

**Levine, Nancy E.:** *The Dynamics of Polyandry. Kinship, Domesticity, and Population on the Tibetan Border.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. xvii + 309 pp., tab., fig., maps, photos. Price: \$21.50

The Western fascination with Tibet and Tibetans has not stimulated an equivalent outpouring of anthropological literature about that culture area, and it remains one of the few regions of the world where firsthand objective information is still hard to come by. The appearance of new data, whether for Tibet proper or for the ethnic Tibetan zone in the northern Himalayas, therefore, is always a welcome event, and Levine's study represents an important new source of information on Tibetan social organization.

Despite the title "The Dynamics of Polyandry," the book is really an ethnographic study of the system of kinship and social organization of the Nyinba, a group of ethnic Tibetans in Northwest Nepal (Humla) at the very edge of the Hindu-Buddhist interface. Located only miles from the major Nepalese district headquarters at Simikot, some of the Nyinba's social and cultural patterns are different from other Tibetan groups (for example their use of per stirpes inheritance and related concern with paternity), but they are clearly a part of the broader Tibetan polyandry zone.

The book presents detailed and rich data on a range of topics including, of course, polyandry, and this detail is its strength. However, when the author moves to discuss polyandry per se, the book is less successful. There are problems on a number of topics and at many levels. For example, the modern literature on polyandry is presented in a very misleading way, almost in the form of a strawman or caricature. This misrepresentation, of course, effectively enhances the "distinctiveness" of the author's interpretation.

Levine states that this book presents a new and improved explanation of polyandry that breaks with existing arguments which have found a "determinant materialist logic in polyandry" (xiii). In various parts of the book the author elaborates on this theme, e.g., stating, "Attempts to explain the existence and persistence of Tibetan polyandry have focused primarily on its economic advantages. ... The assumption has been that without polyandry, Tibetans would be reduced to poverty" (158). This she attributes to early commentators such as Westermarck (1925), and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit missionary Desideri (de Fillipi 1937), but also then suggests that later studies, including my own, really adhere to the same view. For example, "Today we find similar arguments, supported by fuller data and couched in more sophisticated terms, most persuasively in the work of Goldstein. He argues that polyandrous marriage is valued, not as an end in itself, but for its economic benefits, and that the system is an adaptive and rational response to conditions of scarce resources. ♦ Goldstein has *refined* the image of polyandry as a check against 'eternal warfare or eternal want' (Westermarck 1925: 187), stressing instead 'material markers of affluence ...'" (158 f.; emphasis added). But in point of fact, my interpretation of Tibetan polyandry has been anything but narrow, mechanistic, and deterministic. I have argued that a number of interrelated factors such as land tenure, political (class) structure, the corvee tax system, interpersonal relations and conflict, male labor, ecological and economic constraints, demography, and changing political and cultural parameters underlie polyandry. And I have categorically *rejected*, not *refined*, naive materialistic explanations that see polyandry as a poverty avoidance mechanism: "Polyandry in Tibet, therefore, while clearly related to economic factors, is oriented primarily toward the social consequences of economic productivity rather than toward subsistence per se. ... Polyandry is primarily selected not for bread and butter motives - fear of starvation in a difficult environment - but rather primarily for the Tibetan equivalent of oysters, champagne, and social esteem" (Goldstein 1978: 329). I have also written extensively about how potential interpersonal problems between brothers and between

younger brothers and the wife also influence the distribution of polyandry at any point in time (Goldstein 1987, 1978).

Levine's interpretation of polyandry emphasizes cultural values. Thus, whereas I have argued that Tibetans consider polyandry more as a means to an end, this book emphasizes it as an end in itself, arguing that polyandry has a special cultural value for the Nyinba whose legends portray ancestors of both the distant and recent past as brothers linked in polyandry. I find Levine's view unconvincing. For example, despite Levine's criticisms of my analysis, the Nyinba clearly discuss polyandry in economic and practical terms. To quote a few examples: Nyinba also see polyandry as a practical response to environmental constraints, and they praise its material advantages (159).

People say that polyandry prevents the dispersion of household wealth and the fragmentation of land and that it avoids the proliferation of households, thus restricting village growth (32). People describe a direct connection between wealth, household size, and polyandry (8).

Sometimes people volunteered the advantages of marrying polyandrously, how it prevented the dispersion of property and fragmentation of limited landholdings and how it supported a higher standard of living (9).

As Nyinba see it, the only way to juggle the multiple economic involvements of agriculture, herding, and trade is through polyandry and the economic specialization of brothers (82).

Certainly, we all know that Tibetans see nothing wrong or unusual with polyandry, but if they were *primarily* marrying polyandrously because of its cultural value per se, we would expect polyandry to be distributed equally throughout the society, regardless of issues of class and landownership. This, however, is not what the data show. As I have written, polyandry is characteristic of those households who formed the "taxpayer" class, with the "small households" engaging in polyandry only infrequently because they had no hereditary land to conserve and no large taxes (especially corvee ones) to fulfill. Thus, although Tibetans evaluate polyandry positively, it is typical of the upper strata (landowning) peasants (and aristocrats). I do not think the Nyinba are different. When one reads Levine's ethnography carefully, the polyandry sections deal primarily with the *trongba*, i.e., only the upper strata, landed class of the peasantry. The Nyinba small households, like the lower strata Tibetans I wrote about, practice polyandry less frequently, if at all. Although it is surprising that this issue was not addressed directly and in detail (e.g. ♦ despite numerous tables on other topics there is no table breaking down marriage type and social strata), Levine in one section of the book confirms that my contention is also valid in Nyinba: "In Madangkogpo ... The better-off households are large and extended, and their more recent marriages have been polyandrous. The poorer households are small, and their marriages remain monogamous. ♦ Thus we find polyandrous and large households among the wealthier freedmen in this group, but the majority of households remain small, monogamous, ..." (83 f.).

The "special cultural value" explanation of polyandry emphasized here by Levine has other problems. It cannot explain recent changes in the distribution of polyandry. For example, in 1965, just four years after leaving Tibet, a resettlement community containing several thousand Tibetan refugees had no new fraternal polyandrous unions. The reason for this lay in India's implementation of a new system of land tenure which negated the traditional advantages Tibetans perceive polyandry offers. Specifically, each person received 1 acre of arable land but only for his or her lifetime, the plot reverting to the community at death. With no core of inheritable land, the new system was similar to that of the "small householders" in Tibet and, not surprisingly, the marriage pattern was also that of the lower stratum, i.e., monogamy not polyandry (Goldstein 1971: 73). Deep seated cultural values obviously had not changed in four years. What had changed was the socio-politico-economic system under

which the Tibetans were living, and this affected their perception of the benefits of polyandry.

In conclusion, then, although this book exhibits a number of serious flaws, it is an important study of an interesting ethnic Tibetan group, and will have to be read and reread by scholars and students in the years ahead for its rich ethnographic data.

## References Cited

### **Fillipi, Filippo de (ed.)**

1937 ◆◆◆ An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia, S.J., 1712-1727. London: Routledge and Sons.

### **Goldstein, Melvyn C.**

1971 ◆◆◆ Taxation and the Structure of a Tibetan Village. *Central Asiatic Journal* 14:1-27.

1978 ◆◆◆ Pahari and Tibetan Polyandry Revisited. *Ethnology* 17: 325-337.

1987 ◆◆◆ When Brothers Share a Wife. *Natural History* 96/3: 39-49.

### **Westermarck, E.**

1925 ◆◆◆ The History of Human Marriage: vol. 3. London: Macmillan. [5th ed.]

Melvyn C. Goldstein