

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOCIAL MATRIX OF TIBETAN POPULATIONS IN THE HIGH HIMALAYA

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Résumé — Malgré leur isolement et leur apparent traditionalisme, les populations tibétaines vivant dans les régions de haute altitude et arides de l'Himalaya ont modifié les structures sociales en ce qui concerne la famille et le mariage. L'auteur étudie la façon dont les forces indirectes de modernisation ont fait pression sur les populations tibétaines en «désenclovrant» leur environnement traditionnellement isolé. Des études de cas ont été analysées pour Limi, nord-ouest du Népal et le Ladakh.

Summary — Despite their remoteness and seeming traditionalism, the Tibetan populations inhabiting the high and arid areas of the Himalayas have undergone substantial social change with regard to family and marriage patterns. The paper examines the manner in which indirect forces of modernization have impacted upon Tibetan populations by de-encapsulating their traditional encapsulated environment. Examples are taken from Limi, northwest Nepal, and Ladakh.

The heightened awareness that emerged during the 1970's of the tragic destruction of Nepal's environmental heritage has focused attention on the physical environment — on the measurement and delimitation of these processes and on the manner in which technology and science can be utilized to halt/or reverse them. However, although the transformation of the physical environment in the Himalayas is clearly one of the most salient features of the current situation, another equally important but less well understood transformation has been and is occurring in the high altitude zone along the northern reaches of the Himalayas. Despite their remoteness, inaccessibility and seeming traditionalism, a series of exogenous forces have impacted on these societies and produced analogous structural changes in their social systems. This short essay will examine these changes in several such Tibetan speaking populations in Nepal and India.

Encapsulation and de-encapsulation

Although it is extremely difficult to generalize for the entire Tibetan geographic area, it is possible to delineate a high altitude zone and to characterize the traditional socio-economic organization found there as an adaptation to what I shall call environmental encapsulation. Encapsulation refers to a situation in which the inelasticity of the physical environment severely restricts the potential for increased energy production and thus forces the population to adjust to this restricted economic potential. For example, within this zone there is a very narrow altitude range for cultivation — in a given area often no more than 100 meters — due to the short growing season and the need for irrigation. These factors severely limit the potential for expanding agriculture to new areas and it is not surprising to find that only 0.48 % of the total area of the Tibetan plateau is under cultivation (Li, 1980, 3).

The high altitude environment is also inelastic in that intensification of cultivation using traditional technology is limited because of the already highly intensive methods of agriculture used. For example, Tibetans traditionally employed fertilizers, irrigation, crop rotation, weeding and in most areas carefully maintained terraces.

The inelasticity of the environment has still another dimension. For centuries, Tibetan populations have not only had to extract their own subsistence from the fragile physical environment but have had to generate substantial surpluses so as to maintain in luxury the religious and secular feudal elites that dominated their society. These surpluses involved not only food-stuffs and products but also labor (corvee tax obligations). The peasants had to work the feudal lords' lands, transport their goods, serve on their household staff, etc. and it is clear that such obligations were among the most onerous. Traditional Tibetan social structure was as much an adaptation to the environment of serfdom as it was to the climatic and geomorphological limitations of the high altitude environment.

One of the critical ways that Tibetan traditionally adapted to these parameters was by means of a rare system of marriage and family that reduced the likelihood of land fragmentation, concentrated labor in family units and reduced aggregate fertility. Fraternal polyandry, the form of marriage in which two or more brothers jointly share a wife, was the social mechanism by which they accomplished this (see Goldstein, 1971, 1976, 1978, 1981a, 1981b). This rare but effective system of marriage and family facilitated the sustenance of a major civilization in Tibet without either :

- impoverishing the population and producing chronic starvation ;
- reducing the level of consumption of the elites ;
- destroying the productive capacity of the environment ;
- producing large scale migration to other ecological zones.

The traditional system, however, has undergone significant changes over the past half century or more. Although the causes of these changes vary area by area, their impact has produced analogous transformations that have functioned to de-encapsulate the environment by :

- offering new economic opportunities that did

not require significant initial stores of capital, and

— eliminating the exploitive serf system with its heavy labor obligations.

These exogenous forces reduced the importance of concentrating labor in the family while providing younger brothers new opportunities for obtaining income outside the traditional system. The consequence of this has been the disintegration of the traditional polyandrous family/marriage system. The remainder of the paper will examine this situation in two populations at different stages of change.

Ladakh

Ladakh is the northeast most district of Jammu and Kashmir State. Research in Ladakh was undertaken by the author in Kyilung, a predominately Buddhist village near Leh, the capital of Ladakh. In Ladakh, fraternal polyandry was linked traditionally to primogeniture (sole inheritance by the elder brother) so that land fragmentation was impossible and labor was maximally concentrated in the family unit.

Following Indian independence, Kashmir (with Ladakh) became a part of the new Indian nation. As such it was subject to the new constitution of India and, very simply, according to Indian law primogeniture and corvee labor taxes were not legal. Although no special effort has been made to eradicate primogeniture in Ladakh, the gradual realization of its illegality has transformed the nature of family organization there by permitting younger brothers who in some cases only grudgingly remained together with their older brother(s) to demand a share of the family patrimony. As their demands were sustained in court, the integrity of the corporate family dissolved and land and family fragmentation flourished. For example, during the last three decades, the number of households in Kyilung has increased 223 % (Goldstein, 1981b). However, even though primogeniture could be legally circumvented in modern India, younger brothers still had to determine whether they could survive economically if they split off from their natal family.

Indian independence ended the feudallike corvee transportation tax that had fallen on all taxpayer families. In Kyilung, this tax obligated each family to send one adult male with food and animals for four months of the year (one month every three months) to a nearby «transport

station» where officially sanctioned travellers and goods arrived and were moved to the next such station going either toward Leh or Kashmir. This was a very costly and difficult obligation that often resulted in beatings when, for example, animals were not ready to leave on time. Several old Ladakhi men told me that the night or two before their turn came to move to the «station» they could not sleep well because of their apprehension. This requirement, even without primogeniture, would have made it extremely difficult for a young man to marry monogamously and go it alone. Its elimination was another of the factors underlying the social transformation in Kyilung.

About the same time that India obtained her independence from Britain, Tibet came under the People's Republic of China. India and China were unable to settle their joint border and after much acrimony and many border incidents, the Chinese armies attacked India in Ladakh in 1962. Although the troops were pulled back across the tentative borders within a short time, this conflagration heightened the strategic importance of this remote part of the Indian nation and resulted in a major strengthening of the Indian military in Ladakh as well as development of administrative and educational facilities there. The result of this was an economic boom. Ladakhi villagers obtained jobs in road building, general construction, in the army, and in the rest of the complex infrastructure that was necessary to maintain a bureaucracy and a sophisticated modern army in a backward, extraordinarily harsh environment. It is not surprising that virtually every one of the recently «split-off» families has one or more individuals engaged in wage labor.

The result of these and other factors has been a rapid transformation of the traditional encapsulated socio-economic system into one dependent on the world economic and political system for its subsistence. No longer are Ladakhis part of a more or less homeostatic system. Their traditional system has been disintegrated by the indirect impact of relatively small and innocuous changes in the areas adjacent to it. They are now locked in a struggle to survive which they are unlikely to win without substantial outside assistance. This assistance, however, must not only examine the arid physical environment but also the unstable and volatile social environment.

Limi

Limi is a Tibetan area located in the north-west most part of Nepal on the Tibetan border. It is a remote high altitude arid area that is one of the most representative examples of traditional Tibetan social, cultural and economic patterns. Research was conducted by the author in Tsang village (3,932 m) and surrounding areas in 1974, 1976, 1977.

Exogenous forces began to impact on Limi about the same time as Ladakh, and change, while not as far advanced as we have seen in Kyilung, is following an analogous course. In 1960-61, a group of Tibetan nomads from areas across the border just north of Limi decided to seek refuge in India and crossed over into Limi together with their herds. Since Limi is the end of the high altitude Tibetan geographic zone, their yak and sheep could not be taken further south and the Limis obtained their animals either for free or very cheaply. This allowed some younger brothers to set up independent nuclear families.

Another factor that has indirectly worked to undermine the traditional social and environmental balance was the emergence of new markets in India. Because of the flight of almost 80,000 Tibetans to India and the contact of the Limis with these refugees, the Limis discovered that Tibetan culture was popular among Westerners and that there was a very lucrative market for Tibetan statues, paintings (tankas) and jewelry. The Limis were in an excellent position to capitalize on this market since these items had become virtually worthless in Tibet and the Limis (but not the refugees) could go to Tibet and buy such items very cheaply. Younger brothers, therefore, were again presented with economic opportunities that required little capital. Although the illegality of trade in such items restrained many younger brothers who were unhappy with their polyandrous union, some decided to split from their families.

Events related to the economic development of Tibet have had another indirect and unintended consequence for the Limis. Limis depend on Tibetan pastureland for winter pasture and keep their animals in Tibet for 8 months of the year (see Goldstein and Messerschmidt, 1980). Without this access to Tibetan pastureland the Limis could not maintain their large herds which have increased in recent years and have come to play a more important part in the

Limis' overall economy. Space limitation precludes a full discussion but, in short, the Limis' dependence on winter pasture in Tibet has made them dependent on Chinese permission to use this land, which, in turn, is predicated on their ability to pay «pasture fees». Since the Chinese only accept trade items as payment, the Limis' wood trade has come to play a central role in this relationship.

The Limis have traditionally traded with Tibet in wood products and lumber and many Limis are excellent carpenters and woodsmiths producing wood craft articles such as eating bowls, and saddles and construction items such as beams and pillars. Until recently, the craft articles comprised the bulk of this trade. Beginning in the mid-1970's, however, this changed. Economic development in the Tibetan areas just north of Limi has substantially increased the demand for lumber to be used in construction and as in the past, the Limis have been asked to provide these. However, now larger amounts of lumber and lumber of higher quality are needed. While birch, which is found in Limi, is adequate for construction, it is said to warp over time and thus as the Chinese built larger and more substantial buildings, their requirements escalated. Since the Limis must have access to winter pasture in Tibet, they felt compelled to provide the desired trade items, i.e. high quality lumber.

The Limis' answer to this has been to utilize the Fir trees located on the southern face of the mountains separating Limi from the rest of Humla. Beginning in 1976, the Limis moved 100's of their yak, horses and hybrids over a 4,420 m and a 5,100 m pass to reach a relatively low lying forest area (about 3000 m) located three days south of them. This area still has forest areas with Fir stands and the Limis have begun to exploit these. While current levels of utilization do not appear to pose a short term threat to the environment, the long term picture is obviously uncertain.

Limi, therefore, appears headed along the same path as Ladakh although for very different reasons. While fraternal polyandry is still highly valued in Limi, because of the new pastoral resources and other trade opportunities discussed in Goldstein (1981b), younger brother are increasingly splitting from their brothers and setting up independent families. With regard to one set of new problems, pastureland in Tibet, the changes that have occurred have resulted in a totally

new exploitation of the Nepalese physical environment. Like Ladakhis, the Limis are engaged in a struggle to sustain their quality of life and like the Ladakhis, this has begun a process of social change that probably is irreversible.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades the human use systems of high altitude Tibetan speaking population in the Himalayas have undergone analogous changes. As illustrated by Limi and Ladakh, the traditionally encapsulated system has been de-encapsulated and with it the prevalence of fraternal polyandry reduced. This, in turn, has produced land fragmentation, population increase and an ever increasing dependence on outside income. Thus, despite surface cultural continuity, these areas are in a state of social, political and economic flux.

Notes

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