

Ancient Dialogue Amidst a Modern Cacophony: Gurung religious pluralism and the founding of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Pokhara valley

Ben Tamblyn

Introduction

This paper looks at the monastic demography and religio-political issues surrounding the emergence, in the last thirty years, of nine Buddhist institutions in the Pokhara valley. The data contained in this article were collected during a five-month period of fieldwork from March to August 2000. In its original presentation, as a somewhat lengthy undergraduate dissertation, the information was used to analyse the current religious climate, and illuminate certain unique features of ethnicity amongst local Gurungs and Tibetans in the Pokhara valley. Before the 1950s, there was little more to Pokhara than a small Newar bazaar, yet since that time the town has experienced prolific urban development and a population explosion. A significant proportion of this development has been due to a huge mountaineering and trekking tourist industry in Pokhara, which, until recently, made a significant contribution to Nepal's economy.¹ Pokhara also hosts the second-largest concentration of Buddhist institutions in Nepal, second only to Kathmandu where during the same thirty-year period (and for many of the same reasons) sixteen Buddhist monasteries have been founded around Bauddha, mainly of the Kagyu and Nyingma schools (Helffer 1993). In Pokhara the monastic developments have been due almost entirely to the large-scale migration of Gurungs and Tibetans into the area. Both groups began arriving and settling in the Pokhara valley from the 1960s onwards—most Gurungs since the 1980s. The Tibetans arrived as part of a mass of refugees fleeing the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and

¹ Due to the Maoist 'People's War', and the Nepali government's declaration of a national State of Emergency in November 2001, the tourist industry in Pokhara is currently far from booming. Some estimates suggest that trade is currently down as much as 80 percent. None the less, the tourist industry has been a major reason for the valley's prolific development in recent decades.

those who stayed in the Pokhara valley settled on four plots of land allocated by the Nepali government, three of which are within the immediate vicinity of Pokhara town. From the 1970s onwards the Gurungs, rather than returning to their traditional hill villages to the north of Pokhara, began settling in the town after retiring from British and Indian military service (Pettigrew 2000).

As I began to see patterns in what was initially (to my untrained eye) a random system of recruitment and development amongst the local Buddhist institutions, it dawned on me how much that is new in this valley is a continuation of an age-old religio-political 'Himalayan dialogue' (Mumford 1989). Stanley Royal Mumford's ethnographic research in Gyasumdo, to the far north of Pokhara, identifies the same two ethnic groups dominating Buddhist institutional developments. I found that in Pokhara the Gurungs and Tibetans have again been thrown into the mix and the majority remain attached to polarized yet interdependent religious traditions, which perpetuate fundamental elements of the dialogue Mumford recorded in Gyasumdo. This positioning of local Buddhist institutional developments on an historical continuum (here manifesting itself, as it did in Gyasumdo, as a relationship between local Gurungs and Tibetans) reveals some interesting aspects of the contemporary form of an ancient relationship between shamanism and Buddhism. Amongst the local Gurung population shamanism is alive and well, despite being continually challenged by orthodox Tibetan Buddhism, which is now also heavily affiliated with certain Gurung communities. In light of this, the term 'dialogue' should be considered rather too simple a term in the Pokhara valley; here the juxtaposed yet interwoven religions of the two ethnic groups in the north have mutated, fused, and been further subsumed within a powerful concoction of modernity, and Hinduism.

Religious behaviour amongst the Gurungs in Pokhara is considerably more dynamic than in Gyasumdo as there is no longer a single dominant archetypal model of religious behaviour behind which the Gurungs unite—primarily (but far from exclusively) due to their loss of political influence. Unfortunately discussion of all the factors influencing religious orientations amongst the major Buddhist communities in the Pokhara valley falls way beyond the remit of this article. Consequently, I have focused on the demography of local Buddhist monastic institutions and used it to explore the ongoing relationship between Buddhism and shamanism—a discussion that invariably brings one to the Gurungs.² I will proceed by providing a breakdown of the monastic orders

² Before continuing, it should be noted that Gurung affiliations with Buddhist lineages are closely associated with issues of clanship. However I have avoided the issue in this article due to considerations both practical (lack of space) and political (its highly contentious

present in the valley and their relative size and then, having charted the development of all these new Buddhist monasteries and depicted the extent of the Gurungs' involvement, I will go on to discuss the latest chapter in the 'Himalayan dialogue', namely the founding of the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh (TPLS). This new Gurung shamanic temple, founded in 1990, suggests that a straightforward prediction of the demise of shamanism due to a 'Buddhist takeover' of Gurung culture in the Pokhara valley may be premature. I conclude with a discussion of this shamanic resurgence and emphasize how, despite the Gurungs' increasing range of affiliations to other religious traditions, a strong shamanic orientation not only persists but, in fact, could be precisely why the Gurungs are able to embrace such extensive religious pluralism.

The monasteries

As shown in Table 1, the only sect of Tibetan Buddhism not represented in Pokhara is the Sakya sect; the three other sects of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism all have monasteries in the valley. The Kagyu sect has the largest number of monks and rinpoches,³ closely followed by the generally smaller, but extremely well-supported, Nyingma monasteries, and finally by the two Gelug monasteries. There is also an old Theravada monastery serving the Newar community. Exact dates of the founding of the monasteries are very hard to pin down and do not always represent the beginnings of Buddhist practice in that vicinity. For example, there have been monks, senior lamas, and in some cases rinpoches, present within the four refugee camps in the Pokhara valley since their establishment, in one case as early as 1959, even though there was no monastery established until several years later. In the Paljor Ling Tibetan Refugee Settlement, for example, there was, for several years, a small group of elderly, learned monks including a rinpoche living in a hut in the compound. Although this was not officially a monastery, it served as a temporary base from which they performed rites for the local Tibetan laity until sufficient funds were raised to build what is now the SGCL.

nature). During my time in Pokhara I was perplexed by the complexity of local Gurung clanship systems and as I visited the various monasteries of Pokhara and attended Gurung death rites, I was constantly warned against investigating them. Avoiding these clanship debates does little, in my opinion, to detract from the validity of issues discussed in this paper. However, I am aware that further in-depth discussion of some of the questions raised here could not proceed further without facing that issue.

³ 'Rinpoche' was the term by which my informants always referred to reincarnate lamas.

In Table 1 the different sects, the approximate numbers of monks and dates of each monastery's founding have been recorded. In Table 2 I give the ethnic percentages found amongst the monastic communities of each sect. Following these overviews, I have elaborated, sect by sect, certain demographic features and points of interest for each of the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Pokhara valley.

Table 1. Data summary of monasteries in the Pokhara valley

Name of monastery	Current sect ^a	Date founded	No. Monks	No. Nuns
Dharmashila Buddha Vihar ^b (DBV)	Theravada	1942	3	1
Vikrama Shilla Buddhist Institute (VSBI)	Kagyü	1961/2	100 ^c	0
Karma Dhubgyu Chokhorling Nyeshang Korti (KDCNK)	Kagyü	1971/2	60	0
Bouddha Arghoun Sadan (BAS)	Kagyü	1980	17	0
Dhe Chhen Ling Buddha (DCLB)	Nyingma	1981	5	23
Shree Ghaden Dargay Ling (SGDL)	Gelug	1986	22	0
Shang Ghaden Choekor Ling (SGCL)	Gelug	1987	50	0
Nyah Gayur Sannagh Chhyoeling (NGSC)	Nyingma	1994	9	0
Karma Tashi Chyoling (KTC)	Nyingma	1994	10	0

Notes

- I have written 'current sect' because some of the monasteries in Pokhara have changed since their founding. This table represents their allegiance during the first six months of 2000.
- I have followed the monasteries' own anglicized orthography.
- Due to its teaching facilities, contacts, and general prestige, the monastic population of the VSBI is subject to particularly strong fluctuations and ethnic variance. The number of monks in residence could, at a different time, be double what is recorded here.

Table 2. Ethnic percentages represented in each sect in Pokhara

Ethnicity	Gelug (n=72)	Kagyü (n=177)	Nyingma (n=47)	Theravada (n=4)
Gurung	0%	37%	85%	0%
Tibetan	100%	16%	0%	0%
Thakali	0%	10%	13%	0%
Tamang	0%	12%	2%	0%
Other	0%	25%	0%	100%

Gelug: The Shang Ghaden Choekor Ling (SGCL) monastery is the larger of two Gelug monasteries in Pokhara. It houses some 50 monks, including one rinpoche and five senior monks. The number of monks in residence tends to vary considerably. Of the 50 associated with this monastery, 18 are currently in Sera in southern India studying Buddhist philosophy. The 5th Dalai Lama established the original monastery in Tibet in 1642 and by 1959 it housed well over a thousand monks (Samuel 1993). The 'mother monastery', as the monks call it, was completely destroyed in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution. Of those who managed to escape, several senior lamas and a rinpoche settled in Paljor Ling Tibetan Refugee Settlement. Eventually, sufficient funds were raised to begin building a monastery; money came from international charities, local donations, and the monks conducting household *pūjās* amongst the rapidly growing, predominantly Gurung, Buddhist community. This is significant because it represents the first instance of infiltration of Gelug Mahayana Buddhism into the religio-political arena of Pokhara. The SGCL, as it is today, began to be built in 1987. In the first of four stages a prayer hall, kitchen, and five apartments were completed. Through the three subsequent building stages, an extra two floors of accommodation have been added, as well as prayer-rooms, storerooms, a 'dharma-wheel' room, and now, directly above it, they are adding a small clinic for the storage and dispensing of Tibetan medicine. A 'mani-wall' has also been erected around the perimeter of the monastery.

The second Gelug monastery, Shree Ghaden Dargay Ling monastery (SGDL) is in the Tashi Ling Tibetan Refugee Settlement. The monastery was founded in 1986, mainly from local and international donations. Although not particularly profitable, the SGDL also has a bookshop located on the second floor above the entrance gate. Like all the monasteries here in Pokhara, monks performing *pūjās* in local households tend to be the other main source of income. There are twenty-two monks in residence here, including a sixty-one-year-old rinpoche who is the seventh reincarnation of Dorje Loben. He escaped to Nepal from Tibet during the Cultural Revolution and has been in Tashi Ling ever since. There are also four other senior monks in residence at Shree Ghaden Dargay Ling; they all escaped together from the same monastery in Tibet. The seniority of these monks has lent considerable prestige to the monastery, as does the fact that the SGDL constantly has a resident teacher from the Guedo Tantric University in Assam, India. The teacher usually stays for one year, until his replacement turns up and relieves him of his post.

Kagyü: There are three Kagyü monasteries in Pokhara town. Firstly, there is the Bouddha Arghoun Sadan (BAS). When it was built in the early 1980s the monks practised Nyingma Mahayana Buddhism and cooperated with local paju and gyabré (*paju* and *gyābre*, Gurung shamanic priests) at death ceremonies and other rituals. The entire monastic population here is Gurung, consisting of roughly 17 monks, including five senior lamas, and the numbers often swell to as many as 50. During the early 1990s the BAS converted to Kagyü Mahayana Buddhism, and since then no shamans have been allowed to practise here, although local Gurung non-celibate Nyingma lamas are still allowed to use the grounds for death rites, so long as they practise alone (i.e. without Gurung shamans). This is a classic example of the way in which Nyingma village lamas have become increasingly assimilated to a more orthodox Buddhism that consistently rejects the previous amalgamation of lamaism and shamanism. It is an issue at the heart of understanding the religio-political dynamics in local Gurung culture and the modern religious environment of Pokhara.

The BAS is a particularly important monastery in Pokhara because it is the only Buddhist monastery in Pokhara with a funeral pyre (Np. *ghāt*). As the monastery is right next to the Gandaki Hospital, the monks are often called upon to perform ceremonies for families who cannot, for various reasons, have the ceremony conducted at home. The opportunity to cremate next to a river attracts a wide range of families from strongly contrasting religious backgrounds and thus a very public expression of the intimate relationship between Buddhism and death is constantly being propagated.

The second Kagyü establishment is the Karma Dhubgyu Chlokhoring Nyeshang Korti (KDCNK), which started as a very humble building up on the hill overlooking the hospital district. It is commonly known as the 'Mati Pani Gompa', as it overlooks this predominantly Gurung district of Pokhara. The KDCNK was founded in the late 1960s, by a lineage of Kagyüpas from the Manang area, hence the 'Nyeshang' in the monastery's official title, which means Manang. Today however, the lingua franca is Nepali; there is no longer a Manangi majority in residence and the title can only be seen to reflect the monastery's origins. In fact, the KDCNK has the most multi-ethnic monastic community of any monastery in Pokhara. Now extremely well established, this monastery houses some 60 monks of a variety of different ethnicities including Gurung, Tibetan, Thakali, Tamang, and Sherpa. There are presently four senior lamas and a rinpoche in residence at the KDCNK. The four senior lamas at this monastery are all from Manang: one is Gurung and the other three are Tibetan. The monastery has grown rapidly over the last thirty years,

with a new prayer hall and stupa having been completed just four years ago. At the moment a large accommodation block is being erected just down the hill from the main prayer hall. Most of its considerable financial support comes from close ties with the Kagyü sect in Southeast Asia, particularly an affluent monastery in Malaysia, which is frequently visited by the resident rinpoche.

The third Kagyü monastery is the very large and prestigious Vikrama Shilla Buddhist Institute (VSBI) in the grounds of Tashi Palkiel Tibetan Refugee Settlement. The monastery is famous for its 1,000 golden Buddhas, which fill display cabinets from floor to ceiling in the enormous main prayer hall. There are approximately 100 monks here including roughly 15 senior lamas and 3 rinpoches, all originally from Tibet. The monastery, as it stands today, was completed just ten years ago, although as with the other refugee communities in Pokhara, there has been a small religious community at the camp since its founding in the 1960s. Additional premises have been added whenever sufficient funds have become available, and there is now a large dormitory building behind the main temple, which houses the monks. The camp is also building new sleeping quarters and a dining hall to accommodate guests of the rinpoches. Most of the finances for these enterprises come from affluent Kagyü monasteries and private sponsors in Singapore. The head rinpoche was in Singapore during all of my visits to this settlement. As well as the substantial sponsorship that this monastery is receiving from Singapore, they also have a shop selling incense, books, and other religious paraphernalia. All of the profits go back into the monastery where they are used to pay teachers and buy food.

VSBI is now such a well-established monastery that monks come to study here from many parts of Nepal and India. It is particularly renowned for its teachings on Buddhist philosophy, as well as offering courses in Tibetan grammar, English, and Nepali. Because of its situation within the Tibetan settlement the majority of monks in the monastery are ethnically Tibetan. However, during my fieldwork there were also seven Gurungs, four Thakalis, and one Newar monk in residence. Again, this incorporation of diverse ethnic groups into the new monastic schools of Tibetan Buddhism helps explain the current proliferation of orthodox ideology amongst the wider population in Pokhara. Quite simply, with the recruitment of a new monk, the monastery also acquires a new affiliation with a local family.

Nyingma: There are three Nyingma Buddhist monasteries in Pokhara, the oldest of which is Dhe Chhen Ling Buddha monastery (DCLB). This

monastery is in the Dhip district and has been built by the local inhabitants, who are predominantly Gurungs and Thakalis. Although additional features have been added at different times, the main building was finished in 1981 and now houses approximately 23 celibate nuns and five non-celibate monks. All Nyingma nuns are expected to remain celibate, whilst most Nyingma monks at this monastery will abandon celibacy and marry at some point.

The DCLB provides a classic example of the fascinating relationship between Gurungs, Buddhism and military service. Behind the monastery there is a small military compound and a large house formerly owned and occupied by Captain Ganesh Gurung MC of the British Gurkhas. Captain Ganesh Gurung was a close friend of Lobsang Temba Rinpoche, who died in 1989, and donated the plot of land that the main temple structure is now built on. During their time in Pokhara, Captain Gurung's wife had a daughter who eventually married a Gurkha soldier and was subsequently posted to Hong Kong. Whilst in Hong Kong with her husband, the captain's daughter gave birth to a boy, Thuwang Tenzin. As the story is told, by the age of two Thuwang Tenzin had begun to speak about a monastery in Pokhara where he believed he was the Lama. So convinced of this was the little boy, that his parents felt they had no choice but to return him to Nepal where he could be verified as the reincarnation of Lobsang Temba Lama. Upon his return the boy appeared to recognize many features of the monastery, including some of the monks, and was eventually officially recognized as Thuwang Tenzin Rinpoche. He is now 12 years old and currently in Kathmandu receiving instruction under a senior Kagyupa lama.

In 1994 a Gurung Lama lineage built the Nyah Gayur Sannagh Chhyoeling monastery (NGSC). This Gurung family has been in Pokhara for the last 20 years. The head of the lineage, Khadka Lama, settled after retirement from military service, at which point he returned to his lamaist traditions, being well read in the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and a skilled Tibetan medicinal and palmistry practitioner. Initially Khadka practised Nyingma Buddhism from the family home; now they live in the new monastery which was completed recently. Being a family affair, I met the majority of Khadka's children and in-laws who are either monks themselves or help out at the monastery. Sunita Lama, Khadka's eldest daughter, tells me her younger brother, Rudra, is also a learned monk, currently in Hong Kong. I met Rudra's wife, Laxmi, at the monastery and she told me their son would also become a monk after he has finished his primary education in Pokhara. The NGSC is a privately sponsored Gurung monastery; the family raised the money for the founding of the monastery through military service and subsequent work in Hong Kong and

elsewhere abroad. Amongst the immediate family members whom I met during my visits here, a number of different languages are spoken including Nepali, Gurung, Tibetan, Malay, Hindi, and English. I will return to a discussion of this family later.

Also built in 1994, the Karma Tashi Chyoling monastery (KTC) is a relatively small monastery on the road leading to the Gandaki Hospital, not far from the BAS. As with the NGSC, the monastery is sponsored, run, and used almost exclusively by Gurungs. The head of the monastery is a 40-year-old monk called Gopal Lama. Gopal Lama has taken in some young boys from poor homes in Pokhara and the monastery now houses 10 monks in total, all of whom are Gurungs. Interestingly, unlike the NGSC, all the monks apart from Gopal are celibate. The monastery maintains strong connections with Malaysia, where Gopal was schooled and received funds for the founding of the monastery.

Gopal is a well-respected practitioner of Tibetan medicine; his family has a strong tradition of practising Tibetan medicine in their home. It should also be noted that Gopal Lama's uncle is Khadka Lama from the NGSC. These two closely related Gurung families are the only two monastic orders in Pokhara practising Tibetan medicine (although it appears the SGCL is soon to offer such a facility) and for this reason both monasteries are regularly visited by monks and laity from the Tibetan refugee settlements. Gopal Lama founded the monastery in Pokhara after the old one in Ghandrung "fell down due to old age". There has been a long history of lamaism in Gopal Lama's family (referring to the same lineage, Khadka says it can be traced back through fourteen generations); he says his father was a Nyingma priest who taught him much about Tibetan medicine. He says one of his predecessors once travelled to Tibet to learn the art of medicine and since then the knowledge has been passed on from one generation to the next. Other rites and ceremonies practised by Gopal were learned partly from his father and partly from an incarnate lama in Malaysia.

Theravada: The Dharmashila Buddha Vihar monastery (DBV) is in Nadipur, on the way to Bugar. It is a Newar Buddhist monastery and, although construction dates are a little tentative, my informants tell me it was built in 1942, making it the oldest monastery in Pokhara. There are three elderly monks in residence at the monastery, the oldest of whom is a 95-year-old man, Brahman by birth, who only fully committed himself to a Buddhist monastic lifestyle at the age of 75. The other two residents at the monastery are both Newars, one a 60-year-old monk, the other a 60-year-old nun. It

remains to be seen what will happen to the monastery after these monks and nuns have passed away.

Several points of interest arise from this summary of monastic developments. Firstly, we can see that all Gelug monks in Pokhara are Tibetan. I would argue this is primarily because the two Gelug monasteries in Pokhara are both situated inside Tibetan refugee camps and have been built by the local Tibetan population primarily for their own use.

Secondly, the Kagyu sect is by far the most ethnically mixed of the monastic orders in Pokhara. This may be partly explained by their long history in the Manang area, where it has coexisted amongst the mixed Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups (along with the Nyingma sect) for generations. Furthermore, when the KDCNK monastery was built there was no choice of monastery for local families who felt an allegiance to Buddhism and who wished to send a son to a monastery. Their sons either went to the Kagyu monastery, or not at all. As a result of this, as mentioned earlier, some families from ethnic groups with no previous affiliation to the Kagyu order inadvertently became lay followers of Kagyu Buddhism.

It is also interesting that there is not a single ethnically Tibetan Nyingma monk in Pokhara. The only explanation I can think of for this is that the relatively smaller population of Tibetans being recruited into the monasteries is completely catered for by the refugee settlement monasteries, where nearly all the Tibetans live.

Buddhism versus shamanism in Pokhara: a new chapter of ancient history

Above I have outlined the development of Buddhist monasteries in Pokhara and highlighted the founding role of the local Gurungs and Tibetans. The religio-political climate behind these recent institutional developments is a manifestation of local Gurung and Tibetan religious orientations, which, as Mumford suggests, have been in a state of interdependent, yet conflictual, evolution for generations. Referring to the origins of the religio-political dialogue between these two ethnic groups in Gyasumdo, Mumford writes:

The recent migration of Tibetans from Kyirong and Nupri [into Manang] over the last century has instigated a contemporary clash between Buddhist lamas and Gurung shamans on the Nepal side of the

border. The older, shamanic layer is still being challenged by Tibetan Lamaism, in a manner analogous to the confrontation that must have occurred again and again in rural Tibet in the past. (Mumford 1989: 7)

During the early stages of their migration into Gyasumdo the Tibetan people were forced to conform to shamanic religious ceremonies because of the local Gurung Ghale clan's political and economic dominance. Although Buddhism remained a central part of the local Tibetan identity, it experienced a considerable suspension of orthodoxy due to weak institutional leadership and their subservience to the Ghale lords. Thus the Gyasumdo region was a bastion of Himalayan shamanism that until the middle of the twentieth century remained relatively unchallenged. Before describing the revolutionary events that then led the Tibetans to abandon most of their adopted shamanic practices, it should be noted that elsewhere in Gurung territory Buddhism was being adopted alongside shamanism by various Gurung families, predominantly from the Charjat clans, who in turn began non-celibate lineages of 'village lamaism'. Of this history of Buddhism amongst the Gurungs, Pettigrew writes:

On the basis of the oral texts, Tamu and Tamu (1993: 484) write that after the Tamumai [Gurung people] had left the ancestral village of Khola and moved down into their present homeland "some of the Kwonma clan went from Siklis to Nar in Mustang to learn Lamaism from recently-arrived Tibetan Lamas". It is difficult to suggest dates but the period they refer to is likely to have been hundreds of years ago.

(Pettigrew 1995: 144)

And so it came to be that in most of the Gurung territory to the south the Gurungs' affiliation with Buddhism was gradually solidifying. Interestingly, the greatest resistance to Buddhism remained in the northern area of Gyasumdo, where there was the strongest concentration of Tibetans—and therefore Buddhism; a feature also clearly the case in the Pokhara valley today. Importantly, however, it is both these polarized examples of the Gurungs' relationship to Buddhism that explain the development of Buddhist institutions in Pokhara and the contemporary religio-political climate. Gurungs with strong affiliations to only Buddhism, Buddhism and shamanism, and only shamanism all co-exist in Pokhara—not to mention those with Christian and Hindu affiliations. Further discussion of this multitude of faiths will follow shortly.

Returning to the story in Gyasumdo, Mumford argues that interplay between shamanism and Buddhism passed an important milestone earlier this century

with the mass exodus of Tibetans into Nepal due to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Amongst the fleeing refugees were prestigious reincarnate lamas who stayed in the Tibetan villages as they passed through northern Nepal on their way to Kathmandu and India. Chog Lingpa Rinpoche was one such lama who effectively acted as the catalyst for a revolution amongst the Tibetan laity in Gyasumdo, whom he condemned for colluding in local shamanic 'red offerings' (animal sacrifices):

Lama Chog Lingpa... was shocked to find that although the Gyasumdo Tibetans had lamas of the Nyingma sect in every village, had built monasteries (tib. Gompas), and had followed the Tibetan ritual cycle, they had nevertheless, compromised with the Gurung custom that is most critical: the red offering of animal sacrifice. Outraged, Lama Chog Lingpa thundered condemnation in sermons as he gathered the Tibetans to receive his initiations. Tibetan lay leaders in every village [of the Manang area] except Thang-jet threw out the yearly spring communal sacrifice they had practiced for generations under the domination of the Ghale [Gurung] lords... (Mumford 1989: 80)

Chog Lingpa's presence also influenced Buddhist practitioners in neighbouring districts irrespective of ethnicity. According to Mumford, "the break with the sacrificial custom...required a charismatic lama presence that would replicate the taming and oath binding performed by Padmasambhava in Tibet" (Mumford 1989: 83). This reference to an ancient mythical Buddhist victory over shamanism again emphasizes the history of the conflict between shamanism and Buddhism.⁴ The essential point is that today in Pokhara there are a considerable number of rinpoches and learned monks *permanently in residence* amongst the local monastic population, a population more strongly constituted of ethnically Gurung monks than ever before. These monasteries have created an unprecedented concentration of orthodox Buddhism amongst the Gurung community that is loaded with orthodox, reformatory ideology: in fact, the presence of so many Gelug and Kagyu rinpoches and celibate, high-ranking monks in Pokhara has persuaded nearly all local Nyingma Gurung village lamas to stop cooperating with shamans. In Pokhara, no Nyingma lamas (celibate or otherwise) are willing to work with a paju or gyabré if a sacrifice is involved; in fact I found no celibate monastic Nyingma who would work with them at all. Thus it would appear that Chog Lingpa Rinpoche's condemnations continue to echo through the Pokhara valley, only now within

⁴ Although most Tibetan Buddhist monks can recite this story without hesitation, it should be noted that many shamans and lay Gurungs are equally familiar with another version that represents the encounter, far from being a defeat, as the birth of a proud oral tradition.

and amongst many Gurung communities, as opposed to the now orthodox Buddhist Tibetan population.

A classic example of the reform of Gurung village lamaism comes from the NGSC monastery and its resident lineage. Although there are many Gurungs who would contest such a statement, Sunita Lama told me with great pride how her family is capable of providing for all the needs of the local Gurung community and how the monastery is now widely respected. On my last visit, she was quick to point out that a famous Gelug rinpoche was here just a few days previously for advice about Tibetan medicine and to tell her father about his recent visit to America. Once their monastery was founded, it appears there was quite a profound change in status, as being perceived as a monastic order conveys much more religious authority than being a mere village lama. As if to substantiate this authority, several years ago Khadka's eldest son left to study Buddhist scripture in Mustang, which is unusual for a Gurung lama lineage as knowledge is most often passed on patrilineally. Not only did Khadka's son study the ancient Buddhist scriptures at Muktinath, he also underwent the prestigious three-year-three-month-three-day retreat, which, upon his return, very effectively set a seal upon the elevation of his family's status. Sunita Lama tells me that her brother gave teachings to the young Rinpoche from the DCLB monastery when he first returned from Hong Kong.

The essential point about this family is the effect that their vastly improved religious education, which is at the heart of the process of reform, has had on their attitude concerning animal sacrifice and consequently on Gurungs who use shamans. Sunita told me that in previous generations, priests from their family's lineage collaborated with the paju and gyabré during various rites that involved animal sacrifice. Today, she speaks adamantly about how animal sacrifice is wrong. She tells me her father and her brother "understand the Tibetan language; Buddha said cutting no good" (by "cutting" she means animal sacrifice). Khadka Lama believes there is a growing divide in Gurung society: "If understanding is complete, then the Gurungs do not use paju and gyabré. If understanding is not complete, then Gurungs use paju, gyabré, and lama as tradition dictates."⁵ Ironically, then, with the deepening of Buddhist education comes a broadening of discriminatory attitudes within Gurung society towards their own traditions. Such Gurung Lama lineages wish to be taken seriously as monastic institutions and hence are actively trying to disassociate themselves from their shamanic brethren. Consequently, Gurung

⁵ Again it should be stressed that many local shamanists are passionately opposed to the use of lamas for death rituals (*pwe*). They believe they do have a full understanding of the implications of animal sacrifice, which is precisely why they continue to do it.

Lama monastic lineages in Pokhara have a greater interest in the rejection of animal sacrifice than anyone else. Through its rejection they express both their purity as Buddhists and the extent of their education. They are Gurungs, but, more importantly, they are educated, successful (both spiritually and materially) Buddhist Gurungs. The role of image and the means by which it is maintained are critical issues in understanding ethnic identity amongst the Buddhist population in Pokhara, particularly the Gurungs. Animal sacrifice is not just an ethical issue; it is also an identity issue. Pettigrew's discussion of this issue of image maintenance amongst Gurung communities in Pokhara suggests the critical importance of 'doing the right things' in order to be perceived as educated and upwardly mobile. For example, being unable to speak the Gurung language is seen as a public expression of status and success for young urban-dwelling Gurung laity and their families (Pettigrew 2000: 12). In the same manner, rejection of animal sacrifice gains the Gurung lamas respectability and status amongst the Buddhist monastic community (and many Gurungs), whilst maintenance of sacrificial rites amongst local Gurung shamanists is passionately argued to be doing the right thing by the ancestors and to be equally in accordance with the Gurung worldview.

The story of the NGSC epitomizes the impossible task of defining the archetypal Gurung Lama lineage as they continue to evolve and change over generations. Despite the NGSC and KTC being the only two 'traditional' Gurung Lama lineages in Pokhara, there are several other nearby monasteries that are locally referred to as 'Gurung monasteries', including the KDCNK and most importantly the BAS. In the case of the BAS what is meant by 'Gurung monastery' is that it was built using financial donations from local Gurungs and is populated by ethnically Gurung monks. However, the BAS is not run by a Gurung Lama lineage and when I discussed this matter with an informant, he scoffed at the idea that all the BAS monks were Gurungs. Amongst the Gurung community in Pokhara there is considerable contention as to who is really a Gurung. I was told that many of the monks at the BAS are what are known locally as 'Manangis', i.e. from the northern periphery of the Gandaki zone. I was told they speak a dialect closer to Tibetan (probably Thakali) than Gurung and are 'not real Gurungs'.⁶

Another interesting feature about the BAS monastery is that when it was first founded, as a Nyingma Buddhist institution, the local paju and gyabré used to

⁶ At this point in the paper I find myself closest to the issue of Gurung clanship. Clarification of who is and who isn't a 'real Gurung' can only be achieved through investigating people's linguistic orientation and clan affiliation claims, which my informant, a local Gurung, seemed able to assess quite spontaneously.

perform rites with the monks there. More recently, however, like many of the monasteries in the hills to the north of Pokhara, the BAS has converted to Kagyu Buddhism. Since its conversion, the monastery has refused to allow Gurung shamans to practise on its grounds or with its monks. The process of conversion may have been helped by a strong presence of 'Manangi' monks at the BAS. In an interview with one of the senior lamas at the KDCNK, another monastery with a substantial number of Gurung monks, I was told that over the last 16-17 years there has been a thorough conversion to Kagyu Buddhism of monasteries in the Manang area. A powerful Kagyupa lama called Sherab Gyaltzen Rinpoche had been 'spreading his dharma' throughout the area and converting the Nyingma monasteries. This story suggests a continuation of the Chog Lingpa scenario in Gyasumdo, as described by Mumford, and further helps to explain not only the rise of orthodoxy amongst Pokhara's Buddhist institutions, but also the predominance of certain Buddhist sects over others. The senior monks and the rinpoche currently in residence at the BAS allow local non-celibate Gurung Nyingma village lamas to use their facilities for ceremonies, but they will not condone the animal sacrifices of the paju and gyabré, so the Gurung Nyingma lamas invariably officiate alone.

The valley of priests

Throughout most of their traditional homelands, the Gurungs gradually experienced contact with priests other than the paju and gyabré and began developing localized traditions (Pignède 1993). Although the influence of Buddhism and the rise of village lama lineages were fairly widespread, it should be emphasized that in many areas the Gurungs also began to rely on Hindu Brahmans. Hinduism has infiltrated Gurung culture in numerous different ways, but rarely to the same depth as Buddhism, yet despite their more superficial involvement, Pignède describes an important role for local Brahmans settling on the periphery of Mohoriya and other Gurung villages. They became a part of Gurung customs by providing astrological readings and

Table 3: Gurung household priest affiliations

	Paju	Gyabré	Nyingma Lama	Other Lama	Hindu	Christian
Households (n=40)	32	31	13	12	11	5

Note: Affiliation was defined in terms of having called on the services of the priest within the last year.

house protection rites (Np. *satya nārāyan pūjā*) alongside the traditional paju and gyabré shamans. Today in Pokhara this is more the case than ever before, with local Gurungs choosing to use Brahmans, lamas, and shamans alike. In Table 3 I have summarized details of priest affiliations from a small census I conducted amongst the local Gurung laity.

The rite at the heart of Gurung society that encapsulates most profoundly their cosmological orientation is the death ritual, the *pwé laba* (Pettigrew 2000), and it is the lama's ability to manipulate these ancient cosmological understandings that explains why Buddhism, rather than Hinduism, became so deeply accepted within many Gurung villages (Mumford 1989). The Gurungs in Pokhara are from different villages spread throughout Gurung territory and so have brought a variety of localized customs with them. I found that 27.5 percent of Gurung households in my survey used a local Brahman for some kind of religious rite, most commonly the *satya nārāyan pūjā*, and many of the Gurung laity use Brahmans for astrological consultations and house protection rites as readily as they will use paju and gyabré. It should be noted, however, that despite the fact that the number of rites being performed by the local Brahmans often vastly outnumbered the rites performed by the Gurung lamas, they were generally considered of much less religious significance.

As became evident from my survey, the Gurungs are involved with many different religions in Pokhara and my findings remain somewhat contrary to the informal estimations proposed by Pettigrew's informants (2000: 31). A substantial number of Gurung households surveyed claimed to use more than one kind of priest. For example, 12.5 percent used paju, gyabré, lama and Brahman for religious rites and duties. Of a majority of Gurungs who use paju and gyabré, I found 40.5 percent of them also used Buddhist lamas, which would suggest that apart from the small Gurung Christian community (a total of five families in the whole of Pokhara to the best of my knowledge), every other Gurung family in Pokhara remains actively involved with two or more different kinds of priest.

Discussion

Arguably, the story so far depicts a rather dire situation for local Gurung shamanists. Indeed, it is a perspective shared by many educated Gurungs in Pokhara, who today see their shamanic traditions being lost to alternative lifestyles and religions and feel deeply concerned about the fate of their cultural traditions. They are worried about future generations of Gurungs

growing up in a modern urban environment where their ethnic origins and unique cultural heritage are subsumed beneath a purely Buddhist and/or westernized identity (Pettigrew 2000). However, far from being oppressed—or even intimidated—by the sweep of modernity and contemporary orthodox Buddhism, a collective of successful, well-educated local Gurungs came together in 1990 and organized the founding of the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh (TPLS), which has very effectively created an institutionalized shamanic counter-culture in Pokhara.⁷ In fact, since the initial founding of the temple and cultural centre, a shamanic secondary school was completed in 2002. The TPLS provides a focus for local Gurungs, with a cultural museum of artefacts, costumes, and information comprehensively representing early Gurung religious and lay practices. The TPLS also serves as a centre for the performance of shamanic rites (as noted above, they are no longer possible in any Buddhist monastery in Pokhara), and is now also capable of facilitating the training of a new generation of both paju and gyabré priests. Significantly, the TPLS is the only religious institution in Pokhara, other than the BAS, with a funeral pyre and today expresses a reasserted shamanic religious orthodoxy that parallels the development of Buddhist institutions in Pokhara. Ironically, two of the institutions at the heart of the fervent religio-political contention amongst the local Gurung community, the BAS and the TPLS, stand on opposite sides of a gorge, facing each other. Despite being populated entirely by Gurungs, who have converted from the Nyingma Buddhism of its early days and abandoned the initial intention of cooperating with the local paju and gyabré shamans, the BAS now finds itself directly opposite an institution embodying the very practices and people from whom it disassociated itself—a geographical juxtaposition that appears deeply symbolic of the resilient nature of shamanism.

There is an educated core of Gurungs at the TPLS who remain dedicated to the traditional means of worshipping their ancestors and ensuring the safe passage of the dead to the Afterworld, and for these Gurungs sacrifice is an essential part of their religious practice. Despite the calls from local Buddhist institutions and certain Gurung lama lineages that 'cutting is no good'—calls that reflect prejudices embedded in many sectors of today's 'modern' society—many Gurungs are now bravely uniting behind their shamanic scholars. In doing so, the TPLS is becoming an increasingly fascinating institution, for it simultaneously represents the ancient and the modern:

⁷ The TPLS is part of a network of Gurung shamanic temples/cultural centres. There is even a TPLS, complete with extremely efficient fund raising committee, in Brunei. I am grateful to Judith Pettigrew for this and other information on the TPLS.

It is undeniable that considerable cultural repertoire has been lost, and that more will undoubtedly be lost in the future. For many people there will continue to be much to lament. It could be argued, however, that through their actions much has also been gained. There are new ways of doing things based in part on the 'old' ways and knowledge; there are new ways of doing things based on *habitus*; and there are new ways of doing things based on new ways of knowing. Thus 'culture' will be 'saved' not, however, as the 'old' ways but as a 'new' way, shaped by the political and social contexts of today. (Pettigrew 1995: 95)

With the founding of the TPLS, traditional Gurung shamanic practices were publicly affirmed and given a place in Pokhara society. This formalization of shamanic cosmology empowered many local Gurungs who now feel capable of standing up against the might of orthodox Buddhism, and feel increasingly justified in maintaining their practices of animal sacrifice. However, the limitations of the TPLS' ability to reimpose shamanic cosmology onto the local religious scene remain significant, for orthodox Tibetan Buddhist institutions are part of a whole range of contemporary social, political and religious phenomena that have swept through the Pokhara valley, as they have done in many other rapidly modernizing regions of Nepal. Amongst these phenomena, the orthodoxy of local Tibetan Buddhist institutions represents probably the most concentrated and potentially detrimental challenge to shamanism and the Gurungs' traditional way of life. However, it is far from being the only challenge and the extent of many Gurung families' involvement with Buddhism suggests that some will be sensing anything but an allegiance to the TPLS. Despite rare reports of coordinated Buddhist-shamanic religious practices continuing in outlying Gurung villages, it is fair to say that Gurung lamaism in Pokhara has been totally revolutionized, yet without the same fate befalling the local paju and gyabré. But maybe those Gurungs who continue to venture further and further afield in their religious affiliations are not so far from their shamanic roots after all. Mumford describes how it is that, embedded within the shamanic worldview, there is an understanding of change that could be seen to apply also to the contemporary religious pluralism of Pokhara:

History is moving us into a period of reciprocal illumination. When cultural identities become decentered by the perspective of others, the way is forward, plunging ever more deeply into the interpenetration...[the shamans of Gyasumdo] do not draw a boundary around their identity of mutual collaboration. They embrace the

interpenetration of different wills, allowing spirits from the periphery and from previous eras to enter their own being. They enter alien realms on behalf of the community. They admit their complicity in the transgression of their sacrifice, which expresses indebtedness to all realms. Because of this self-image the Paju and Gyabré are able to view their own motives and images as unbounded, incomplete and historically changing. Their legends refer to influences from other traditions, including that of the lamas. They view their own truths as partial and in need of further elaboration from other sources.

(Mumford 1989: 246)

Such prophetic spiritual conceptualizations of the world are at the core of Gurung shamanism and shine an optimistic light over the fate of Gurung culture and religious practices. The metaphorical tales and legends of the paju and gyabré are in a constant state of flux, always incorporating, rejecting, and reincorporating new influences in a manner that cannot but profoundly influence the Gurung laity's worldview and may help to account for their perplexing ability to engage in so many different religious practices. It may be then that, despite embracing other religious practices and lifestyles (often simultaneously), the majority of Gurungs remain grounded in a shamanic worldview. The Gurungs' shamanic foundations prepare them well for modern, pluralistic environments. As Mumford rightly suggests, shamanism has a funny habit of thriving on such stony ground—like the eternal underdog—and despite substantial opposition from the literary traditions of modernity, Buddhism, and Hinduism in the Pokhara valley, shamanism has not only survived, but is engaged in a lively counter-culture. A conflictual religio-political dialogue between shamanism and Buddhism is thus alive and well in Pokhara, yet unlike the Himalayan dialogue of previous epochs, this dialogue is now just one element of a broader discourse: a 'Himalayan cacophony' if you like. A new degree of religious pluralism is unfolding in the Pokhara valley, one that challenges the boundaries of ethnic identity amongst many local communities, although none more so than the local Gurungs.

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