

MARITAL PAYMENTS: THE CASE OF TIBETAN NOMADS

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Among most ethnic groups of the world, marriage is associated with economic exchanges which customarily take the forms of bridewealth or dowry. Bridewealth is a gift of money or goods given to the bride's relatives by the groom or his kin, whereas dowry involves goods or money given by the bride's family to the bride, the groom, or the groom's family.

Although discussions of bridewealth and dowry are long-standing, some questions remain. For example, why should bridewealth be more common in horticultural and pastoral societies, while dowry is more common in agricultural European and Asian societies? Jack Goody (1974) has theorized that the nature of marriage payments depends on the extent of women's contributions to the domestic economy and that such contributions are more substantial under horticultural and pastoral regimes. Moreover, he explains dowry as a kind of inheritance system for women, paid out in advance of their parent's deaths.

Here we will utilize first-hand materials based on our own field research among Tibetan pastoral nomads, together with published data on these populations, to test Goody's theory. We will consider whether his explanation accurately represents the circumstances of Tibetan nomadic communities and whether marital payments indeed relate to the level of women's economic contributions to their families. Finally, we will consider whether there are any relationships between marital transactions and inheritance patterns.

Research sites and methods

Our research was conducted in the summer of 1994 with Tibetan nomads in Serthar County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in northwest Sichuan Province. The county has an area of 12,185.4 square km with a total population of 33,649, 93% (31,357), of whom are Tibetans, according to 1990 census figures. The nomadic way of life has been followed for centuries. Traditionally, this pastoral area is known as Washul Serthar (Washu being the most influential clan there). Traditional anthropological methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing and questionnaires provided the data utilized in this article.

Field study on marital payments

Our research on marital payments was conducted among fifty-four nomadic tentholds within three different Tsho-ba (local groups of a territory) in three different Xiang (a local township administrative unit), chosen to represent different levels of wealth and experience of access to roads.

Among Serthar nomads, the exchange of gifts has been a very important part of the betrothal and marriage process, similar to other Tibetan pastoral areas. Bridewealth is paid to a bride or her family before the wedding ceremony takes place, and a dowry is brought by the bride with her to the new family. In the local dialect, dowry is called 'bag-skal' and refers, namely, to the gifts or property given by parents to their daughter at her marriage. Bridewealth is called 'mag-skal', meaning gifts given to the girl's parents by the future husband or his family, or property the man brings when a magpa marriage is introduced. (Magpa refers to the change of residence of the man to his wife's family's tent). The word "skal" means "a share".

According to the traditions of Serthar nomads, when children marry and move out, the family calculates what its property includes and gives an equal or fair share to the

marrying child. Each child takes their share of the family property into their own marriage. If a person is from a wealthier family, then the share of property that they bring to marriage will be greater on average.

Marital payments usually include tools of production and other necessities such as tents, clothes, household goods, and so forth, but cash gifts are seldom given because people don't have much cash. Livestock is given priority as a marital payment, since domestic animals are essential to work and life, and the quantity of livestock directly reflects a nomad's wealth. So, whether poor or rich, the parents try to provide animals for the children upon their marriage.

Traditionally, in the Serthar area, large amounts of gifts for marriage were prepared and provided by the groom's family, but our findings suggest that the bride's family provides more than that of the groom's. There also is a difference between the quantity of livestock provided by the man's family and that of the woman (Table 1). The bride's family, furthermore, tends to provide more grain and tea, on average, and more clothing.

Customarily, tents should be provided by the man's family, but the woman's parents are also willing to send a tent as part of the dowry if the groom is too poor to afford it. Among the thirteen neolocal marriages we studied, in six cases the husband brought the tent. In two cases, tents were brought into the marriage by the woman. Also, one couple purchased a tent after they married. Four households provided no information on this issue.

Marital payments often include sheepskin coats and wool coats. Because Serthar is located in an area where the average altitude is over 4000 m, the climate is harsh, and the difference of temperature between day and night is extremely sharp. Therefore, the nomad's basic garments, a sheepskin robe and a wool robe, are very popular marital gifts. They are worn as a garment during the day and used as a quilt at night. Our data shows

that twenty women received such garments as part of their marital share, while only nine men's shares included such garments.

Expensive ornaments, such as headdresses, necklaces, belts and other jewelry are also included in dowry. In general, these ornaments are usually kept by the woman herself during her marriage and not by her husband or his parents. Later, if the marriage fails through no fault of the woman's, or as the local people say, it is a "reasonable divorce," then the wife returns to her kin with all these ornaments, just as guns go with the man. However, if the marriage fails and the wife is to blame, then the husband will acquire all of this jewelry into his own possession.

The kinds and amounts of marital payments in the cooperative and commune era (1960-1981) are distinctively different from those given after 1981. The first difference concerns the giving of livestock. During the cooperative and commune periods, the average number of animals per household given as dowry and bridewealth was two and four, respectively. However, these numbers increased to an average of twenty-two and eight, respectively, after the introduction of the responsibility system, which started in 1982.

The second difference concerns the types of goods given as marital payments. During the cooperative and commune periods marital payments usually included the basic necessities of life, such as livestock, grain, clothes, tea, etc. Since 1982, however, marital payments have not only included those things mentioned above, but also some goods that are considered luxury items, such as sewing machines, wool blankets and so forth. Also, before 1982, jewelry was seldom given in dowry, but since 1982, jewelry has become a common gift.

The third difference concerns the cash value of marital gifts. The value of marital payments averaged 1,766 RMB per dowry and 1,839 RMB per bridewealth, during the cooperative and commune periods. But those averages increased to 14,086 RMB per dowry and 5,378 RMB per bridewealth after 1982 (Table 2). That means cash payments

were eight times higher for dowries and three times higher for bridewealth after 1982, according to the value of these same goods in 1994.

Why the sharp increase in marital payments between the periods prior to and after 1982? The answer is simple. First, during the cooperative and commune periods, most animals and productive implements were owned by the commune. Nomad households were able to keep one milking cow of the yak species, or dri; per person and one horse for every two people as kashul (Kashul is the minimum number of animals required to provide basic subsistence.) When children married out, they were able to take only their share of kashul and clothes. However, larger families had more kashul/animals. By pooling their resources, these larger families might have been able to get by on less "family kashul," in order to provide more animals to their out-marrying children. This would be the only way a family could give animals as part of marital payments to their children.

Second, a work points system was practiced during the cooperative and commune periods. All the pastoral tasks such as milking, shearing, and so forth were assigned a work-point value from one to ten. Work points were awarded each day depending on the nature and amount of each person's work. These work points would eventually be converted to a monetary figure, from which the nomads could "buy" basic necessities at the end of the year, at a large distribution of goods. Each nomad could obtain some mutton, yak meat, butter, grain, skins, and other necessities by "cashing in" work points they had earned. Thus, whenever a nlop (matrilocal), patrilocal or neolocal marriage was engaged in, the couple would bring their work points with them to the marriage. In consequence, during the period when the work point system was used, fewer goods (in kind) were given as marital payment because of the share to be received in the more intangible work points.

Our data also show that the amount and kinds of marital payments largely depend upon the economic background of the individual's natal family. For instance, households

which are rich in livestock provide a large marital payment, while those who are poor in livestock provide lower payments.

In the Serthar area, women enjoy equal rights of property with men. This is evidenced through the method employed in dividing property in the event of divorce. If there is no child, each party takes back their own property that they had brought into the marriage. But if a divorce involves a third party (e.g. if one spouse is involved in an extramarital affair), the spouse involved must pay out a certain amount of his property to the other. If no children are involved and the husband marries again, he must pay the former wife 'mossier' (a compensation fee). Paying mossier has been a unique cultural feature in the Serthar area. Property acquired after the marriage should be divided equally among all family members (both spouses and any children) in the event of a divorce. Even the family tent may be torn apart, with each family member taking his and her own share.

Research data of other field workers

Another set of data derived from comparative studies shows that our findings on marital payments are universal in other nomadic areas, and also call Goody's theory into question. In the Golog Nomadic area, male and female siblings within a family enjoy equal inheritance rights, the only difference being that the female's inheritance takes the form of a dowry which she takes to another tenthold at marriage. If she divorces, she is entitled to the full dowry she brought to the marriage, as well as her equal share of the rest of the family property (as it is divided equally among the spouses and each child). For example, if the tenthold has increased its livestock holdings, she is entitled to a share of that incremental increase, for through her role as tent mistress, she has contributed to its prosperity (Ekvall 1968:28).

In the southern nomadic area of Qinghai Lake, there is an equipartition of livestock between sons if they move away from their tent of birth after marriage. A

daughter, if she leaves her natal tent at marriage, is likely to receive only clothes, jewelry and a horse. If she is permitted to bring a magpa in (to bring a husband into her natal family), she will have a right to share in the livestock of her natal household (Clarke 1992:402-403).

Similarly, among the Songpan nomadic communities of the Kham area, all out-marrying children, whether sons or daughters, receive what must be considered a dowry at the time of their marriage. This dowry is less than a full share of their family's property. For example, parents prepare only clothes and jewelry for the out-marrying daughters and provide only a skin coat, a riding horse and a rifle as gifts for their son if he moves to his wife's family's tent or into his own tent. However, in the latter event he assumes the inheritance rights of his wife's total property (Qu 1987:200-209).

Conclusion

In Serthar, and the other nomadic regions cited above, the productive technology and the economic contributions of women are virtually identical. Women do the milking, churning, cooking, collecting dung for fuel, fetching water, taking care of the tents and so forth. They are valued not merely as child-bearers, but also as an important part of the labor force. The women in these populations make far greater contributions toward the subsistence economy of their society than the men (see, on this subject, Gelek 1984:68).

According to Goody, in such societies, bridewealth should be more prevalent than dowry. Yet, the data which we collected shows that women tend to receive more in dowry than men do in bridewealth. When a married couple resides with the bride's parents or groom's parents, only the in-marrying spouse brings a marital share. The partner who stays in the parental tent brings nothing special, but instead holds the right to inherit his or her parents' property at their death. Thus because patrilocal marriages occur more commonly than matrilineal ones (eight cases of patrilocal to one of matrilineal marriage in our sample), dowry is more commonplace. However, even in cases of

neolocal post-marital residence, dowries tend to be more substantial than bridewealth. We can see this when patrilocal and matrilocal marriages are excluded from the calculations in Table 2. Dowry totaled an average of 1,969 RMB during the cooperative and commune periods, while bridewealth totaled an average of 1,089 RMB. In more recent years, dowry in neolocal marriages has totaled an average of 13,627 RMB, while bridewealth totaled an average of 8,366 RMB. Thus, in instances of patrilocal or matrilocal marriage, the marital payments actually are replaced by or become equivalent to inheritance, when children remain in their parents' tents and then take them over after their death. Thus we find together with the transmission of property at marriage, full inheritance of property by women as well as by men (Goody 1976:34).

We note that there are geographical sub-cultural differences in marital payments in the different nomadic areas. In Serthar, marital payments are given to either bride or groom, but none to either of their families. In Yushu, Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, nomads give jewelry for the bride, plus bridewealth consisting of a milking dri for her mother and a horse for her father (Zhu 1994:219). Similarly, in the Ngari and Nagchu pastoral areas of Western Tibet, the groom's family has also to send a dri to the bride's mother as a "compensation fee" for the labor spent in raising her daughter. Moreover, if the couple chooses to live alone, apart from either set of parents, both families will provide yak hair to make a tent for them. (Gelek, et al. 1993:185-186). This is just one example of how marital payments are greatly influenced by the local traditional culture.

Economic background has always been taken into consideration when marriage is negotiated. Until the present day, the greater part of economic activities in Tibetan pastoral areas has been undertaken by the family. A family is not only a consanguineous kinship group and reproductive unit whose members fight against unexpected disasters together, but also the elementary production and consuming unit of the society. Therefore the family can be considered to be an efficient "insurance company." In such a society marriage is very important. The choice of a marriage partner not only affects the reputation of a family, but also affects its economic life as well.

The subsistence of children after their marriage partially depends on investments from both natal families. This is quite different from urban families which support themselves on salaries. In Tibetan pastoral areas the market economy is underdeveloped, population migration is slow, and the people are geographically isolated from the modern world. Marital payments are, undoubtedly, the initial capital for newly-married couples. With the development of a market economy, urbanization, and industrialization, more and more children undoubtedly will leave their families and engage in paid labor, and such incomes will lay a foundation for them to live independently, making them reluctant to rely on their families. In these circumstances, the economic functions of the family will decrease, making economic considerations at marriage less important. Marital payments may be changed as well.

Our data suggest that local cultural traditions, the economic background of an individual's family, post-marital residence, and the bilateral inheritance system of the nomads are the major factors influencing patterns of marital payments among Tibetan nomads. Thus we find that Goody's theory on marital payments is overly simplistic, since it does not fit the complexities of this case. We also call for further research in different Tibetan nomadic areas in order to discover the sources of cultural differences in marital transactions, where productive technology and the economic contributions of women seem virtually identical.

Table 1. Marital Payments Among Serthar Nomads

Bridewealth

Household Number	Livestock	Grain & Tea	Tent	Clothes	Household Items	Total Bridewealth
1	2943	0	0	0	0	2943
2	2500	0	0	0	0	2500
3	1000	0	0	0	0	1000

4	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	4000	10	5000	1100	0	10110
9	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	5000	234	2500	510	100	8344
14	1500	0	5000	400	849	7749
15	2300	502	5000	910	394	9106
16	0	0	0	0	0	0
17	0	0	0	0	0	0
18	8450	0	0	0	0	8450
19	2500	402	0	800	871	4573
20	6860	1102	5000	500	708	14170
21	6090	0	5000	400	0	11490
22	5500	200	5000	620	94	11414
23	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	2114.91	106.52	1413.04	227.83	131.13	3993.43

Amount

Items that enter into in marital payments, cattle, food, tents, clothes, and so forth, are calculated in RMB, according to their 1994 prices on the Serthar market.

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Dowry

Household Number	Livestock	Grain & Tea	Tent Items	Clothes	Household Ornaments	Total Dowry
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1	2943	0	0	0	0	0	2943
2	2000	40	0	400	30	330	2800
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	500	0	0	0	0	0	500
5	2000	0	0	0	0	0	2000
6	1500	1038	0	0	30	0	2568
7	1000	200	0	400	0	0	1600
8	2500	47	0	400	38	0	2985
9	500	0	0	0	0	0	500
10	5500	604	0	1310	15	0	7429
11	3770	51	5000	400	127	0	9348
12	5450	0	0	510	0	4040	10000
13	720	200	2500	910	56	0	10866
14	4090	202	0	800	0	2620	7712
15	8000	100	0	910	56	0	9066
16	17900	0	0	1300	0	6400	25600
17	10400	1208	0	1310	0	8190	21108
18	10450	0	0	0	0	0	10450
19	14500	502	5000	400	389	1188	21979
20	6770	1408	0	1200	0	622	10000
21	16670	0	0	1600	0	0	18270
22	22500	0	0	0	400	2050	24950
23	10400	0	0	0	30	0	10430
Mean							
Amount	6806.22	243.48	543.48	515.22	50.91	1106.09	9265.39

Source: Gelek and Hai M.

Table 2. Increases in Marital Payments Over Time

Time Period	Total Bridewealth	Total Dowry	Year of Marriage	Postmarital Residence
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Cooperative	2943	2943	1963	N
And	2500	2800	1964	N
Commune	1000	0	1965	M
Periods	0	500	1967	P
	0	2000	1973	N
(1961-1981)	0	2568	1974	P
	0	1600	1975	N
	10110	2985	1977	P
	0	500	1977	N
Mean Payment	1938	1766		
Open-up	0	7429	1983	P
Policy	0	9348	1985	N
	0	10000	1985	P
(1982-present)	8344	10866	1985	N
	7749	7712	1986	N
	9106	9066	1988	N
	0	25600	1988	P
	0	21108	1988	P
	0	21108	1988	P
	8450	10450	1989	N
	4573	21979	1989	N
	14170	10000	1989	N
	11490	18270	1990	N
	11414	24950	1991	N
	0	10430	1993	P
Mean payment	5378	14086		

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