunciation of the word, but more recent works have dropped the umlaut. For simplicity’s sake I have followed the latter convention.
  9. For more detailed information on Bon, see Karmay (1972, 1998); Snellgrove (1980); and Samuel (1993).
  10. Bonpo literally means “Bon person” in Tibetan. “-po” is a male nominalizer, and technically when referring to women it would be preferable to use the

female “-mo” or “-ma.” However, since “Bonpo” has emerged as the standard term to refer to all Bon practitioners in the scholarly literature, I have followed that convention here.

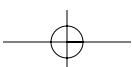
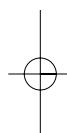
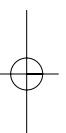
11. As described by Ramble (1984), Lubra is a priestly village, with each household having its own hereditary lineage. In theory there should always be 14 married householder lamas in the village, 1 from each house, but many hereditary lamas of the current generation have stopped practicing actively. Those who do maintain their lineage are often away trading or conducting rituals elsewhere, so it is now rare to find more than three to five lamas in the village at any time.
12. Cassinelli and Ekvall offer a description of a similar “nun tax” in the Tibetan principality of Sakya (1969:296–297).
13. See Schuler (1978, 1987) for details of marriage practices in Baragaun and Levine (1988) for additional information on polyandry in the Himalayas.
14. *Gompa* means “any solitary place where meditative practice can be carried on” (Snellgrove 1957:200–201). Although the word is often translated as “monastery,” this is a misnomer in a village like Lubra, where the *gompa* has no permanent inhabitants.
15. It is hard to judge the validity of such statements from someone like Chomo Khandru whose character was infused with humility. Her responses to questions about her own achievements were always self-deprecating.
16. See Fisher (1986); von Fürer-Haimendorf (1975); and Spengen (2000) on trans-Himalayan trade.
17. Although the salt-grain trade ended with the 1959 Chinese occupation of Tibet, new items and routes of trade have developed over the last several decades. Most contemporary Baragaun men and some women spend three to five months of the year in northeastern India selling sweaters and other manufactured goods.
18. The Tamang are a major ethnic population living in Nepal’s middle hills, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language, practice their own form of Buddhism, and maintain strong links to ethnic Tibetan populations elsewhere in the Himalayas.
19. See Goldstein (1997) and Shakya (1999) for details of these historical events.
20. See Moran (2004) for an insightful discussion of the dynamics between Tibetan and Western Buddhists in Kathmandu.
21. There are relatively large Bon nunneries in the eastern Tibetan area of Amdo (within the Qinghai and Sichuan provinces of China), but these are geographically and linguistically inaccessible to Lubra’s women. However, the last decade has seen a revival of Sakya and Kagyu Buddhist nunneries in the Baragaun and larger Mustang area, creating many more opportunities for women from these sects to join such institutions than were available in the past.

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## Chapter 4

### The True River Ganges: Tara's Begging Practices

Kristin Hanssen

"It's beautiful. It's red," Tara said in a letter to me describing the cow she bought with the money I had sent. Her mention of the red cow recalled to me the times when she had spoken of the traits of this specific color. Red was the color her guru had given her when she became initiated as a Vaishnava Baul. It reflected the power of menstrual blood containing female procreative seed, esteemed by Tara and her kin for its beneficent properties. Other bodily secretions such as urine, tears, and mother's milk were also held to be benevolent, yet menstrual blood was particularly valuable. Tara described the female substance as the true river Ganges, bearing the same sacred powers in concentrated form. During her ceremony of initiation, when she received a *sannyas* mantra, her sari, blouse, and underskirt had all been red. The color varied from pink and crimson to bright brown and saffron and, like other Bauls, Tara wore these shades in combination.

In this chapter I examine two seemingly divergent spheres, showing how ideas about menstrual blood and related substances enter into Baul begging practices. Drawing on conversations with Tara, a married female Baul in her early thirties, I argue that Bauls attempt to forge social ties to people by channeling their life force, arising from their seed, to others when they sing. In doing so they challenge Brahmin claims of ritual superiority. Moreover, making the step to become a renouncer has as Knight (this volume) points out the added implication of enabling female Bauls to leave the household sphere by taking up the practice of singing songs for alms. Significantly too for Tara, becoming Baul allows her to embrace an alternative interpretation