

Buddhists

*Understanding Buddhism Through
the Lives of Practitioners*

Edited by
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Living Practical Dharma

Chomo Khandru and the Himalayan Bon Tradition

Sara Shneiderman

Editor's Introduction

In the Kali Gandaki Valley of central Nepal, Chomo Khandru lived an extraordinary life, beginning as a caravan merchant and then dedicating herself to a career as a ritual practitioner. She was a master of the Bon tradition. This lineage of Tibetan religion has a long and still obscure history; its texts and followers assert that it preceded Buddhism, and that Shakyamuni Buddha was a later incarnation of Bon's founder, Sherab Miwo. Despite Bon's history of marginalization, the 14th Dalai Lama acknowledged Bon as a fifth sect of Buddhism, and the tradition's high lamas are well respected by Buddhist monks and laity. Bon has a long history in places such as the village of Lubra, Mustang, Chomo Khandru's home, and it exists in pockets across the Tibetan cultural region, all the way to eastern Tibet.

Chomo Khandru became an ordained monastic at age 11, accepting the custom of second daughters devoting their lives to religion. Second daughters became *chomo* to ensure that families had at least one member generating religious merit, while also creating a time lag between the marriages of the first and third or younger daughters in a rural, high-altitude environment where resources were sparse.

Chomo Khandru received her religious training from two older *chomo*, who themselves were trained by a Bon lama who came to Lubra 80 years ago and guided them in developing spiritual skills through long solitary retreats. With their guidance, Chomo Khandru learned to read, one of the few women who did so there, memorized basic religious texts, and spent the little free time she had meditating. Through her devotion, she became a highly respected village figure,

the only woman ever called to join village lamas in conducting certain rituals in the village temple or individual homes. Although disappointed that she could not master the more philosophical aspects of the dharma, she came to find meaning in serving her village and region through rituals devoted to "practical dharma" that generated merit and protection.

Wherever Buddhism spread, it adapted to the "logic of local life." This chapter offers a detailed and nuanced case study of this truism. It also presents a lucid analysis of how the world that Chomo Khandru was born into has been radically changed, first by the closing of Tibet and then by globalization. Using the case of her great-niece Nhima Bhuti's life choices to sharpen the contrast, we learn that, as trade opportunities moved south, exposure to new languages and places altered worldviews; we also see how the *chomo*'s role lost allure, given the heightened status of ordained, celibate monastics that resulted from the internationalization of Tibetan religion that flowed all the way back to the village. Through these life histories, we are drawn to the life of this strong and dedicated practitioner, even as we are left to witness the end of the tradition she embodied.

Introduction¹

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 Nepal's Mustang district 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.² Chomo Khandru was the oldest woman in Lubra, a tiny settlement of 14 houses sheltered in a side canyon of the Kali Gandaki river, and she was arguably the most senior *chomo* in the entire area. 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 one of the historic Tibet-to-India salt-grain trading trails unfolded. With an unusually sharp memory for dates, names, and places, and a down-to-earth way of explaining abstract religious concepts, she was indeed a gifted raconteur and teacher.

Since that first meeting, I have puzzled over how to tell Chomo Khandru's story, an individual life history that recalls the rich collective history of women's religious practice in the village of Lubra as well as that of the larger Himalayan region. It also invokes the intertwined political histories of Nepal, Tibet, and China, and illuminates how

living at the intersection of these politics has shaped women's religious experiences over time. Her story also foreshadows the cultural, political, and economic opportunities, and challenges, that Chomo Khandru's descendants now experience 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. This brief biography moves 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.

Janice Willis has described women's roles within the historical Tibetan cultural milieu as "dynamic, bustling, diverse, and fluid."³ I focus here on the tension between such fluidity and fixity in constituting women's religious identities. In Chomo Khandru's life, this dynamic manifested itself as an opposition between the dharma (religion) 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 own spiritual life.



Figure 26.1 Chomo Khandru. Photograph by Sara Shneiderman. Reprinted with permission.

Over the second half of the twentieth century, this local conception of “fluid religious identity” began to come into conversation with more static notions of religious identity. Cultivated by several extralocal entities including the Tibetan monastic establishment in exile, the Nepali state, and foreign charity and development organizations, the definition of religious authenticity based on institutional power and formal learning became increasingly influential during the latter half of Chomo Khandru’s life. Idealized extralocal notions of how Tibetan religion “should” be structured have encouraged shifts in local conceptions of religious authority.⁴ 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, contemporary women in particular have found it more difficult to follow in Chomo Khandru’s footsteps to lead renunciant lives.

Locating Lubra and the Bon Tradition

Lubra is located in the lower half of Mustang District, Dhaulagiri Zone, Nepal. Part of the larger 19-village community known as Baragaon, which stretches along the Kali Gandaki river valley, Lubra is just out of range of the heavily

trekked Annapurna Circuit trail.⁵ In this sense, it straddles two worlds: it remains relatively isolated and tourist-free in comparison to other Baragaon villages, but its proximity to them furnishes access to the amenities, trade opportunities, and foreign ideas that tourism and development projects have brought. Villager livelihoods depend upon a mixture of subsistence agriculture and cash income from seasonal trade. Over the past two decades, international migration to the United States has also become an important component of familial economic strategies.⁶

The inhabitants of Lubra’s 14 houses 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.⁷ Upon reaching Lubra, he founded a lineage of noncelibate householder priests that continues today.⁸ Lama Tashi Gyalzen fits the description of the “Himalayan frontier lamas” that Joanne Watkins⁹ describes in her discussion of women’s religious roles in Manang, a Nepali administrative district that lies just 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 the 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, which required travel and residence in monastic institutions elsewhere.

Tashi Gyalzen was a follower of the Bon tradition, and the villagers of Lubra maintain that identity today.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ The tradition’s high lamas are well respected by Buddhist monks and laity, as well as their own lay adherents.¹² In some ways, Lubra’s Bon-ness contributed to a sense of “double oppression” for women such as Chomo Khandru, who are not only women but also members of a once marginalized religious sect. Since Lubra is the only entirely Bon village in Mustang, 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, most women had to develop their own forms of spiritual practice as householders. However, Lubra women tend to describe Buddhism and Bon as *experientially* similar, noting only superficial differences in practice, 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.”¹³ 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. Although Chomo Khandru’s life story is first that of a Bonpo woman, it resonates strongly with the experiences of Buddhist women from Mustang and other Himalayan areas.

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. 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,” which 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 with various Tibetan and Nepali terms at various 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.

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. Economic considerations compelled families to offer their second daughters as *chomo*; first daughters were destined for early marriage, and in certain situations they could also inherit property. 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. This tradition 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 inherited through the male line.¹⁴ 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 steady 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 such as 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 at age 11 was confirmed through a hair-cutting ceremony that took place at the village *gompa* (temple), during which her family made offerings to a visiting high lama and she pledged to devote herself to religious life. 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 officially ordained or not. Chomo Khandru then began an informal process of religious training with two well-respected older *chomo*, Tsultrim and Dawa Kunzum. Educated by Yeshe Tenpa Gyaltsen, 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 *chomo* passed on their Tibetan literacy skills to Chomo Khandru, but, in her characteristically self-deprecating style, she always told me that she was never able to develop these skills to the high degree that her mentors had.

Although Chomo Khandru had a great desire to engage in spiritual practice, she was compelled by circumstances to work as a 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* required her to serve as the family's missing man, devoting the time she would have spent on religious practice to breadwinning 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. From about 1935 to 1959, when Chomo Khandru was a young woman between the ages of 20 and 45, she worked as a trader. She traveled north to Lo Monthang (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. To go there, she traveled with her male relatives and a train of grain-laden *dzo* (yak-cow cross-breeds). 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 cut short as a *chomo*, she could usually pass as one. By her side she carried a *khukuri*, a traditional Nepali knife, and she 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 still respected the others for their own 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: Lubra's villagers had begun to view celibacy for both men and women as a prerequisite to serious religious practice.

Due to the constant fear that her gender subterfuge would be discovered, and given 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. So 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 whether 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 Kim Gutschow describes for nuns in the Zangskar region of northwestern India, the religious agency of *chomo* can be limited by their femininity.¹⁵ In many situations they do not have equal access to the formal religious training that their male counterparts receive. Chomo Khandru's life history also suggests that both gender and religious identities are mutable. The religious role of the *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."¹⁶ 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. But there is also a specific kind of maleness that a *chomo* must emulate if she is to command community respect. One lama made it clear to me that it was necessary to read Tibetan to become a fully fledged 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.

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.¹⁷ In Lubra, as in the Tamang community that March describes,¹⁸ 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.

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. It is precisely this unintellectualized, embodied aspect of spiritual practice – the dharma of action – that laywomen most often engage in within their daily lives. Their core practices, often repeated many times each day, sometimes while engaged in household or agricultural labor, include mantra recitation with prayer wheels or rosaries, circumambulation, and prostration. 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.”¹⁹ 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 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 integral to 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 faraway 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 *chomo* was because having the experience of childbearing and rearing enabled them to empathize more fully with laywomen's experiences, and this enabled them, 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 was married), but this did not compromise their reputation as spiritual practitioners. If anything, motherhood strengthened their ability to engage with the dharma at the practical level and serve as role models and teachers to other women. In this, 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 like women who worked with their families and cared for children, 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, 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 crossborder trade between

Nepal and Tibet was disrupted after the Chinese asserted control over Tibet in the 1950s. 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 fieldwork 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 candlelight. Through her obvious devotion to the dharma, she became a highly respected village figure, the only woman ever called to join village lamas in conducting certain rituals in the village temple or individual homes. 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. 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, places 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.²⁰ Although the people of Lubra were citizens of Nepal, the political shifts north of the border

changed the terms of their religious practice. The itinerant lamas from Tibet who had provided the focal point of Lubra's religious life no longer came; the center of religious authority for the people of Lubra and other Himalayan villages shifted from Tibet to the exile towns of India and Nepal, where many lamas reestablished their monasteries after the Dalai Lama and many other Tibetans fled into exile. The people of Lubra had never previously needed to visit monasteries in Tibet; the lamas had always come to them. Now they were bypassed. Lubra became ever more constrained by its out-of-the-way location. Ironically, the transnational development of Tibetan religion further isolated Lubra from 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 faraway places. While boys were now sent off for study, girls rarely were. Menri Gompa, which had been the most important Bonpo *gompa* in Tibet, was reestablished in 1969 as the seat of the Bon tradition in exile at Dolanji, in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India.²¹ Funded in part by foreign donations, the Dolanji monastery began offering full scholarships for studies up to grade eight to children from Himalayan villages such as 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 kept 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. Further, the school provided a false sense of educational security, and even the one lama who had previously tried to provide some education in Tibetan for village girls ceased these activities after the establishment of the school. Most importantly,

education in Nepali provided younger women with access to the world of trade and commerce. Many girls, including those intended to be *chomo*, began leaving 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." She attributed this in part to the emergence of Nepali-language education in the vacuum left after the itinerant lamas stopped coming to teach after 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. 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; in contrast, the women of her great-niece's generation had little interest in religious practice and saw traveling and trading as ends in themselves, often leaving the village against the wishes of their families. Further, they traveled southward to the Nepali city of Pokhara and onward to India, rather than northward to Tibet. This shift was in large part caused by 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.

Continuing the Lineage

Over the past two decades, 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 Nhima Bhuti. Nhima was one of the young woman traders who spent much of her time outside the village, selling sweaters in India for the months

of October through February. I empathized with Nhima when Chomo Khandru constantly berated her for succumbing to the religion of money; Nhima 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 Nhima's cohort belied a sense of personal responsibility for failing to provide the young women with a better religious education, or to inculcate her successors with a greater sense of spiritual commitment. Nhima was in fact very similar to Chomo Khandru herself – a strong, self-confident woman who cared about her village and family but did not want to be tied down 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: Nhima was the oldest child of six, and, since her father had died young and her mother was chronically ill, Nhima had become the honorary man of the family, just as her great-aunt had before her. Now in her late thirties, Nhima has chosen to remain unmarried.

When I asked Nhima 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 continued:

It's the worst of both worlds: they are not full monastic practitioners, so no one respects them, but they also don't get to enjoy 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.

Nhima'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 of 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 through an embodied commitment to practices such as circumambulation, prostration, and mantra recitation must now leave the village to join a monastic institution elsewhere if they wish to be considered authoritative practitioners. 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. 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 Nhima. While most travel only as far as India, the more adventurous have migrated to the United States. 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 such as the Nepali state, exiled Tibetan monastic institutions, and foreign interests.

When Chomo Khandru died in 2002, the Bonpo *chomo* tradition of Lubra went with her.

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Notes

- 1 An extended version of this biography was previously published, as "Living Practical Dharma: A Tribute to Chomo Khandru and the Bonpo Women of Lubra Village, Mustang, Nepal" in *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints and Singers* (ed. M. Khandelwal, S.L. Hausner, and A.G. Gold), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, pp. 69–93. I am grateful to the editors and publisher for permission to reprint this adaptation here. I also thank Sienna Craig, Ann Gold, Nhima Bhuti Gurung, Sondra Hausner, Meena Khandelwal, Charles Ramble, Pat Symonds, Mark Turin, Mark Unno, and the people of Baragaon for their invaluable contributions to my work on this topic.
- 2 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*.
- 3 Willis 1989: 100.
- 4 Ramble 1983.
- 5 Ramble 1984.
- 6 Watkins 1996: 200.
- 7 See Sihlé (2002) for a general discussion of the increasing monasticization of ritual practices in the Mustang area. In an analysis of "culture change in the name of cultural preservation" in Nubri (an ethnically Tibetan area in Western Nepal's Gorkha district, just east of Mustang), Childs (2004) 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."
- 8 Baragaon 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.
- 9 Craig 2002.
- 10 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 follow the latter convention.
- 11 For more detailed information on Bon, see Karmay (1972, 1998); Snellgrove (1980); and Samuel (1993).
- 12 Noting these similarities, Geoffrey 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" (1993: 326).
- 13 Cech 1993: 42.
- 14 Schuler 1978, 1987.
- 15 Gutschow 2004.
- 16 Ramble 1984: 133.
- 17 March 1984: 729.
- 18 The Tamang are an ethnic population living in Nepal's middle hills who speak a Tibeto-Burman language and practice their own form of Buddhism.
- 19 Campbell 1996: 156.
- 20 Moran 2004.
- 21 Skorupski 1981.