TIBETAN STUDIES

Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the
International Association for Tibetan Studies
FAGERNES 1992

VOLUME 1

edited by
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The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture
Oslo, 1994

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This paper describes and accounts for changes in marital practice in the Purang valley in the context of radically altered systems of land tenure and other economic and legal reforms introduced after 1959. In Purang in the past, the better-off farmers contracted formal co-residential marriages. Today such arrangements have been abandoned; instead men and women establish informal, or consensual, unions which involve neither co-residence nor shared work and property. This reconstruction of a relatively major shift in patterns of family life relies on oral historical accounts and individual family histories collected in the course of field research in the summer of 1990. The aim is to document what may be termed an institutional change and to show how the responses of separate individuals to their reoriented life circumstances can create, in the aggregate, a shift in the patterning of everyday social relationships.

Purang (sPu-hrang) is the name of a dzong (rdzong), now a xian, or county, in southwestern Tibet. In the mid 1980s, the county included some six thousand people, two thirds of whom were agriculturalists. The agriculturalists cluster along the valleys cut by the Karnali river and its tributaries. Purang stands adjacent to northwestern Nepal and Almora, India and throughout the twentieth century it has been an entrepot for trade between the three countries. I lack space here to discuss general features of traditional economic and social life, except to say that Purang was similar in rough outline to other agricultural areas of political Tibet (see Aziz 1978; Goldstein 1971a, 1971b; Levine 1993).

Land Tenure and Marriage Practices in Purang, Southwestern Tibet

To trace changes of concern to this paper it is necessary to describe traditional marital practices and the land tenure system, which shaped the life chances of Tibetan agriculturalists in fundamental ways. Only a subset of peasants held secure rights over the land they farmed; these were the so-called taxpayers (khral-pa), and they maintained such rights only so long as they met a complex and sometimes highly burdensome array of tax obligations, in goods and in labor services. The rest of the peasantry held, at best, lifetime use-rights in land, or they leased land, supported themselves by crafts work or by temporary labor. At worst, they lived as house servants, a status that could be hereditary.
In the Purang valley, as elsewhere in Tibet, taxpayer rights and obligations were assessed in terms of a standard "full allotment" (khral sgang) of land. While there seems to have been great regional variation in the proportions of peasants in the different statuses, in Purang taxpayers apparently were most numerous, and many of them held full allotments. A full allotment—if well managed—was adequate for household subsistence, but it did not provide ease or wealth. Purang is an arid region with little arable land, and full taxpayers there had to manage on holdings equivalent to the poorest taxpayers elsewhere. A few local households had more than a full allotment, but many held only partial shares and lacked adequate land for their support; typically they fell heavily in debt. In the administrative unit (tsho chhung) of Khocher ('khor chhags), whose local temple was a famous pilgrimage site, a register compiled by the government in 1959 listed eighty-two households distributed across three villages. Villagers say that fifty-three of these were taxpayer households; among them three held more than a full allotment, thirty-one held full allotments, three held three-quarter allotments, fourteen held half allotments, and two held one-quarter allotments. The remaining twenty-nine households were landless, mostly grong chung, literally "small households," whose members leased land and performed agricultural labor for wealthier taxpayers. There also were a few tshe gyog, "life servants," and ironsmiths, mgar-nu.

Goldstein early on identified two key features of traditional marriage in Central Tibet. First was the fact that marriage and family formation varied according to social class. Second, the economically secure taxpaying agricultural households contracted only one marriage per generation; this he termed the "monomarital principle" (1971b: 68). Similar conditions obtained in Purang. The taxpayers with stable, hereditary rights to land were likely to contract a single marriage, which might be polyandrous, polygynous, or monogamous. Their households, in consequence, tended to be large and generationally extended. The wealthier households sponsored elaborate, expensive weddings similar to those described for northwest Nepal and Ladakh. By contrast, landless people and those with very small allotments of land were unlikely to marry. Rather, they tended to become involved in consensual relations which did not involve co-residence of spouses. In most cases, these relationships linked men and women from the same or adjoining villages and were accorded more-or-less formal recognition, often persisting throughout the partners' lives. In some cases, an official temporarily posted in the region struck up a relationship with a local woman; this relationship would end when his appointment finished.

Polyandry is the aspect of Tibetan marital practice which has most engaged the attention of scholars; one issue of continuing concern is its economic concomitants. In Purang there were obvious correlations between polyandry and social class. However, with the limited data at hand, it is difficult to draw further conclusions. One villager suggested that the "big taxpayers" were polyandrous, and that polyandrous households tended to be more economically successful.
However, a retired local official stated that polyandry occurred among people of all economic levels, because "getting along together was what counted."(3) The requirement that taxpayers with two sons send one to the monastery meant that many parents had no choice but to contract a monogamous marriage for the son who remained at home. Thus the fundamental choice in this region was not polyandry or monogamy, but whether to contract a formal marriage, that is, to "bring a daughter-in-law" to the household.(4) Thereafter, if the union was polyandrous, one or more brothers could effectively cut his ties to the wife by establishing an informal liaison with an unmarried local woman—understanding that this union never would have the prestige of the formal household marriage and that children produced within it would be illegitimate.

Where more than one brother lived at home and a formal marriage was contracted, polyandry occurred. The effect of the decision to marry and to include all resident brothers in the marriage is illustrated here for one upper valley (Toyo) Purang household (figure 1). In 1955, that household comprised seven adult siblings—four brothers and three sisters, the co-resident, polyandrously married wife, and the children produced from the marriage. Although two of the brothers had been trained as monks, one had returned home some years before and joined the common marriage. However it was only the middle brother who maintained an enduring relationship with the polyandrously married wife. The eldest and youngest became involved in long-term informal relationships with other women in nearby villages. They did not live with these women, but rather visited them on a regular basis and contributed to the expenses of children said to

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![Diagram](image)

Figure 1. A Purang Household in 1955
be theirs. The household also included three sisters who never married. The eldest was a nun, and the younger two were involved in relatively stable informal liaisons with local men who helped them and helped in the support of their children. By custom, only the children of the brothers' formal marriage had rights to the family property. Such preferential rights were ended by post-1959 legal reforms, as discussed below.

Three Decades of Change: The Individualization of Productive Systems and the Demise of Marriage

Between 1959 and 1960, the first of a series of land reforms was implemented in Tibet; it influenced marital practice, although surely the effects were unanticipated. The first round of reforms had little impact on the utilization of land. Some land was taken or bought at nominal prices from the few local landlords and wealthy headmen and distributed among the very poorest households. Otherwise people continued to farm family landholdings. Groups of five to ten households were joined into collective work teams (phan rogs tshogs pa), often composed of relatives. Otherwise households with farm tools might be paired with households lacking such tools, or households with many workers with labor-short households, and so on. Workers were accorded points, and those households which benefited from the work of others were expected to pay the latter with meals, grain, or cash.

The reforms of the early 1970s were more far-reaching, particularly the institution of communal agriculture, which lasted approximately a decade. All land and animals fell under collective ownership, and people were organized into village-wide production teams. Each person was responsible for specific kinds of work, for which he or she earned points, according to the assessed difficulty of the labor and quality of performance. One person kept the accounts, and villagers would meet regularly to appraise one another's labor and its value. This proved to be a very unpopular system and nowadays is discussed with some rancor.

At harvest time, food was distributed among commune members following locally variable systems. In one Purang production team, for example, forty per cent of what the group produced was divided equally among members, regardless of their work contributions, while sixty per cent was distributed according to the number of work points accumulated. In another commune, each person received two khal of grain, and all food remaining was allocated according to his or her total work points.

The commune system was dismantled between 1980 and 1981. In its place, the so-called "individual responsibility system" (gan tshang) was phased in over the next few years. Fields and domestic animals were allocated to the members of each production team from among communal holdings, typically on a per capita basis. In some areas, people say that a small, additional share of land went to
adult workers. There has been no attempt to control how people use their land; they can cultivate it or loan it out to others. The sole restriction is on land sales. Moreover, as early as 1980 in some localities, people were permitted to resume the independent trade of commodities.

As one might expect, such fundamental changes in systems of production and resource distribution affected patterns of work and family budgeting; the effects radiated outward to affect the ways in which families organized themselves. Villagers today describe how the series of reforms encouraged the dissolution of large, extended families, which otherwise might have remained unified. They also suggest that diverse legal, political, and economic reforms contributed to several young women’s refusals to remain in formal marriages. The decline in co-residential marriages is attributed to the same factors. As a number of people explained it, these reforms had the effect of shifting rights over resources from the household to the individual. Thus individuals faced no obstacles in separating from their families and marriages and were able to manage on their own. One person noted that household dissolution was made particularly easy during the time of communes, because income was calculated according to the points each individual earned: “men and women were equal” and “if one had labor he or she could get food.”

This seems only part of the story, however—although somewhat better fit to the commune years than before or after. Today, Purang villagers do not live as single persons but in households of varying size. The principal difference is that today’s households form around male and female siblings, rather than generations of married couples or single individuals, as in the past. And each of these siblings holds equal rights in the resources they utilize—rights they expect to pass on to any co-resident children.

Such events raise several questions. First, are these changes most aptly regarded as having created a new family system? Or is what we see today a development of the traditional system, in which more people than in the past live in circumstances conducive to non-residential marriage and in which adults continue to live amongst parents and siblings? Second, and more difficult to resolve, are the present-day arrangements consistent with traditional ideas and expectations about marriage or are they accompanied by genuinely new understandings of marriage? That is, are people responding in customary ways to new circumstances or can we conclude that local culture has changed in profound ways?

In answering these questions we must refer to the past. For one thing, we know that consensual unions were commonplace in this region before the reforms were instituted. In 1958, only 38.2% of individuals were involved in formal, co-residential marriages (Table 1 below). At that time, informal, or consensual, liaisons linked people who were too poor to marry or provided an alternative for unhappy polyandrously married men from well-off, taxpaying families. We also
know that partition, or the division of household property between brothers, was uncommon in the past. Parents are said to have blocked this, due to the disastrous consequences of dividing an estate in a region where anything less than a full allotment was insufficient. Partition also made it difficult to meet tax obligations, the labor taxes particularly, which called for family members to be sent off during seasons of peak labor demand. There was only one source of new land: the landlord. Land could not be bought or sold nor existing fields expanded. But when another household had abandoned its holding, a man with many brothers might convince the landlord to give its share over to him, facilitating partition.

Table 1. Change in Purang Valley Marriages, 1958 - 1988

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<tr>
<td>N.</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>N.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men and Women Aged 18 - 30</td>
<td>4 23.5</td>
<td>6 22.2</td>
<td>2 8.3</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men and Women Aged 31 - 44</td>
<td>10 40.0</td>
<td>11 68.8</td>
<td>5 41.7</td>
<td>4 19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men and Women Aged 45 +</td>
<td>10 47.6</td>
<td>10 38.5</td>
<td>14 48.3</td>
<td>10 45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults of Unknown Age</td>
<td>2 40.0</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
<td>0 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Ages</td>
<td>26 38.2</td>
<td>27 38.0</td>
<td>21 29.6</td>
<td>14 21.5</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Adults in co-residential, formal marriages as a percentage of all adults in the same age group.
Men in the past undoubtedly found it easy to establish consensual unions. Family histories suggest that numbers of unmarried women were available, due to polyandry and the high proportion of men in monasteries. Traditionally, men and women in consensual unions remained in their parental homes, working for their natal families, or lived alone. The man would visit the woman—described by the same term used for a co-residing wife—mostly at night. In some cases there seems to have been a brief and simple wedding ceremony to formalize the relationship. Such wives were described as “outside” (phyi-la), and the children they had were described as “illegitimate” (nyal-bu). What happened to these children is not entirely clear. People suggest that they mostly stayed with their mothers. Sometimes a son or two, rarely a daughter, was sent off to the father’s household. Although one person said, “the sons went to the father, the daughters to the mother,” genealogies do not confirm this as a regular practice. Nonetheless, non-custodial parents apparently did contribute to the children’s upkeep, until they reached a certain age.

People say that changes began to occur in marriage and household composition as early as the late 1950s. Women who were unhappy in their co-residential marriages seem to have been among the first to take advantage of new national laws to dissolve those marriages; they then returned to their parents. Unhappy polyandrously married men soon began separating from their brothers too. As a result, numbers of new households were set up in the villages. By 1968 the household depicted above had subdivided into three separate units (see figure 2). Family histories suggest that the tempo of partitioning increased during the commune years. Nonetheless, such actions were not novel; they simply had become more common. Women had left husbands in the past, and brothers had abandoned polyandrous marriages to try to make a living on their own. The problem is that in the absence of a large sample of households, it is impossible to assess rates of partitioning at various periods of time. There is an additional fact to explain as well: certain marriages did not dissolve nor did all brothers form independent households. The fact is that there were countervailing pressures for family unity. This seems to have been realized in the increasingly common phenomenon of households organized around groups of siblings.
Figure 2. Changes in Marriage: Three Partitioned Households in 1968
People explain the increasingly common phenomenon of sibling households as follows. During the commune period, parents tried to keep adult children from leaving, in order to benefit from their work points. When land was reallocated to individual households, the same motivation applied. Land was redistributed, one recalls, on a per capita (and per working adult) basis, so that when the children did not marry out, the household retained control over a relatively larger parcel of grouped shares. To an outsider, however, the explanation is not entirely satisfying. That is because, in terms of property, there would be no difference between all siblings living together and some siblings bringing spouses home, joining spousal to family shares, while others married out.

Perhaps the disaste for co-residential marriage has less to do with the balance of resources than with a pre-existing low valuation of marriage and distrust of in-laws. It is not clear what roles in-laws played among Tibetan peasants. We know that marriages had to be contracted with non-relatives, due to prohibitions on cousin marriages. We also know that in-marrying daughters-in-law were regarded as outsiders and distrusted. Finally, we know that fraternal solidarity always was highly valued. As one person said, "siblings who split up, divide family property are not good...more respected are siblings who get along together and pool their efforts." Another person said, "It is better to stay in one's own family, with one's own brothers and sisters. Men like to stay in their own homes and help their own parents, women like to stay with their own parents. The man can go to the woman's home at night. When they move in together, the woman can't get along with her mother-in-law, and partition results."

In present-day arrangements, a man is expected to help his sister raise her children; he may or may not choose to bring one or more of his children to his family home. The reasons for such choices remain to be investigated. Informal unions, although more common nowadays, seem to be conducted much as they were in the past. The partnerships are known to fellow villagers, and many last a lifetime, with the non-resident men regularly visiting and contributing labor to their wives' households. One difference today is that the children of officially co-residentially married brothers have no greater rights than the offspring of informal unions. Children are expected to inherit property from their custodial parent, whomever that may be. In addition, child-support payments by the non-custodial parent are sanctioned by law, which stipulates a certain amount per month, until the child reaches age 18.

The results of this preference for sibling co-residence can be seen in the changing composition of a once well-off taxpayer household between 1958 and 1988 (figure 3). Note that the household depicted in figure 2, above, was organized around a core of siblings as early as 1968. In both cases, formerly large, multi-generational polyandrous households have become households of siblings and mostly the sister's children—a pattern seemingly akin to that of certain
matrilineal societies. In figure 2 we also see that households may contain a brother's children as well (here incorporated in the absence of their father, who left Purang many years ago and still has not returned).

1958

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O = Δ

Angdu b. 1918
Tashi 1924
Monk
Monk

(two sisters had married out)
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O = Δ

Ngodrup 1942
Nyima 1958
Chunima
Yangima
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1988

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O = Δ

Angdu
Tashi
```

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Δ

Ngodrup (informal union)
Nyima (informal union)
Chunima (informal union)
Yangima (informal union)
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Figure 3. The Demise of Marriage: From Polyandry to Informal Unions
Conclusions

Today in the Purang valley few young people are establishing traditional, co-residential marriages. Instead, they have opted for informal unions. Although publicly recognized, these arrangements lack certain of the key features which anthropologists have found to be commonly associated with marriage. For example, Purang children nowadays live with only one of their parents and are reared by his or her co-resident relatives. More important, the man and woman hold no property in common and work on behalf of household kin—only occasionally helping one another. Finally, the children’s legitimacy seems to be irrelevant; certainly the status of the parents’ marriage has no impact on property rights. Due to limited time available for field research it is impossible to say whether such unions are characterized by expectations of sexual fidelity and whether the families of the man and woman have any regularized affinal relationships with one another. (6)

Inasmuch as consensual unions seem to have been commonplace among men and women living in certain economic circumstances in the past, should we describe modern-day practice as a continuation of this traditional marital form? The question is not easily resolved. On the one hand, non-residential marriages are not novel; on the other hand, they are far more common now than in the past and no longer serve as an index of landlessness or poverty. At the same time, one can find other changes in family organization and intra-familial relationships associated with these non-residential marriages. In the past men and women in such unions seem to have lived alone more often than with numbers of adult relatives, including parents and male and female siblings. This surely marks a substantial change—a shift from the Tibetan emphasis on fraternal solidarity, which supported polyandry in the past, to a generalized solidarity of siblings. It also suggests a further possibility: changed relationships between women and men generally. Such a change would not be implausible, given the course and substance of economic and legal reforms introduced over the past several decades. Whether fundamental changes in gender relations have occurred here and elsewhere in modern Tibet is a topic which awaits further research. (7) The extent of changes in familial and marital forms throughout ethnically Tibetan regions awaits additional research as well.

Notes

(1) Thanks are due to the Chinese Center for Tibetological Studies in Beijing, which sponsored this research, and particularly to Dr. Lopsang Gele, who made all necessary arrangements. Thanks also are due to the Harvard-Yenching Foundation, which provided funding for this project.
(2) The "full allotment" varied for different types of tenancy contracts and among different landlords, but typically included land that could be sown with sixty to eighty khal of seeds. (Each khal equals roughly half a bushel of grain.) Lacking information on traditional agricultural practices, it is impossible to determine how much acreage was involved. Yet it seems that the Purang full allotment was small by Tibetan standards, especially since land productivity was so low in this area (see Goldstein 1971a: 9).

(3) Among seventeen households surveyed in the Purang valley, only five were polyandrous in 1958-59. All were taxpayer households, but of different economic standing. In two of them, both fathers and sons were polyandrously married. While one held more than a full allotment, the other held a three-quarter allotment. Among the three households with a single polyandrous marriage, one held a full allotment, one held a three-quarter allotment, and one held a half allotment of land.

(4) Or, if the household lacked sons, they would bring a son-in-law, or magpa home for one or more of their daughters.

(5) Employees of the government and the military did not receive anything in the distribution.

(6) Anthropological attempts to determine the universal features of marriage arose in the course of long-past debates about the nature of polyandry (see Gough 1959; Leach 1955).

(7) Aziz (1987) reports persisting gender inequities in the hotel business in Lhasa, but did not investigate the reasons for this situation.

References Cited:


