

Stratification, Polyandry, and Family Structure in Central Tibet¹

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Polyandry has long held an important place in the literature on kinship and social organization, and Tibet has commonly been used to exemplify a fraternal polyandrously organized society. But even a cursory examination of the literature on marriage and the family in Tibet reveals glaring contradictions concerning the role and importance of polyandry. This paper attempts to show how these contradictions are resolved when marriage is analyzed in terms of stratification and land tenure. Polyandry emerges as only one strategy (albeit a major one) in a larger "monomarital" pattern that was characteristic of certain types of landholding serf and lord strata.

I

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING but misunderstood facets of traditional Tibetan social organization is marriage and the family. Even a cursory examination of the sparse literature on these subjects reveals glaring contradictions. For example, Prince Peter (1965:193) writes: "both polygamy and monogamy are to be found among people of Tibetan culture. . . . Generally speaking, however, it can be said that polyandry is the most usual form of Tibetan family system." Ekvall (1968:26), however, asserts: "The family may be monogamous, polygynous, or polyandrous, though by far the great majority of families are monogamous."

Is the usual form of the family in Tibet, then, polyandrous or monogamous? My purpose in this paper is to show that a more significant problem is involved here than that of merely ascertaining which author's ethnographic data are correct. I shall attempt to show that neither of the above positions is entirely correct or incorrect but that both are inadequate because they ignore fundamental features of Tibetan social structure. They fail because they treat marriage and the family in isolation and, specifically, because they do not relate marriage and the family to the system of stratification and land tenure found in Tibet.

Before considering Tibetan social organization, however, let me briefly indicate the sources of my data. The information on which this paper is based was collected by me during the course of a 20-month field trip (December 1965-August 1967) sponsored by a Junior Fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies. About 17 of the 20 months were spent in the Tibetan refugee resettlement agricultural colony in Mysore, India. The

¹ Central Tibet is taken to include the traditional areas of U, Tsang, Dago, Gongo, and Lhoga.

data therefore are based on my reconstruction of traditional Tibetan patterns from the settlers who had left Tibet generally between 3 and 5 years before.

While reconstruction research is obviously fraught with pitfalls, these, I believe, do not preclude the collection of accurate and detailed data. One of the most serious reconstruction dangers is the all too easy tendency to extrapolate from the comments of a handful of available informants to the society in general, this being a particularly imminent danger in complex societies such as Tibet. A second basic problem in reconstruction research concerns the validation or determination of the accuracy of informants' statements, especially the differentiation of ideal from actual behavioral patterns.

In order to cope with these and other problems, I decided to focus the reconstruction aspects of my project on a relatively small area in Tibet which was demographically well represented in the Mysore settlement. This focal area was, in a broad sense, the Gyantse district in Tsang Province, central Tibet. More specifically, it focused on the village complexes of Samada and Chimdro in Gyantse district. There were, for example, about 80 persons from the Samada village region in Mysore as well as a number of individuals from villages contiguous to Samada (such as Gala and Khangmar). Moreover, contrary to popular opinion, the refugees did not consist predominantly of monks and aristocrats. They included persons from all the different social statuses, ascribed and achieved, high and low, "clean" and "unclean."

Because of this relatively large sample, it was possible to achieve considerable detail and accuracy in the data collected. I was able to work with individual families, to examine specific incidents, and—of crucial importance—to cross-check the remarks or opinions of one informant with others from the same and different intra-village social units as well as with persons from the neighboring villages. Finally, some comparative depth was attained by having questionnaire interviews with a sample of individuals representing the other areas in Tibet.

II

Since it is my contention that the system of marriage and family in Tibet cannot be understood outside the framework of stratification, I shall present some of the salient features of that system.

All laymen in Tibet were differentiated into two hierarchical strata referred to in Tibetan as *ger-ba* and *mi-sey*, which in English denote, respectively, aristocratic lords and serfs. Membership in these strata was hereditary, the linkage of serfs to their lord being transmitted through parallel descent, i.e., daughters were ascribed to the lord of their mother and sons to the lord of their father. Demographically, with the exception of approximately 300 *ger-ba* families, the lay population belonged to the stratum of *mi-sey*, or serfs.²

² For a detailed examination of serfdom in Tibet, see Goldstein (1971).

Tibetans classified serfs into two main categories: 1) tre-ba and 2) dü-jung. The first term literally translates as "taxpayer," or "the one who does taxes," and the second as "small householder," or, more literally, "small smoke." Of the two, the tre-ba status was superior in terms of prestige and of political authority and power, and usually also in terms of wealth.

Tre-ba were organized into named corporate family units which hereditarily held sizable amounts of agricultural land from their lord. These family units held written title to their land and could not be evicted so long as they fulfilled specified obligations. On the other hand, however, they were tied to their land and were unable unilaterally and permanently to leave it. The tre-ba obligations to their lord (or lords) were very extensive, including wide-ranging corvée services in the form of human and particularly animal labor as well as a variety of taxes in kind and money. The animal labor tax was particularly burdensome because it required the tre-ba families to maintain carrying and riding animals, such as donkeys and horses, and be prepared at any time to accompany their animals to the next communication station about 15 miles away and back. This obligation required substantial surplus wealth (for maintaining these animals and the people who looked after them) and was a tax obligation only for the tre-ba status. The tre-ba, therefore, hereditarily held considerable amounts of land but reciprocally had heavy tax responsibilities.

The term dü-jung, on the other hand, referred to two distinct statuses. One type of dü-jung, like the tre-ba, was bound to the land; the other type was not. The "bound" dü-jung, in contrast to the tre-ba, held only small plots of land which were jurally the possession of individuals rather than of corporate family entities. Moreover, these plots of land (tenemental property) were not legally inheritable as were those of the tre-ba. Normally, a bound dü-jung when he came of age received land from his lord, and the size of his holding might increase somewhat during his most productive years. While circumstances might well occur when a son would petition for and receive use of the same land that his aging parents had used, these plots were clearly not inheritable in the same sense as those of the tre-ba, who had the right to automatically transmit their land to their heirs.

As one would imagine from these circumstances, the bound dü-jung also differed significantly from the tre-ba with regard to their respective tax obligations. Whereas the tre-ba had substantial and varied obligations, the dü-jung were generally required to provide their lord with only corvée human labor. Moreover, the tax fell on individuals rather than on corporate family units. For example, the Driqü monastic estate in Gyantse district was comprised almost entirely of such tied dü-jung serfs. Each taxable adult (any person

between the ages of 13 and 60) was provided by the monastery with a house (as needed) and a small plot of land, in return for which he or she was required to provide the corvée labor for the lord's demesne (or reserve) fields. The tax obligation was arranged so that every 3 taxable persons comprised a tax unit known as "gang," and one person was required to serve as corvée labor every day from each "gang" unit. In other words, for tre-ba the number of persons in a family did not affect their tax; a family had the same obligations whether it had 3 or 10 adults. With the tied dü-jung, however, the obligations fell on the individual. This difference was one of the most significant distinctions between the two statuses.

The other type of dü-jung was termed mi-bo ("human lease"). These serfs were not bound to estates. They retained control over their movements and were free to go wherever they wanted and to work at whatever and for whom-ever they desired, although—like the tied dü-jung and the tre-ba—they were clearly still linked through an estate to their lord, to whom they owed certain obligations.

Since these mi-bo serfs earned their livelihood primarily through leasing and working on tre-ba lands, let me briefly describe the relationship of these two strata in a central Tibetan village. About 280 persons normally resided in the shung-gyu-ba³ village of Samada in Gyantse district. Of these, only 40 to 50 were tre-ba (specifically there were 8 named corporate tre-ba families), the remainder being the dü-jung type of mi-bo serfs. Relative numerical strength, however, was not correlated with political and economic authority and resources. In fact, the 8 tre-ba family units completely—and legally—monopolized all political authority and land in the village. Only these tre-ba families had rights in the village land and administration. The resident dü-jung lived there solely at the sufferance of the tre-ba.

The tre-ba families possessed large land holdings; in Samada their holdings ranged from about 20-30 acres to about 300 acres, whereas dü-jung held anywhere from less than an acre to one or two acres at most. The tre-ba needed large holdings in order to enable them to fulfill their varied and heavy tax obligations. But because of the size of their land holdings and related technological factors, these basic land resources could not be worked solely by the tre-ba family members. Outside labor was required, and that labor force was provided by the dü-jung.

Dü-jung typically leased land from tre-ba families on a work basis; i.e., for every unit of land leased, the dü-jung was obligated to work for the leaser for a specific number of days at the convenience and need of the leaser. Like

³ "Shung-gyu-ba" refers to a type of tre-ba serf whose lord represented the central government in the form of the district administration.

the bound *dü-jung*, then, these *mi-bo dü-jung* also used resources as individuals rather than as members of land-owning family corporations, and the resources were not hereditary.

III

It should be obvious from even this cursory discussion of stratification that undifferentiated reference to "peasants" or "villagers" is a gross oversimplification which obfuscates the basic social structural units of rural Tibetan society. Consequently, it is not surprising that analyses of marriage and the family that failed to take cognizance of these units yielded skewed and contradictory results. When, however, marriage is analyzed in relation to the two major serf strata, these problems disappear. We find that the two strata exhibited distinctively different patterns of marriage and of family structure.

TRE-BA

The system of marriage and family among the *tre-ba* was characterized by what I call a "monomarital" marriage principle and a "monomarital" stem family. The monomarital principle recognizes that in each generation of a *tre-ba* family one and only one marriage can be contracted, the children of which are considered full family members with full jural rights.

The application of this norm was motivated by the strong desire to prevent partition of the corporate unit with its lands. Given the basic inheritance rule which held that all males in a family were coparceners with demand rights to a share of the family corporation's land, Tibetans considered situations with two conjugal families in a given generation (i.e., joint families) unstable. Situations such as this produced serious conflicts of interest between the two conjugal families (and their two sets of heirs) and were thought likely to lead to partition between the two units.

Depending on the distribution of the siblings in the marriageable generation (as well as such factors as personality and ambition), the monomarital principle was employed to guarantee the establishment of only one jurally recognized marriage. If we take a hypothetical family consisting of a father, a mother, their daughter, and two sons, this principle was implemented as follows. Since the *tre-ba* were patrilineally organized and primarily patrilocal, females normally moved at marriage to the homes of their husbands. Thus, the daughter marries out, leaving the two sons. Since both these sons had demand rights over land, the usual stem-family-producing mechanisms such as primogeniture obviously could not operate. Although I cannot discuss in detail the decision-making process, let it suffice to indicate that almost always such a situation resulted in a fraternal polyandrous marriage. Regarding such marriages, Tibetans believed that marriages involving tri-fraternal

polyandry (i.e., marriages of three brothers to one wife) and especially quatri-fraternal polyandry were much more difficult than bi-fraternal polyandrous marriages to maintain harmoniously, and various mechanisms were employed to decrease the number of siblings, such as making one son a celibate monk or sending one as an adoptive bridegroom to a family with no male children. In all these situations, however, the foremost value was preservation of the family corporation's land through the prevention of the establishment of a joint extended family.

Another application of the monomarital principle is bigenerational polyandry. If we again use the hypothetical family but now have the mother die before her sons were married, we have the matrix from which such bigenerational arrangements occurred. If the eldest son was in his late teens, the father would more than likely be under 40 and would want to have a wife. But if he remarried and then the sons also married, all within a period of a few years, a situation considered ripe for conflict and partition would be brought about. The father, his new bride, and their subsequent children would be placed in direct competition with the sons and their brides and children. The normal developmental process which culminated with the exchange of authority and power from one generation to the next (from father to sons) would be severely threatened, for the father's second wife (and her children) would probably strive to maintain and to transmit the authority and power of her husband to her children rather than to the sons of the father's first marriage. Tibetans believe that the presence of two new and unrelated brides in a family household without the husband(s) of the younger bride being linked to the elder by a son-mother relationship was very likely to produce serious conflict and partition.

One Tibetan alternative to this potentially contentious situation was to have the father share a new bride with his sons. There were no fixed rules concerning this problem; a great deal depended on the age of the sons and, subsequently, of the father's second wife. If, as was usual, the sons or, at least, the elder son was in his late teens, generally a younger wife was obtained and formally married to the sons. It is important to note that formal bigenerational marriages (with both generations partaking in the actual ceremony) were not generally made. However, in such arrangements it was explicitly agreed upon by the bride and her family before the wedding that the father would also have sexual rights over her. This mechanism allowed the family to obtain the female needed for economic and reproductive purposes and permitted the males to obtain a female for sexual satisfaction. Conflict between unrelated females was precluded, and the resultant children were jurally considered to be the children of the sons. While this practice conforms to Fischer's (1952) definition of polykoity, or plural mating, it illustrates again how the Tibetans

apply the monomartial notion to their human resources so as to avoid conflicts in which the family would be in danger of partition.

Relevant to the same problem was another—though rather rare—family situation. As noted above, the perpetuation of the corporate family was a prime concern to its members. Consequently, though patrilocality was preferred and took precedence, in cases where all children were females the common custom was for a bridegroom marriage to be arranged, i.e., for the bridegroom to move matrilocally at marriage and become a "member" of his wife's family. According to Tibetan norms, males have demand rights over land, but females have residual rights to the land of their natal family corporation in the event that there are no males present to inherit. If a family had, for example, two daughters and no sons, the monomartial notion could be expected to operate in order to prevent each of them from bringing in a bridegroom. In fact, on the rare occasions when this situation arose, a matrilocal polygynous marriage took place.

Turning now to an actual example, I recorded 62 primary marriages among the 23 tre-ba families of the village of Chimdro in Gyantse district. Of these, 24 (39%) were characterized by the presence of only one male of marriageable age and, thus, could be classed as monogamous marriages. Thirty-two (51%) occurred in families with more than one son and were all polyandrous. Of these 32, 20 were cases where there were only 2 siblings, whose marriages were all of the bi-fraternal polyandrous type. In the 8 cases of 3 sons, 6 were tri-fraternal polyandrous marriages and 2 were bi-fraternal (with one brother going to his wife's family as bridegroom). There were 4 cases of families with 4 sons. In one of these, quadri-fraternal polyandrous marriage took place; in 2, bi-fraternal polyandry occurred; and in one, there was a tri-fraternal polyandrous marriage. In no instance with multiple sons was a joint family established.

In the remaining 6 cases (10%) there were only daughters present, and in all of these bridegrooms were brought in. In 5 of the families with only one daughter, the monomartial pattern was not relevant. But the sixth family had two daughters. Here a matrilocal sororal polygynous marriage alternative, with both daughters bringing in husbands, was avoided by making the younger daughter a celibate nun while she was a youth. Clearly, the ultimate strategy and motivation are identical with the earlier instances. The varying forms of marriage as well as the other alternatives, such as the monastic and nun orders, were all derived from the basic desire (or the perceived need) to maintain the family corporation intact across generations through the implementation of a monomartial principle. Although statistically, in this village, fraternal polyandry emerged as the most frequent mode of marriage among tre-ba, this resulted from the fact that most tre-ba families in the village had

two or more sons. The salient feature of tre-ba family organization was the application of this monomartial principle so that either some form of polygamy or polykoity, or some functional equivalent, was employed to prevent the creation of two elementary families in a given generation.

The family structure of the tre-ba stratum can be considered as a type of stem family. The stem family is commonly defined as a family in which a conjugal family of *one* married child is linked with his natal family in a common household (Murdock 1960:4; Johnson 1964:39; Befu 1963:1330; Zimmerman and Frampton 1966; Freeman 1960:66 ff.) Freeman (1960: 66-67) describes the stem family of the Iban of Borneo as follows:

Typically, a *bilek* family contains three generations, consisting of a pair of grandparents, a son or daughter and his or her spouse, and grandchildren. Stem families of this type usually have about six or seven members. Such families are perpetuated as corporate groups by a single expedient: at least one of the children of the family, when he (or she) reaches maturity and marries, remains permanently in the ancestral *bilek*. All the other children of the family may marry out, and so become members of other units, but one . . . always stays in the natal *bilek*. In this way an Iban *bilek* family achieves continuity through time as, from one generation to the next, one elementary family grows out of and succeeds another in an unbroken sequence.

If we hold the critical feature of the stem family to be the fact that the link joining the two generations must be through only *one* child, as is implied in the above sources, then the Tibetan tre-ba family system obviously cannot be considered as a stem family system. If, however, we take the basic characteristic of the stem type of family unit to be not the numerical nature of the linkage but rather the fact that only one jurally recognized conjugal family is formed, then families such as the Tibetan tre-ba units can be considered stem families. The Tibetan monomartial stem family, as we may refer to it, produced the same result as the "normal" stem family in that the corporate family unit was perpetuated without each sibling establishing a separate elementary family within the framework of the corporation.

DÜ-JUNG

Although there were some differences between the tied and human-lease types of dü-jung, for the sake of simplicity I shall treat them as one type. As indicated above, they were characterized by the absence of corporate family units. Since the dü-jung gained access to land as individuals rather than as parcellers in family corporations, the importance of the family unit was greatly diminished. Normally, there was a continual process of splitting off as the children married and established their own households. There was little pressure exerted to maintain an extended or even a stem family unit. Sometimes one of the children who was close to his parents remained with them;

sometimes as the parents aged they "retired" and went to live with one of their children, but such families normally had no continuity and were not maintained intact across generations. Unlike the tre-ba, where marriage was a serious matter which entailed subtle strategies and arranged marriages, the dü-jung, with no patrimonies to maintain, characteristically married out of love and almost always married monogamously. The few instances of polyandry occurred, not surprisingly, in very wealthy families (usually trading families) who were upwardly mobile and who, in fact, did have significant "corporate" wealth.

It is clear, then, that the contradictory statements in the literature on the family and marriage in Tibet are easily resolved when patterns of marriage are not treated as statistics in reference to an undifferentiated village population but, rather, are considered in terms of the fundamental social structural units operative in that milieu. While polyandry was the modal marriage form among the tre-ba discussed above, this of course varied according to the demographic realities of each tre-ba group. Structurally, however, the tre-ba stratum was characterized by the monomartial principle and the resulting type of stem family. As for the dü-jung, we have seen how they were characterized by monogamy and elementary family units. But, since the majority of residents of many villages were dü-jung, an overall statistical survey would decisively conclude that monogamy was the characteristic Tibetan marriage pattern. Clearly, the marriage and family system in Tibet cannot be meaningfully comprehended outside of the framework of the social strata and their associated politico-economic rights.

IV

I have tried to describe in this paper how the marriage and family patterns for the two major social strata in Tibet differed significantly. These differences were shown to be related to their respective modes of land tenure and the subsequent motivation of the tre-ba status to manipulate their human resources so as to prevent the partition of their corporate family units or, more specifically, the land which these corporations possessed.

Although space precludes any real documentation in this paper, it can be shown that this motivation to follow the monomartial principle derives from both techno-political causes as well as basic stratificational ones. There is no question but that relatively large land holdings were required in order to produce the variety and amount of taxes and corvée services the tre-ba were obligated to provide. Fragmentation of land in any consistent manner would have quickly rendered the families unable to fulfill their obligation to their lord and to the central government. I know of instances where estates organized with tied dü-jung specifically created a few tre-ba units (larger lands held

permanently) so as to enable them to fulfill the very difficult animal labor tax. Related to this, although I do not believe it is as important, is the fact that polyandry produces economic units well adapted to complex economic patterns, which in most parts of Tibet included both intensive farming and the maintenance of significant herds of yak, sheep, goats, and other animals. The family histories I collected showed a correlation between the number of adult family members and the economic success of the unit. There were then important advantages both to devices for preventing partition through stem families and to polyandrously organized family units. 2

There is another interesting factor regarding the pattern of tre-ba marriage. Although one might expect that Tibetans would have valued polyandry highly and have held it as the preferred form of marriage, this was not the case. Certainly, polyandry was valued as a technique for maintaining families intact, but as a form of marriage in and of itself it was considered inferior to monogamy. Polyandry was a difficult form of marriage which produced stresses and anxieties and which required considerable adjustment by the participants. It was perceived by the thoughtful more as the lesser of two evils than as the prized form of marriage. This point was strikingly illustrated during my research in India. In the two villages of the south Indian settlement where I worked most closely, my survey and the village records indicated that no polyandrous marriages were contracted among either the former tre-ba or dü-jung. The marriage and family pattern was clearly of the dü-jung type and, not surprisingly, so was the land tenure system. Each *individual* had one acre registered in his or her name, and the land was a permanent possession so long as the individual was alive. On death, however, the acre reverted to the settlement corporation. In other words, the land was permanent but not hereditary and thus fits precisely into the tied dü-jung land-tenure pattern in Tibet.

In this brief examination of marriage and the family in Tibet I have found no evidence that notions such as latent homosexuality (Prince Peter: 1965) or females having property rights (Leach:1955) have any relevance at all. The causal factors producing the monomartial and dü-jung family patterns seem to have derived from rules of land tenure and the semi-feudal politico-economic system.

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