

Preliminary Notes on Marriage and Kinship

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that Helambu is only three days walk from Kathmandu and is one of the most popular trekking-areas, virtually nothing is known about the socio-cultural organization of its inhabitants. Both Ethnic Groups of Nepal¹ and People of Nepal² mention, in passing only, that Helambu is an area inhabited by Sherpas. Haimendorf, in his book on Khumbu³ writes:

The inhabitants of several villages of the Yelmu region ... also describe themselves as Sherpas⁴ and, though their dialect and many features of their material culture differ from those of the Sherpas of eastern Nepal, these differences do not stand in the way of occasional alliances with Sherpas of Solu.

Yet, it is precisely because of its differences (and similarities) with other Sherpa and Bhotea areas that Helambu is an important area anthropologically. The extent of these differences became apparent to me during the course of a short (17-day) visit to the area in January, 1974. Although I plan to return there to undertake more extensive research, I feel the data on Helambu warrant discussion in the form of a preliminary statement comparing the Sherpas of Helambu with the Sherpas of Khumbu and the Tibetans of Lhasa.

Helambu: background

The term Helambu⁵ is used by the inhabitants to refer only to the areas on each side of the Melamchi Khola. Anthropologically, however, the area includes the villages located above the adjacent Yangri Khola, Larke Khola, and parts of the Trisuli Khola. All of these areas constitute a Sherpa sub-cultural type and Helambu will hereafter be taken to include them all.

Helambu is a large area comprised mainly of Sherpa villages but with some Tamangs at lower elevations. The Sherpa villages range from small scattered settlements of five to ten houses to large nucleated settlements such as Tarkeyyang which has one hundred and ten households. A very rough estimate of the population of the entire Helambu area is around three thousand households or 12-13,000 persons.

The Sherpas of the area speak a dialect of Sherpa (Tibetan) that is partially intelligible to Sherpas of other areas such as

Khumbu and Rolwaling. They also usually speak Nepali, some Tamang, and many know varying degrees of Tibetan. Buddhist monastic institutions are active in the area and although most of the monasteries are Nyingmapa, there are several impressive Gelugpa monasteries with permanent celibate monk populations.

The staple crops are potatoes, turnips, wheat and apples, potatoes being the largest of these. Animal husbandry is also important in many parts of Helambu with Buffalo, Sheep, Urang (cross between a dzo and a cow) and Goats the main animals kept.

Helambu: Kinship

Like the Sherpas of Khumbu, the Helambu Sherpas are organized into exogamous patri-clans. I recorded fourteen such clans and there may well be more. They are: Dongpa, Shangpa, Lhopa, Chusangpa, Yoopa (Opa), Ayogpa, Lhalhungpa, Terkelingpa, Thongsowa, Chapa, Galee, Tomarey, Cheepa. None of these clans are present in Khumbu, but two, Dongpa and Galee, seem to correspond to Tamang clans cited in Dor Bahadur Bista⁶ (his Dong and Goley clans)⁷. The Helambu Sherpa clans are not corporately organized and seem to function exclusively with respect to marriage exogamy. Three clans, however, do have special behavioral restrictions in that they do not eat beef or pork and should not (although they do) eat chicken. These three are permitted to eat mutton. There is no concept of "brother" clan as is found among the Sherpas of Khumbu.

The clans follow a patrilineal rule of descent and are exogamous. Precise genealogical relations between clan members is not known.

The most striking feature of the Helambu area with respect to kinship and marriage is their emphatically stated preference for bilateral cross-cousin marriage (i.e. marriage, for a male, with his MBD and FZD) of the type Fox⁸ calls "statistical". In this type it is not large kinship units like clans which are exchanging women but rather individual families and it is 'true' relatives which are involved. Consequently, although the Helambu Sherpas have clans of sorts, their preferred cross cousin marriage pattern resembles groups such as the Shosone which do not.

Bilateral cross-cousin marriage has been rumoured to exist among Tibetanoid⁹ populations in Sikkim and Bhutan, but this is the first time such marriage practices have been documented for a Tibetanoid population.

The normal pattern in Helambu is for children to establish neolocal residence at the time of marriage with the exception of the youngest son who remains with the parents in a stem family. At marriage, each son and daughter get a share of the property although daughters normally get jewelery rather than land. The youngest son ultimately gets his own share as well as that of his parents. There is no polyandry or polygyny and no jointfamily.

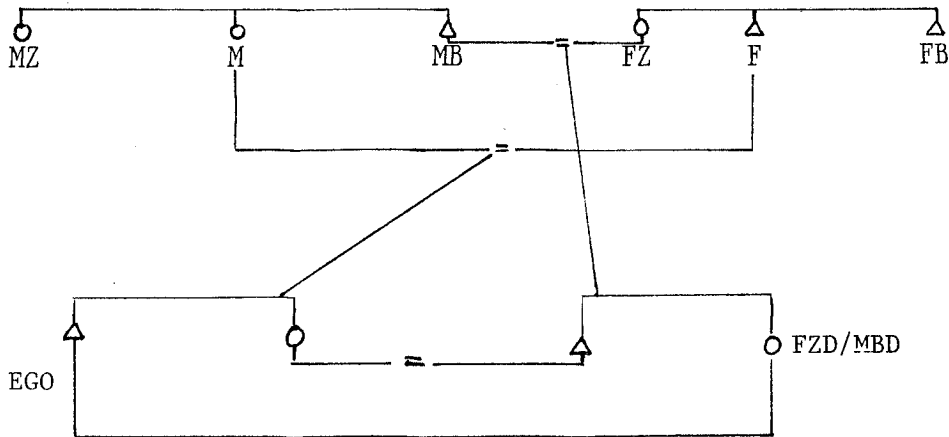
Given this unusual marriage preference, the kinship terminology of the Helambu Sherpas was collected. Not surprisingly, it follows normal cross-cousin terminology.

In the first ascending generation of the diagrams on pages 60 and 61, we find typical cross-cousin terminology in the names for spouses. Here FZH is called by the same term as MB and MBW is called by the same term as FS. Similarly, FBW is called by the same term as MS and MSH is called by the same term as FB. Since this type of marriage system consists of sister exchange, the kinship terms reflect the ideal norm.

HELAMBU SEMANTIC SPACE KINSHIP DIAGRAM*

		Male		Female	
		Older	Younger	Younger	Older
+ 2	lineal (lin.)	MEME		iBi	
	Collateral (col.)	Papa		ama	
	Patrilateral lin.	ɔwu		ani	
+ 1	patrilateral	aʒaŋ		cheche	
	matrilateral	ada	N''	Numu	aʒe
0	lin.	bitsɔ		phom	
	Col.	tshɔwu		tshamo	
- 1	lin.	tshɔwu		tshamo	
	col.	tshɔwu		tshamo	
- 2	lin.	tshɔwu		tshamo	
	col.	tshɔwu		tshamo	

* Not including affinal terminology.



Thus, ideally, Ego's MZH is his FB and his FBW is his MZ. This is in fact how the Helambu terminology sorts them.

Lhasa: Kinship

The Lhasa (Ü region) system differs markedly from that of Helambu. First, there is no cross-cousin marriage, this being considered heinous incest. In fact, exogamy is defined by a bilateral kindred which is delimited at seven generations patrilaterally, & five (or seven) matrilaterally. Second, polandry and other plural marriage arrangements¹⁰ are typical. Third, there are no clans at all. The term ru (rus)¹¹ which is sometimes claimed to mean clan in Tibet and is actually used in Khumbu to mean that -- in Lhasa simply connotes paternal relatives. The term sha ('flesh') is used for maternal relatives.

Although Lhasa kinship terminology is not as different as one might expect, a major difference does exist with respect to spouse terms.

LHASA SEMANTIC SPACE KINSHIP DIAGRAM*

		Male		Female	
		Older	Younger	Younger	Older
+ 2	lin.	Poo		Moo	
	ol				
+ 1	lin.	Paa		ama	
	Patrilateral	əqu		aNi	
	Matrilateral	asaŋ		Samo	
0	lin.	aco	oo	aca	
	Col.				
- 1	lin.	phu		phomo	
	col.				
- 2	lin.	aco	oo	aca	
	col.				

* Not including affinal terminology.

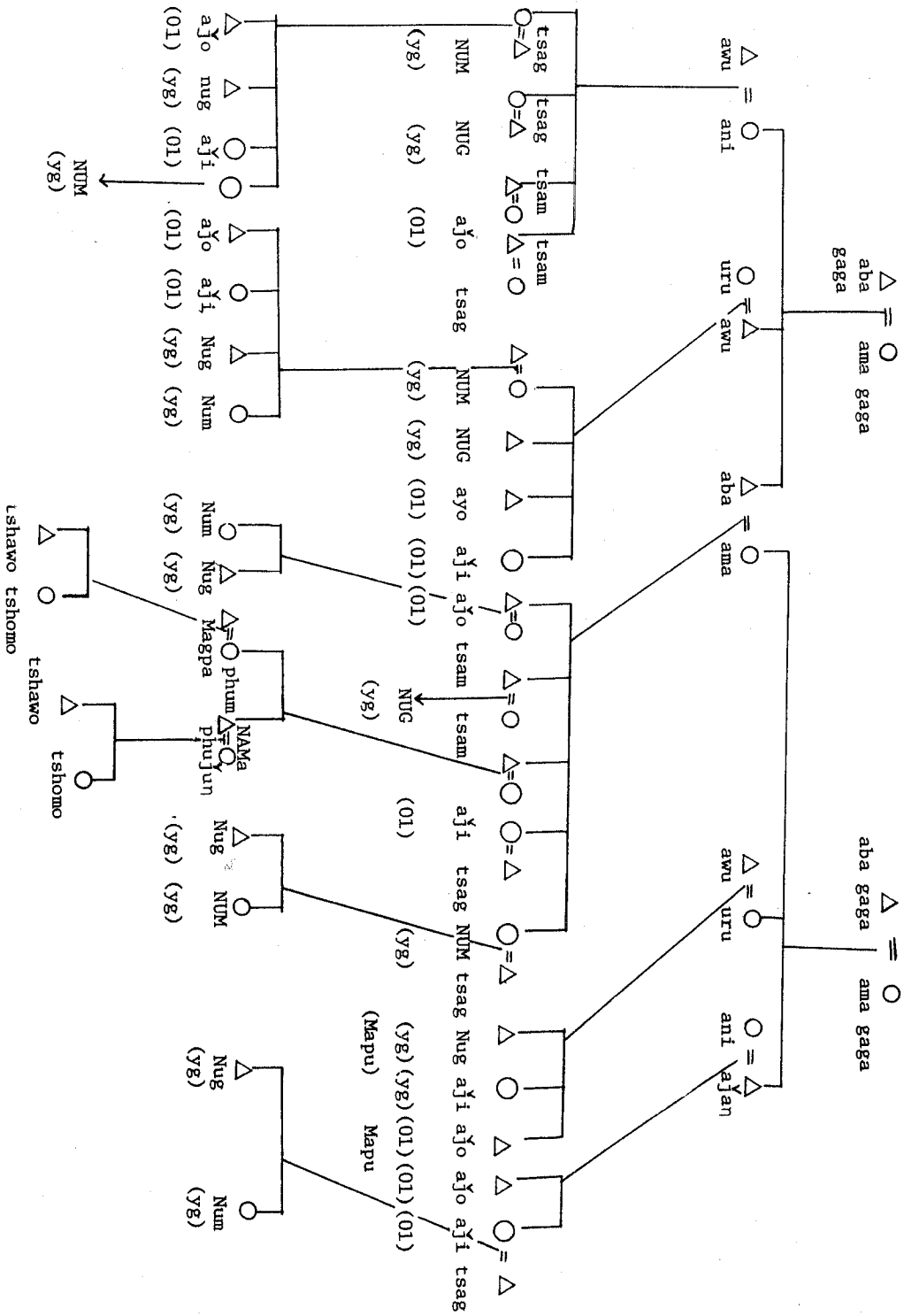
Unlike the Helambu terminological system, in Lhasa the spouses of "uncles" the "aunts" have no designated terms. In address, sometimes names are used and sometimes various kin terms are used. For example, in one case I know well an asang's (MB) wife is actually called aja, the term for older female of own generation (although she is clearly not of ego's generation). In referring to spouses Lhasans will describe them as 'the wife of my...'

Khumbu: Kinship

Intermediate in many respects between Helambu & Lhasa are the Sherpas of Khumbu who have been described by Haimendorf¹¹. On the one hand, like Lhasa, they have no cross cousin marriages but do have polyandrous marriages. On the other, like Helambu they do have exogamous patri-clans and identical inheritance patterns. The clans, however, do not correspond in name with those of Helambu, and are not the sole determinant of exogamy since in Khumbu maternal relatives are also ineligible for marriage. Their kinship terminology reflects this.

The kinship terms presented in the following diagram differ somewhat from those presented in Haimendorf¹². In ego's generation Haimendorf cites separate terms for parallel and cross-cousins, patrilaterally and matrilaterally. My informants, however, use "sibling terms" and explain the discrepancy by saying that Haimendorf's terms are "archaic" or "literary" and are not actually used. In any case, the terms I elicited are:

KHUMBU



KHUMBU SEMANTIC SPACE KINSHIP DIAGRAM*

		Male		Female	
		Older	Younger	Younger	Older
	lineal (lin.)				
+ 2	Collateral (col.)	aba gaga		ama gaga	
	lin.	aba		ama	
	Patrilateral	awu		aNi	
+ 1 Col.	Matrilateral	a ^Y an		URU	
	lin.	a ^Y o ; Nug		Num ; a ^Y i	
	col.				
	lin.	phu ^Y un		phom	
- 1	col.	a ^Y o ; Nug		Num ; a ^Y i	
	lin.	tshawo		tshamo	
- 2	col.				

* Not including affinal terminology.

These terms generally correspond to the Helambu ones with only two relatively minor differences: (1) asang is used as FZH in Helambu whereas in Khumbu awu is used. (2) the special term asa is used for FBW in Helambu: in Khumbu uru (MZ) is used.

Conclusion

In this brief comparison of the kinship and marriage patterns of Helambu Sherpas with the Sherpas of Khumbu & Tibetans of Lhasa, we have seen a variety of differences and similarities. The greatest differences exist between the Helambu Sherpas and the Lhasa Tibetans. The Khumbu Sherpas, although they differ from Lhasa Tibetans in possessing clans and in their spouse kinship terminology, still seem much more similar to the Lhasans than to the Helambu Sherpas with their, for Tibet and Khumbu, "incestuous" cross-cousin preferred marriages.

It is interesting to note, however, that the Sherpas view the interrelationships differently. As Barth has pointed out, in Ethnic Groups and Boundaries¹², differences or similarities perceived by outside observers have no significance with respect to ethnic identities unless they are also perceived to be relevant by the actors themselves. In this instance, both the Sherpas of Helambu and Khumbu consider themselves (and each other) to be Sherpas and not Bhotia (or bod-pa). Both also consider the Lhasans to be Bhotia and not Sherpa. This self-identification is all the more interesting when we consider that Nepalese generally use the term Bhotia to include not only Tibetans and Tibetanoids in the mountain regions of northern Nepal, but also Sherpas.

One wonders, then, whether in the long run the Nepali delimitation of ethnic boundaries will give impetus to the formation of a pan-Tibetanoid ethnic identity or whether the Sherpa delimitation will lead to changes in the Nepali conceptualization of Tibetanoids. In any case, Helambu is an area which is very important anthropologically & deserves serious research consideration in the future.

FOOTNOTES

1. D.B. Shrestha, C.B. Singh & B.M. Pradhan. Ethnic Groups of Nepal & their ways of living. H.M.G. Press, Kathmandu, 1972, p. 12.
2. Dor Bahadur Bista, People of Nepal, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1967, p. 160.
3. Ch. von FÜRER-Haimendorf. The Sherpas of Nepal, Buddhist Highlanders, London, 1964 p. A.W. Macdonald gives some Helambu clan names in his article "Les Tamang vus par l'un d'eux" published - L'homme, VI, 1, Paris, 1966, p. 27-58, note 94. See also the list of Tamang clan-names to be found in the same article.

4. The phrasing seems to imply to some doubt with respect to the validity of this claim.
5. The local etymology of the term is that "hèy" being the Sherpa term for 'potato' and "lapu" the term for 'radish', the name of the district thus refers to the two main crops of the area.
6. Dor Bista, op.cit., p. 55. See also Macdonald, ibid.
7. He also cites a Ghale class among Gurungs (p. 78).
8. R. Fox, Kinship & Marriage, Penguin Books, 1969, p. 200-202.
9. Tibetanoid is used for any Buddhist or Bon-po speaking a dialect of Tibetan.
10. For a more detailed discussion of Central Tibetan marriage & family organization, see M.C. Goldstein, "Stratification, Polyandry & Family Structure in Tibet", Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, vol. 27, 1971.
11. Haimendorf, op.cit.
12. F. Barth, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, Little Brown, 1969, pp. 1-39.