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Two Houses and the Pain of Separation in Tamang Narratives from Highland Nepal

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Sites for the expression of sex difference

At the heart of the anthropological endeavor lies a desire to understand other peoples. This effort has varied across a broad spectrum: from the exploitative if not baldly extorted accounts put in the service of colonial, missionary, national, or commercial interests, through the sincere if not always successful attempts at collaboration, to the eccentric, even romantic or egoistic, chronicles of personal encounters. What is at stake in the most recent anthropological critiques of our own enterprise is nothing less than our ability to represent others' identities, especially those forged in colonial and postcolonial encounters.

O'Hanlon's 1988 review of *Subaltern studies*, in particular, invites us to reconsider relationships of power and resistance, of hegemony and autonomy, and of women and men, suggesting that there are certain important parallels among all these relationships and the contemporary critiques of them. This paper looks at men's and women's verbal constructions of their identities; then, at the continuities and discontinuities in their expressions of sex-specific experience; and finally, at both women's and men's evocation of gender imagery to depict aspects of their lives as painful.

Gender and domination

At stake in my presentation are two central reflections. First is the question of whether or not power and resistance, hegemony and autonomy, interact in the same way between women and men, and more specifically between contemporary Tamang men and women from central highland

Nepal, as has been described between colonial authorities and local peoples in wider South Asia. To the extent that gendered and other forms of domination are *not* isomorphic, of course, an important subsidiary question arises: if present understandings of colonialism and postcoloniality are inadequate to disassemble gender, then, is this more because gender is different, or more because subaltern studies are inadequate?

The growing field of feminist epistemology takes as its central terrain the social construction of knowledge and its consolidation into the discourses of science, the treachery of their complicity with forms of material domination, and the need for a more determinedly perspectival understanding of both the subject and the world. In many ways this resonates clearly with poststructural literary theory and postcolonial social theory, but with some additional twists. Dimen's (1989) circuit of "Power, sexuality and intimacy," for example, also suggests that when dominance operates on and through desire it has different intrinsic implications for identity, ambiguity, and intimate intersubjectivity.

The bounteous harvest of studies on pre- and postcolonial western Africa holds an invigorating promise for work to be generated from throughout the world.¹ Those studies chart new arrangements of power, sex, belief, and practice: they document different ways of organizing sexual politics in which the sexes exercised dominion in separate but interdependent spheres and in which biological sex and reproduction were divorced from, and subsequently remarried to, social and cultural gender in what were to Eurocentric scholarship startling ways; and they demonstrate how colonial encounters ignored and dismantled these systems. Finally, and mercifully just before the prospect for humane mutual understanding evaporated in the heat of such critiques, Narayan reminds us that "our commitment to the contextual nature of knowledge does not require us to claim that those who do not inhabit these contexts can never have any knowledge of them" (1989:264). Thus, our project is doubly ambitious: to gain knowledge of meanings generated across the profound chasms of difference between ourselves and the voices we solicit in the anthropological field, and to discern what possibilities exist for dialogue across forms of local difference, in this case between Tamang women and men.

¹ See especially Van Allen 1972, 1976; Ifeka-Moller 1975; Okonjo 1986; Amadiume 1987.

Verbal genre and resistance

The second overarching concern in this article is to explore the potentially different roles played by different verbal genres in creating or contesting authoritative or independent points of view. I quite agree with O'Hanlon (1988) and Comaroff (1985) that the validity of resistance should not be measured either in its flamboyance or in its material efficacy. Clearly, even some dramatic and manifestly political rebellions fail. But, more importantly, the vaster number of rebellious acts are smaller (even personal), ineffectual (even unnoticed), experimental (not instrumental), and quieter (even silent)—but for all that not, I would argue, pointless. The boundaries between dissonance and dissidence are undoubtedly more troubling to the analyst than they are to those who play in their fields.

In Tamang fields of dissent/discord, words are the commonest action. If anything is imaginable, but few things are realizable (in the structuralists' sense of myth, imagination, and realities); so, too, many more things are utterable than are actionable. Tamang words take many forms; some can be classed into definite genres, such as talk, song, and gossip. In the present study, I will explore how different kinds of words and the contexts that produce them represent different degrees of collective construction and personal innovation. They voice different subjects—in the senses of both topic and agent.

In this way, they bespeak not singular, more authentic alternate "I's," but an array of positions in which identities are formed and from which they are articulated. Some of these announced identities speak simultaneously *of* and *from* a particular experiential position, for instance of a young married woman or a dying man; but nothing prevents a dying man from trying to imagine his mother's experiences at his birth, speaking in other words *of* experiences *from* his perspective. The question asked of verbal form here, then, is whether different genres speak from different presumptions of experience and hence provide entirely different scope for the expression not only of sympathy or empathy, but also of convention, critique, or resistance.

Tamang identities

The peoples today called Tamang live in the central Nepal highlands in and surrounding the Kathmandu valley. The Tamang community with whose assistance the materials for this article were assembled and interpreted lies in the districts of Rasuwa and Nuwakot about two days'

walk to the north and west of Kathmandu toward the Tibetan Chinese border; other Tamang communities lie in the Helambu region directly north of Kathmandu; still others lie as far east as Dankuta and as far south as the border with India. Typically and traditionally, Tamang are described as a Tibeto-speaking people of Tibetan origin, organized into clans (not castes), who marry their cross-cousins (mother's brother's children or father's sister's children), and whose most respected religious practitioners are Buddhist lamas. But they are not a historically, politically, socially, or linguistically unified people: they speak profoundly divergent dialects; they were not part of a single polity; and they migrated into Nepal severally. Instead, theirs has been a patchwork history. What unifies their experience is above all the way that they have become incorporated into the state of Nepal, which codified its peoples and especially their land and labor obligations as the state formed.

Tamang peoples were the inhabitants of the lands conquered by the founding Nepali monarch, Prithvi Narayan Shah, as he initially blockaded and overtook the Malla kingdoms of the Kathmandu valley during the late eighteenth century. As he consolidated his reign, Prithvi Narayan Shah did so literally on the backs of the people who lived along his path of conquest: they provisioned and portered for his armies in the early years of the Shah monarchy and continued to pay rents in both cash and kind as well as provide *corvée* labor of many sorts throughout the first two centuries of Nepali national history. To be Tamang was to experience the fullest brunt of the social, economic, and political machinery of Nepali national state formation.

As that history unfolded, being Tamang became ever more, as Holmberg (1989) has called it, involuted: even as the demands made upon Tamang by the state increasingly impoverished and demeaned Tamang peoples with pressures imposed from outside, internally Tamang society and culture flourished by turning in upon itself, proliferating and enriching its own forms, but always within the refracted encompassment of the Nepali nation. Many forms of opportunity and expression were denied: political self-rule, economic autonomy, military opportunity, and social mobility were all precluded. Other forms proliferated, such as religious dance, drama festivals, pilgrimage, shamanism, personal story, and song. Although it would be naive to neglect the historical role that the state, the caste-based social and legal system, and the marked privileges of central elites all played in creating and policing the framework—legal, economic, political, and military—within which Tamang identities were formed in Nepal to serve others' purposes, it would be equally naive to disavow the

energy and originality with which Tamang peoples reacted to their situation to interpret and reformulate their identities for themselves.

This study looks, then, at the personal narratives and song compositions of northwestern Tamang to explore the construction of women's identities. These songs and stories display the central tension in women's lives: girls are born into one family line and home, but must move at marriage to live with their husbands. Initially, this movement from one home to another may be understood as the transformation—and a difficult one at that—of one identity into another; that is certainly, at least partially, how women describe it.

Descent and marriage define a woman's two houses

Patrilineal descent and patrilocal post-marital residence mean that a Tamang woman must leave her natal family and move to live with her husband's family when she marries. Although in some parts of South Asia this movement is abrupt and the distance—both social and geographical—between natal and marital families is great, in Tamang communities in north central Nepal marriages occur between cross-cousins. Marrying someone you call your mother's brother's child or your father's sister's child (real or classificatory) greatly reduces the distance between affines at the same time that it introduces new complexity into marriage negotiations. Whether through arrangement or courtship, since marriage is possible only with (real or classificatory) cross-cousins and everyone of your own generation is either a sibling (real or classificatory) or a cross-cousin, the first order of Tamang marriage negotiation depends upon identifying whether the prospective candidate is a cross-cousin or not.

At the heart of Tamang courtship songs like the one called *Sai Khola*, with which I will begin this analysis, there inevitably lies a riddle. In some ways, it is the most universal of all riddles: "Who am I?" But these songs also give voice to distinctively Tamang riddles, for the "I" is, of course, a Tamang "I"; specifically in these songs leading to marriage, it is a cross-cousin marrying "I." In these songs women and men query one another about their identities through long, raucous nights of dancing and complex rhyming *repartées*. They begin with general inquiries, laden with potential romance and marriage.

These songs are challenging to translate, though not primarily because they are poetic and romantic; indeed, the romance is perhaps what makes this poetry most readily accessible across the miles and differences that separate their experiences from ours. Although many details of the

Tamang imagery in such songs require annotation, most of us will find immediate resonances in lines like the following, which are sung by both men and women early in the evening and open one version of a *Sai Khola*:²

*Sai kholé!*³

Take the herding station up onto [place-name] Hill.⁴
Hai!

Playful-songs three-songs in this [our] time of youth.⁵

² To preserve the integrity of the original songs, I have translated all the verses, although the phrases most central to the analysis here are underlined.

³ Every line begins with the song name, *Sai khola* or (more emphatically) *Sai kholé*, which literally means “One hundred streams.” Line-ends are marked by an exclaimed *Hai!* In these translations I have not repeated this phrase with every line.

⁴ The opening lines are well known to all; they are an invitation to get involved in the song competition. Just to give an example of the types of rhymes common throughout: line 1 says *godé / borpa / goDa / gang-ri*; literally, herding station / do or would carry, take, or move / specific place name / hill, mountain, or ridge-on top of; line 2 *wara wara / tschi / som / klangpa / chudé / gang-ri*; literally, genre of playful and dancing song / words, phrases, or song verses / three / do would play / this (proximate) / age of life-in. Although my translation as “Take the herding station up onto the [place name] Hill; playful-songs three-songs in this [our] time of youth!” cannot replicate the rhyming and punning in these songs, I will try to indicate where the important plays with words occur. Groups of lines separated in these translations by a blank line constitute verses of two possible sorts: the first is that each “verse” indicated this way shares a single basic rhyming scheme, but these clusters also anticipate the actual singing exchanges that take place as the singers sing a verse and then wait to hear their counterparts’ reply. [Brackets] indicate untranslatable or missing phrases: these might be (a) place-names or specific tree species names, or (b) other phrases, especially pronouns, that are not specified in the Tamang but are understood—with some necessary ambiguity, as, for example, when the “love” being sung about might be [yours], [mine], or [ours].

⁵ *Wara wara tschi som* or “playful-songs three-songs” refers to the kind of song that was popular some years before *Sai Khola* came into fashion. These song trends each seem to last only about five years. *Sai Khola* has since given way to *Mendolesyo*, which in its turn has given way to others.

Tuck the paper-like petals of flowers into [your] hair.
Has love arrived yet, or not, from all the directions?⁶

Wherever [you] are from, please come up [to us].
Come here to sing [kind of song] and
/[kind of song] [with us].

The temples of the very gods are in Khasyor.⁷
 Searching for nice love⁸ [our] heads spun more.

In a rifle muzzle is a lead bullet round.
 Where will [we] go and hear love's sound?

The stew with rice [special varietal name] is sweet.
 The sound of nice love is sweet.⁹

[I'll] go pick wild banana leaves
 /[to make] a plate [for you].
 If [I] don't find nice love, what will I do?

To eat a half measure of salt.
 How strange it would be if [we] didn't find love.

The corn itself ripens right on the ears.
 We ourselves are virgins pure, pure, pure enough.¹⁰

⁶ The rhyme (with reduplication) here is between *syo syo la* (of paper paper) and *tscho tscho la* (of all the cardinal directions directions). Note that there are six “cardinal” directions in Tamang Buddhist logic: north, south, east, and west, plus up-in-the-center and down-in-the-center.

⁷ This is a major Buddhist monument and *stupa* in the Kathmandu valley. It is an important pilgrimage point for Tamang, who credit the semimythical Tamang woman Gang Jyungmo with its construction.

⁸ Here and below, “nice” love is *gyapi* love, meaning “nice, good, pretty, desirable.”

⁹ “Sweet” in both cases here is *rongpa*, referring to edibles.

¹⁰ The “virgin” here is a Nepali loanword *kanya* (for an unmarried virgin, especially in ideals of marriage); this sex- and caste-based value on virginity is quite well known to, but largely irrelevant for, local Tamang. They know, however, that caste Hindu think that these song-fests, and the relations that can obtain between women and men singers, are titillatingly licentious. The play on “pure, pure, pure enough” juxtaposes different kinds of words for purity—*sang* from Tamang and *choko* from Nepali—and undoubtedly highlights the tensions surrounding conflicts between Tamang and non-Tamang ideas about “purity.”

The incendiary is for burning incense.
For love, there are couples, or aren't there?

The pipestem is there for smoking tobacco.
The time is now¹¹ to go looking for . . . *wa rai ra!*¹²

The call to romance in these verses can be heard even in translation. But the central riposted verses, in which the singers pursue each other's identities, are less apparently accessible because they probe, conceal, and finally reveal a version of personal identity not immediately meaningful to non-Tamang. In these other verses, each singer or group of singers must attempt to obscure their own identities while tricking their opponents into divulging theirs.

Of course, what is critical to these songs of Tamang courtship is marriageability, and marriageability hinges upon whether the person with whom you are competing is a (real or classificatory) cross-cousin or not. With the former, sex, love, and marriage are both possible and positively desired, but any sexualized liaison with the latter is prohibited, incestuous, and shocking. These riddling song verses of love, tryst, and marriage, then, dally in personal identity in specifically Tamang terms. In the following verses both women and men root their self-descriptions in the lineage and locale of their birth:

Young men:

Some chicken's chicks are too young to lay eggs yet.¹³
Where [are you] from? From what village, beloved women?

If the chick, if the hen is yellow,
if you intend to make love enough,

¹¹ Literally, "age is right," as in the number of years old a person is.

¹² The rhyme ends here before the thought is completed, although the implication understood by all hearers was that the singers were looking for opponent-partners with whom to exchange verses that evening. Groups of singers indicate that they are done with their round of singing and are waiting for their opponent-partners to reply via the terminal challenge *wa ra rai* or *wa rai ra*.

¹³ And too young, presumably, to be able to compose adequate song *ripostes*.

give the chaff a whirl in the winnowing tray.
Toss back these three-songs playful-songs.¹⁴

Wa rai ra!

Young women:

Do weave the proper pattern in the *barku*-overgarment.¹⁵
Will it be with us? Or will it be for another?

To eat some potatoes, well, you chew-chew so.
If you sing [with us], speak clearly-clearly so.

To plant corn in the month of *Chait*.¹⁶
Is it for us, perhaps? Who knows?

Young men:

Millet has dried on the drying mat.
[We] have spoken singing to you.

To gamble [you] have to name [your] [suit].¹⁷
It seems our meeting, however, was not by chance.

Take the corn from the earth and put it in the rafters
/[to store and dry it].
Speak truly and sing [type of song] with
/[your] mouths to us.

Young women:

[I'll] eat a snack of green chili peppers.
If [I] sing that way, it will be proper.

Like the goat's kid and the cow's calf, newborn.
What kind and how [are we] come to be kin relations?

¹⁴ Actually proper names for two kinds of “playful” festival competition songs, both of which preceded *Sai Khola* in popularity in this region.

¹⁵ *Barku* and *gya* are the two styles of plaid shawl or overgarment Tamang women traditionally tied over their shoulders.

¹⁶ The month when it must be planted.

¹⁷ Referring to a card game in which each player has to call out names of cards (e.g., “aces,” “deuces,” etc.) depending upon how they are going to play. This announcing of the card numbers is what I have called “naming a suit.”

Divinity is not in the house yard.
We children don't know
/[how or if you are our] kin relations?

Young men:

A ball of red thread. A skein of black thread.
Whose daughter [are you]? Whose daughter-in-law [are you]?

Let's husk the fresh-picked corn and see.
Let's turn around, face each other this way, and see.

Young women:

We eat the salt of Rasuwa.
We're just from Earthshole Dasuwa.¹⁸

The pivot of the rice pounder is
 /[made] from the [species name] tree;
 the pounder is [made] from the [species name] tree.

[Clan name] clan daughter am I;
/and the shaman's daughter-in-law am I.
The lama has his music; the shaman has his drum.¹⁹

[Clan name] father's daughter am I.
[Clan name] mother's daughter am I.²⁰

Young men:

Looking for a rock, [we] found divinity.
Now that [you've] spoken, we find that we know [you].

¹⁸ Two place names made to rhyme.

¹⁹ This line echoes many proverbs about the ritual specializations of Buddhist lamas and shamans among Tamang, but also adds another kind of rhyme between “I and “drum,” both of which are *nga*, differentiated only by tone.

²⁰ These lines were sung as examples, to try to teach me how to sing *Sai Khola*, but it is worth noting that they were played out by a group of young (and not so young) men, who reported that these would be appropriate replies for a young woman to make. In fact, the lines they attribute to the young women fulfill all the requirements of rhyme and other kinds of puns (see, for example, the lines about men going around poking their “walking sticks” into other people’s roofs), but they answer the hypothetical young men’s questions about their identities without trickery; the lines attributed here to the young men, however, display the kind of evasiveness and punning about identity that are most highly admired.

To gamble [you] have to name [your] [suit].
 Let's make love in the best way.²¹

Young women:

To go poking [your] walking stick into [someone's] roof.
Where is [your] village, [you] great kings?

Red lentils are a snack for beer, too.²²
Whose child [are you]? Whose husband [are you]?

Clear [your] throat before singing [your] song.
 Tell it well and give it back to us now.

Young men:

To go poking flowers [in your hair] [species name] flowers.
We are from Five Hundred Streams.

We kill the fish in the weir.
Our village is called [place name].²³

Our grandfather's grandchild, our father's son.
A young woman's young man and some wife's husband.

Young women:

It seems the moon rose silver on the hill.
 It seems [this] meeting has been to share love with us.

The adze is for stripping bark off [the wood for a] yoke.
 Let's just play. We'll all laugh.

A golden charm, a silver chain.
 Why worry to make love?

A piebald deer is on the cliff across the river.
 How will [your] kings' hearts remember [us]?

²¹ "Best" here is the loanword and concept *pakka*, meaning a thing properly made, finished well, polished.

²² This strain of red lentils is said to be so powerful that even rocks accidentally cooked in them will soften.

²³ The name of their home village rhymes, of course, with "weir," but the boast is also evident.

Young men:

Frog's thigh, [place name] river.
Howsoever rememberingly heart of love.

The bitter gourd hangs supported on the trellis.
We children are so brave.

There is liquor in the big drinking bowl.
We're of a heart-and-mind to make love.

Young women:

The three-sided *rudraksha* nut²⁴ is not medicine.
The marriage exchange arranged by Father
/is not meant to be.

To eat the food on the plate, there is a proper time.
Millers put [their] flour inside a wooden container.
Let us make love, at the peak of the proper time.

Young men:

Do cut fodder, well, from the [best fodder species] tree.
Is this just deceit? Or is it the truth?

In this particular exchange, re-created for me by a group of young men from "Five Hundred Streams" in 1977, the young men represent themselves as the more skillful singers. The young women, although presenting themselves as no longer "yellow" chicks, and ready enough to cast aside the "marriage exchange arranged by Father" to eat the young men's "snack of green peppers," give themselves away completely. When the young men ask, "Whose daughter [are you]? Whose daughter-in-law [are you]?" the young women obligingly provide both their father's and mother's clan/lineage name and identify their father-in-law. But the men, when the women complain that "we children don't know [how or if you are our] kin relations," answer only that they are "our grandfather's grandchild, our father's son; a young woman's young man and some wife's husband."

In such song exchanges, as well as exploring each other's clan identities, the women and men ask and eventually tell where the other comes from. "Where [are you] from? From what village, beloved women?" ask the men at the outset of their rhyming inquest. And the women, even after they realize they have given their "suit" away to the

²⁴ A seed commonly used as a bead in religious rosaries.

men, nevertheless challenge them “to go poking [your] walking stick into [someone’s] roof. Where is [your] village, [you] great kings?” The men can now boast, “We are from Five Hundred Streams,” for the riddle has been solved. The singers are marriageable; they are “brave” and “of a heart-and-mind to make love.”

Most of these song contests end either in this way or with the contestants realizing that they are (real or classificatory) brothers and sisters, at which point a different kind of love is all that is possible. The very act of singing—especially about love and liaison—is by Tamang social definitions either a solicitation of sexual possibilities or an incestuous impossibility. To err and court in song the wrong category is deeply embarrassing. In either case the immediate outcome is largely the same: song partners who have engaged in a satisfyingly long and rewarding set of exchanges subsequently exchange snacks, liquor, and tokens. “Brother” and “sister” singers may then team up to instruct one another in further song subtleties on through the night. “Marriageable” singers may elope or at least tryst.

Brothers and sisters, husband and wives, women and men

In these songs it is not men’s and women’s identities *qua* “men” or “women” that is at stake, but their relative positioning as either “brothers and sisters” or “marriageable partners.” As such, the possibilities for contestation and negotiation are distinctly circumscribed. They certainly toss challenges back and forth about each other, but these challenges are rooted less in their respective maleness or femaleness than in their respective kin positions.

Throughout their lives, both men and women are vitally involved in their own patrilineages. Anthropologically, we expect this of the men, as sons and subsequently fathers. But Tamang women are important as daughters and sisters, too. Daughters’ rights in their parents’ houses are recognized in *dzo*, property settlements made by a natal house on its daughters. In wealthy houses, women’s *dzo* can be substantial, including numbers of water buffalo, cattle, and goats, as well as copper cauldrons, water jugs, bronze dishes, and other major household items, and of course gold and silver jewelry and even grain or money. Even in the poorest households a ritually minimal *dzo* must be given, since it marks a daughter’s obligations in her parents’ house: a sickle (*wari*) for cutting the grass at familial cremations, a hoe (*tow*) for scraping a circle on the ground

to demarcate the cremation ground, and a bronze drinking bowl (*khore*) for holding the water to wash her parents' faces at their deaths.

As sisters and clansisters, Tamang women also play important lifelong roles. In childhood, sisters and brothers are each other's caretakers and confederates, a history that establishes lasting close emotional bonds (cf. Wolf 1972). Tamang song, myth, and everyday conversation all emphasize the obligations and love a brother has for his sisters and clan sisters, whom he calls collectively his *busing*; sisters and clansisters, too, have special obligations to one another and form a social group of their own, calling themselves *anonyinchon*. The ties between a brother and his *busing*-sisters or among *anonyinchon*-sisters themselves are particularly important at various points in each other's lives, among which are a brother's first haircutting, each other's weddings, the birth of each other's children, each other's children's marriages, and ultimately each other's deaths. At least once a year sisters and brothers ritually exchange food and gifts to mark their continuing commitment to one another.

The commitment between brothers and sisters is, however, not without contradictions. Sisters and brothers are not just united eternally by the ties of their birth; they are also rivals. Brothers have primary rights over certain kinds of patrilineally held property, especially houses and lands, but sisters may also make substantial claims against that property, whether in the form of *dzo*, in loans, or in refuge.²⁵ When the ancestral house is rich, the needs of both daughters and sons can be fulfilled; but when the house is poor, the requirements of sons take precedence. "Ours," said Tschirto, "is a tale of daughters not getting anything only because father was so very poor. Everything Mother had was given to her sons." To daughters it is, as Tasyi told it, often "a tale of giving later . . . later, if I can" Tamang construe the claims of sisters and the obligations of fathers or brothers to give to daughters or sisters in terms of affection, not right.

It is also not surprising, then, that sisters and brothers sometimes view their situation differently. Women, when they attempt to press demands as daughters or sisters upon their fathers and brothers, often find they are less welcome than the rhetoric of patrilineal solidarity would suggest. Sukumaya was a young woman, newly married, when she mused what would happen if she never went to live in her husband's house:

²⁵ See Fricke 1986 for a more extended discussion of the interplay of men's and women's rights in inheritance and household formation.

Sukumaya: . . . after Father and Mother are grown old, and, say they die, it's not that my younger brothers and sisters will care for me. Then where will I go? I think about that in one half of my mind; the other half thinks only about wanting to stay here.

KSM: You couldn't stay with your brothers?

Sukumaya: You stay with your brothers and then, well, they'll talk harshly to you. They'll scold you a lot. When your own father and mother are there, it's one thing; on your own . . . [Pause].

KSM: On your own, what? What do they say if you stay with your brothers?

Sukumaya: Our kind can only go to husbands. If you stay on like this without going to a husband, they'll talk and talk harshly.

KSM: They're contemptuous.

Sukumaya: Contemptuous. Your brothers are contemptuous. They'll tell you, "Go wherever you want to go, but just go. Do whatever you want to do, but just do it," they'll just say. They'll give lots of work, no food. After you're an old woman.



Jyomo weaving a woman's skirt. (photo credit: D. Holmberg and K. March)

Nhanu, a much older woman, fully established in her own house with her husband and grown children, remembered how she used to think toward her brothers and how it had become: “it would please me to weave a turban and give it to one of my brothers. I’d weave for them because it was my nature; I liked weaving for them. They never had to ask me. I’d say, ‘Take and wear this! You should look good, like fortune has smiled upon you!’ That’s the way I am; that’s the way my heart and mind work. I never once said to any of my younger brothers, ‘Where and when will I get mine?’ . . . Now, each is alone. Each of us is set up separately, one here, the other there; each has hardened toward the other.”

Nhanu, in effect, looks back over the interpersonal tensions over brothers’ and sisters’ respective familial rights within an idiom of the passage of time, as if they “used to” care for one another but “now” do not. But such strains arise all the time, and in general sisters emphasize the unity of cross-sex siblings while brothers emphasize their differences. In one of the common exchanges of the *Sai Khola* songs, the young women sing as sisters:

Sai kholé!

Together the pillars of the house stand. Hai!

The memory is in the hearts-and-minds of two small children!

and again:

How can you of our own natal home forget us?

We, your clansisters?

But the young men answer, like brothers whose tolerance—in Tamang terms “affection”—has been tested too much:

Sai kholé! Why has your natal charm wilted? Hai!

The structural tension between sisters and brothers is recognized most symmetrically and classically in a *namtar* or “origin” song about the beginnings of weaving and writing. This particular song is said to have originated between a brother and a sister. She was sitting weaving; he was learning to read and write in order to become a lama. Both of these images—of men as lamas writing and of women weaving—reverberate throughout Tamang life (March 1984). This song highlights the rivalry between brother and sister as each acquired the symbolic skills and tools of his/her gender. The brother tries to tease his sister, making fun of her weaving so as to glorify his writing. But each time he names a piece of his

paraphernalia with pride, she retorts, singing about her loom in all its pieces and about the antiquity of women's weaving knowledge.²⁶

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,²⁷
the woman straightened out the hollow behind her knee,
pushing against the footboard of her loom.
This is the work that anchors women.²⁸
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman straightened out the hollow behind her knee,
 pushing at the backstrap of her loom.
 This is the work that anchors women.
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman straightened out the hollow behind her knee
 and used the shuttle (*kyurusying*) of her loom.
 The lama has his thighbone trumpet (*kangling*).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had her weaving beater (*graama*).
 The lama has his sword (*patang*).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had her device for wetting her weaving
 /*chhupi chhusying*).²⁹
 The lama has his bamboo pen (*yugu*).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

²⁶ Here again, although I am reproducing the entire song, I have underlined the significant references.

²⁷ In the beginning of time, when things were first coming to their respective rebirths and being defined by them.

²⁸ The work that “ties women down,” that “keeps them from going anywhere,” but that also “secures their place for them” just as it “secures them in their place.”

²⁹ Often nothing more than a dried corn cob dipped in water and drawn across the weaving before beating new threads in, this device helps to make the weaving tight.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had her device for keeping her weaving/
*/a consistent width (phapi phasying).*³⁰
 The lama has his printing of books with woodblocks
/(chhappré).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had all the lease and hettle rods
/(phépi phésying) of her loom.
 The lama has his walking stick (béra).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

What originates in this song, of course, and is attributed to the rivalry of cross-sex siblings, is ultimately the complementarity of Tamang gender in weaving and writing. But in this mythic song and in courtship songs, as in common talk, what is at stake in these versions of cross-sex disputation lies deeper.

Self and locality

Locality provides another anchor for both women's and men's identities. It is manifest in the boundedness of named locales and the markedness of actual or imaginative gates into the community from each of the directions. Local territorial divinities are regularly honored both at these gateways and at the sacred sites they inhabit within the community. Community members are obliged to these divinities and can be directly affected by them, even when they are away from the village. This is clearest in an annual sacrifice and feast at which all the out-married women and the fewer men who go outside the community for adventure or work must nevertheless continue to propitiate their natal local divinities. For most of the men, the overlaps between lineal and local identities, duties, and vulnerabilities are not contradictory, since they are born, live, and work their entire lives in the same locale. It is women, who carry bits of these ties with them when they marry, who highlight the partial independence of local from lineal identity.

³⁰ A length of bamboo sharpened at both ends (and sometimes strung like a bow); poked into both selvages of the emerging fabric, it helps to keep it the same width across the entire length.

In songs like these, as well as in the many more prosaic responses to questions about “who are you?” men and women share an initial language to describe who they are, and it is less a language of sexed identity than that of the place and line of their birth. From the oldest woman who spoke with me, who said, “I’m a *Yema* clanswoman from God’s pasturage,” to the youngest, from both women and men, all identified themselves at the outset of almost any inquiry by noting, more or less in this order: first their patriclan, then their village of birth. If more information were volunteered, they typically progressed to identifying their mother’s patriclan, then their father’s locally known (nick)name. Thus, a standard brief self-introduction would say, “I’m a man (or woman) of such-and-such a clan and such-and-such a village;” a longer variant might run something like, “I’m a woman (or man) of such-and-such a clan-father and such-and-such a clan-mother, born in the village of thus-and-so, the son/daughter of so-and-so [father’s name].”

Self and house

At their outermost reaches, then, birthlines are located in the named patrilineal clans to which both Tamang men and women belong from the moment of their birth until death, and perhaps beyond. These patriclans have their ultimate origins in mythic time and events; in the present, they circumscribe the largest orbits of birth relationships, linking people together within the extended idiom of descent, affection, and obligation as (grand)parents, siblings, and (grand)children.

Within these named clans, the knowable lines of nameable grandfathers, mothers, and fathers are loosely nested. These aspects of social identity intersect at their core with the smallest unit of spatial identity, in the natal “house” or “home”—(*Dim*), a word that encompasses both the place and the personnel of a unified kernel of identity. Houses are built in clusters of closely related agnates, in villages with larger lineage and clan (if multi-clan) identities.

Tamang “houses” are vital social, economic, political, and ritual units. In this centrality and imaginative power to evoke both people and habitation, the idea of the Tamang “house” is not unlike the rural Tawainese house described by Wolf (1968), with one important proviso: Tamang houses are less ideologically and explicitly patriarchal. The Tamang house has both “female” and “male” regions in it, and while the seats of greater apparent outsider prestige are in the male sections, women and men are typically seated in separate but parallel hierarchies, each in their own

sections (Holmberg and March 1985). Each house as well is simultaneously headed by a man (*Dim ki apa*, “the father of the house”) and a woman (*Dim ki ama*, “the mother of the house”) whose authorities, again, are separate but largely parallel.³¹

A woman has two houses

But because Tamang women, unlike Tamang men, move to marry into another patriline and another patrilineally extended residence, they acquire a second “house” in adulthood. And they acquire new language—(1) *hro’i ja*, “someone else’s place;” (2) *apa-ama’i ja*, “father-mother’s place;” (3) *phamyung* and *apa maiti*, “natal home [married woman speaking]”—to talk about these new social and physical loci. Married women’s introductions, then, need to specify not only the place and people of her birth, but also those of her marriage. The oldest woman with whom I worked on life history materials, for example, virtually opened her personal account with “when I was a person of eleven, I reached Foddertree in marriage . . . to [marry] a Gongpo clansman.” Tamang women’s life accounts revolve closely around the very different jural and emotive constellations of their “own birth place,” “someone else’s place,” and their present “house.”

During the early years of her marriage, a woman often spends considerable periods of time in her natal home. As the years pass, she will come to spend more and more of her time in her marital home, but as long as she works in her natal home, even if only occasionally, she retains rights to a named share of the produce there (*khala phyapa*). Only after many years of marriage, the full transfer of her own property (*dzo*), and (usually) the birth of children will a Tamang woman come once again to refer to her marital residence as her “house” (*Dim*). Tamang women are very conscious of their rights in their natal homes: they divide their time between natal and marital homes carefully; they visit regularly and make and claim gifts on all the proper occasions; and, ultimately, they lament the loosening of their ties there as first their parents and then their brothers die.

Men, on the other hand, are born, marry, become fathers, live, and die on the social and spatial terrain of a singular house/home. For men, life is more socially and physically continuous. Although multiple brothers will

³¹ The sexual symmetry of men’s and women’s roles in some (even highly political) rituals suggests there might have been a more West African-like parallelism to gendered authority among the Tamang prior to Hindu and Shah conquest.

eventually move out of the ancestral homestead to build their own houses, they will build them close by, often constituting hamlets of closely related men's houses in a single village. Fathers, brothers, and fathers' brothers interact throughout their lives in all aspects of those lives.

The pain of separation

Although Tamang men and women experience it quite differently, both describe women's move at marriage as painful. Even though Tamang women do not marry strangers (but rather cross-cousins), and even though they almost never marry more than a few hours' walk away, and even though they are not expected to move quickly or exclusively into their husbands' houses, and even though they continue to have important social allies in both their natal and marital homes, and even though they bring considerable property of their own into their marriages, Tamang women speak of great hardship in the move into their husbands' houses.

Women's pains

In their life history narratives, every married woman counterpoised natal and marital homes. All women spoke of their birth home as a place of comfort, freedom, affection, and tranquility; they found their marital homes hard, constrained, and argumentative. Said Jyomo, even as a middle-aged woman well established with a married son:

Hardship, well how can one even speak of it now? My hardship, even more so, more in the house (*Dim*) of those Firestone people,³² then even more here. In Father's and Mother's house, I was carefree. If once you go stay with someone else's own Father and Mother, it's never again carefree. No matter how long it lasts, you know, wisdom never arises when you're young.³³ Then as soon as you're grown up a little, you suddenly become a person living in someone else's house. Where's the freedom from cares?

Different women commented at different lengths on various aspects of this contrast. Sukumaya, for example, was well-known as a very hard worker

³² Where she was first married and subsequently divorced.

³³ Literally, "wisdom never arises in one's young childhood."

in both her own parents' house and in her husband's, but she was outspoken about the obligatory nature of work in her husband's house:

In your own house, if it rains, you get to stay in the house. If you say so, you can stay. Yourself, you can say, "Today, I'm going to go to such-and-such a place," and after saying that, you can go. If you say, "Today, I'm not even going to do any work; I'm just going to sit around," you can stay sitting there. In your own place, in Father and Mother's place. In someone else's house, it isn't possible to talk like that.



Nhanu (tallest in center), with Setar (facing camera), and friends singing. (photo credit: D. Holmberg and K. March)

Mhojyo objected most to the sense that she was under constant scrutiny in her husband's house, saying, "In someone else's house, you're so afraid of what might be said to you, of what you might be asked to do,

of how you're supposed to do things, that you actually shake with fear sometimes." Other women focused on the strictures that they keep more compliantly quiet in their husbands' houses, or that they could not decide for themselves when or what to eat, or that they were subjected to sharper criticism there. But each one called upon this common theme—contrasting birth and natal homes—to organize past and present, birth and marriage, nice and nasty over the course of their lives.

Men's pains

It is the central hardship to women's lives, then, as they speak and sing about them, that they cannot stay forever in their original homes. But men also recognize this rupture in women's lives: they hear their own wives talk about it, and they see their sisters and daughters go through it. In this study I do not wish to explore this rupture per se. My earlier work on both Tamang and Sherpa symbols of intermediacy (1979), especially Tamang uses of weaving and writing (1984), shows not only the strong cultural and religious associations between ideas of femaleness and this movement of women from natal to marital homes, and the imaging of this move as difficult, but also the relevance of these images to both women and men. Holmberg has written in other contexts, too, about the essential femaleness of this kind of suffering in the Tamang ritual complex of the *Tsen* and the shamanic (1983). Here I want to focus more upon the other circumstances in which such suffering is thought to arise.

When Tamang talk or sing about their separate, and, especially for women, separated ties to their joint natal home, they usually do so together and in mixed-sex groups, and more to declare cross-sex solidarity than to assert difference or challenge authority. Both women and men sing similar songs, both listen to each other's singing, and both say they are (and to my observer's eye seem) deeply moved by women's plight. In this activity the distinctive representation of women's experience as painful is not by or for women alone; although based in the sex-specific dislocation of women at marriage, it becomes much more than a symbol of sex difference.

And human pain

Tamang identify the particular pain that women experience in the move out of their natal homes at marriage as *gyurba* or *warba*, "to suffer from separation." This "pain of separation" is regarded as a distinct category of suffering. It can arise from a number of different events,

ranging from the selling off of goods or losing jewelry to parting from friends. But the events most significantly and commonly described as *gyurba* or *warba* are: when a woman moves to marry in her husband's house, when a child is separated from its mother, and when a loved one dies. This Tamang "pain of separation" represents the double realization that one has lost something irretrievably and that one failed adequately to value what was lost before it was gone. It is, of course, about loss, but it is also about increased "wisdom": knowing now enough to remember and desire what was lost; knowing, too, enough to realize that it cannot be retrieved.

In addition to women's separation at marriage, the differentiation of fetus/child from its mother at birth is seen as a quintessential pain of separation. Women who became mothers, as we might expect, spoke and sang of the difficulties they found in bearing and caring for their children. What is more intriguing about Tamang representations is that men also referred to women's maternal pains, and made reference to illustrate their own sufferings. One particularly elegant set of verses from a man's lament, for example, describes his birth and his mother's pain as a very explicit inauguration of his treatment of his own hardships.

A small larva,
 a week or month after the small larva was born,
 My Own Mother was not yet aware of it.
 [next verse incomprehensible]
 After six months that little larva was going to be
 born
 /in My Own Mother's body.
After nine months, it came out;
it was born from My Own Mother!
It emerged, its birthing time was after nine
 months.
As it emerged, during its birthing time,
 oh, My Own Mother,
 a 100-1000 thoughts came to My Own Mother's heart-and-
 mind!
 When those 100-1000 thoughts heated up
 /in My Own Mother's heart-and-mind,/br/>
 /she felt the pain of separation.
 Her heart-and-mind boiled and bubbled.
 Boiling and bubbling like that,
 /she was the Bubble-Bubble Queen!

Here and in many other more prosaic contexts Tamang men use birth imagery much in the way women do, to describe these particular pains at separation.

Gendered pain, unsexed songs

To explore the workings in Tamang speech and song of these images of painful separation as female, regardless of the sex of the speaker/singer, I want to present the final verses of a *bomsang* composed and sung by the senior village lama's sixthborn older brother. *Bomsang* are a category of Tamang song that I have called "personal laments": they are thought of as individual creations, describing a particular person's life and composed as that person contemplated his or her own death; they are supposed to make the listener cry. Although everyone recognized the special beauty of this *bomsang*, the themes, and even many of the refrains, could be heard in many such songs. Since *bomsang* are sung in large measure as meditations on the sorrows and impermanence of life, the pain of separation is a central theme. It is not the centrality of that theme that I want to explore here, but rather its precise imagery, its gender, and its place in locating sexed experience within human life experience as constructed by Tamang.³⁴

In his *bomsang* the sixthborn elder brother sings:

The reason my strength is no longer is because of/
/all this tripping and tumbling after jewelry.
 I suffered the unendurable pain of separation.
 It seems an unbearable burden.
 It seems I was born to unendurable suffering.
 Oh, My Own Mother!
 Please sit down and listen with your ears.³⁵
 Please sit down and listen with your heart-and-mind,
 oh, my sons and daughters!

³⁴ Critical portions are again underlined.

³⁵ Literally, "after ears, sit down."

Thus, drawing round our family circle
 /of mother-and-children,³⁶
 /please sit down and listen.
 My heart-and-mind has suffered
 /the pain of separation all along this long trail.
 Oh! My Own Mother!

In the time of my tenderly sprouting flesh and blood,³⁷
splitting from my brothers, we divided the estate.
I felt the pain of partition.
 I might have been born only to suffer
 /the greatest pains of separation.
 In the time of my birthing, it seems I suffered the pain/
 /of being orphaned from both above and below.³⁸
 In the time of my being cut off from both above and below,/
 /a great sorrow was born in my heart-and-mind.
 Did I come to rest in a conscious lifeform?

No matter what food is eaten, no matter what is drunk,/
/no matter the lifeform,
 all lifeforms that come to birth suffer the pain of death.
 All suffer the pain of decrepit bodies.
 No matter what is drunk, no matter what food is eaten,/
/no matter the clothing that is worn,
 it seems there will be the unendurably
 /hard burdensome pain of separation.
 When enduring such burdensome suffering, is human life
 /a hell of great pain and separation or not?
 When will my time for separating
 /from this lifeform be fulfilled?
 To die is a cruel cutting off; to live, still surviving,/

³⁶ Here *khōr khōr-ché nyhang mhémé* is potentially ambiguous. Two important contemporary Stupahill Tamang words—*mhémé* and *mémé*—are differentiated by only tone and a bit of breathiness, which my effort to write in Roman characters only partially (and perhaps incorrectly) captures. The first refers to a mother-and-her-children (as a family unit), and is often combined with *khōr* (“circle”) to describe these intimate uterine family circles. The latter, *mémé*, means “grandfather,” either in address, in reference, or in the common phrase *mémé-phépé*, which describes the extended patrilineage as a kin group and is more literally lineal than encompassing in its usual imagery.

³⁷ A common poetic reference, literally “flesh-tendrils blood-tendrils,” to the physical fleshy robustness of a human body in its youth.

³⁸ Including the prosaic “up the mountain and down the valleys,” that is, all alone, but also meaning to be cut off from both heaven and hell.

/can I ever cut off the great hardships
/of this lifeform?

Buddhist suffering

The imagery here is, first, indisputably Buddhist. Tamang practice what Holmberg has called an “amonastic” Buddhism, without the esoteric and institutional trappings of the high Tibetan orthodoxy (1989). Nevertheless, the idea that attachment is the root of all suffering is universally meaningful to Tamang. In songs like these, as in many other presentations, Tamang understand life as suffering, and suffering as originating in worldly attachment. The “pain of decrepit bodies” stems from the endless “tripping and tumbling after” bodily wants like food, drink, clothing, and jewels. The pain of social bodies arises in personal attachments—all children’s early-lost attachment to their mother, orphans’ pain at being “left behind,” brothers’ pain when the joint household breaks up.

The pain a person feels at being separated from these things in life is seen as specific evidence of a more general rule: they presage imaginings of a terminal loss of them all in death. And yet in these imaginings the great irony of Tamang death is that it, too, gives rise to other rebirths; this death is not an ending, but the greatest in a many-life-long string—the proper image is, of course, of cycles—of attachments and losses.

The ultimate object is necessarily to obtain release from all attachments, including those that constitute the pain of death. Few, even those most proximately contemplating their own deaths in poetic *bomsang*, can accomplish this. For the longer run of humanity, these pains of separation are not a meditation on impermanence, but a continuing hurt. The language of *gyurba* and *warba* highlights the pain not of the dying but of the surviving. Thus, the language in which women lament the loss of their natal homes is virtually identical to that in which either women or men would sing or speak about becoming orphaned.

The pain of being left behind

To be orphaned is spoken of as an extremely poignant “pain of separation.” In the life history accounts with which I have been working, many people spoke of themselves being orphaned; many worried about leaving orphaned children behind. Indeed, the theme was so recurrent that

village friends, discussing the project with me, suggested it be called “A Tale of Orphans.” “The orphaned bird hears the crying of the world,” sang one man’s *bomsang*, “but is anyone aware when I, an orphan, too, cry?”

Of these tales, Mlangdzom’s is the most relentless: her mother died when she was an infant, so she was taken in fosterage by her father’s sister; that aunt also died, but by then her father had remarried. Although her “younger mother” (her father’s new wife) tried to be kind to her, the family’s poverty sent Mlangdzom out into indentured service in the houses of their many creditors. At fourteen, she was married into one of those houses, and there, where she had already demonstrated her energy as a worker, she bore three sons, one of whom died, before her husband married another woman more to his liking. She tells how she nearly died as a child for want of parental care, how she was not able to accumulate any property of her own, how her husband and his family are contemptuous of her and call her “a wife without even the smallest little chick,” how she has no other place to go, and, hence how “I’ll work, and after doing my work, I’ll eat. I’ll manage.”

It is typical of the complex web of lives and stories found in this community that Mlangdzom’s “younger mother” or stepmother was Tschirto’s widowed mother, who, remarrying, became Mlangdzom’s stepmother. Tschirto’s father died when Tschirto—the youngest—was about six. Her mother, Tikiri, struggled to keep her family of seven children going, but eventually she remarried and moved to live with Mlangdzom’s widowed father when Tschirto was nine or ten. Thus, the arrival of a mother for Mlangdzom meant the loss of a mother to Tschirto, who lamented, “‘Even so, just for a moment, let me live with Mother.’ I’d say to myself, ‘I’ll never know Mother’s warmth; I’ll never get to taste her.’ I was left behind when I was still so little.” Mlangdzom’s words were blunter, but Tschirto’s would amply apply to them both:

I’m a poor orphan, a ragged orphan. Others find themselves with fathers and mothers until they are old men and women. Myself, this time, I didn’t get that. Just like that, everyone keeps on being contemptuous. Even when someone else speaks with contempt, it wouldn’t do for me to leave. Whether in hardship or whether in comfort, each person has to pass the time of their own life.

Tikiri’s own words bring the tales of her two daughters full circle, since she also described herself as orphaned. Although her parents died only after she was grown, her first marriage had been in poverty and ended

in widowhood. She laments, first, the loss of her parents and the support they might have provided her:

And then, well, where was I to go, you know? There was no trail going to my own fathers' birthhome.³⁹ If I said to myself, "Go to your own fathers' birthhome," I had no father, no mother. Crying like that, I suffered, Daughter.⁴⁰ No matter where I went.

And then she described the pain of separation from her children:

All those children were way down there; their mother⁴¹ was here, and the children were still down there. After that happened, I cried. I'd think about those children and I'd cry. I'd say, "I've begun to forget," and then I'd remember those children again, and as soon as the memory would arise, I couldn't even eat. I couldn't work. I lived like that: I'd cry; I'd stay; I'd cry; I'd stay on.

Again, Tamang talk and song seem somewhat distinctive in the facility with which men identify with these womans' pains. Men, of course, could be orphaned themselves, and undoubtedly were in roughly the same numbers that women were. Boys too are left behind by their mothers' remarriages, just as their sisters are. They also lament their plight; they also lament it using the language and the vantage of not only boy-orphans, but sundered mothers as well, as can be heard in this fragment of a man's *bomsang*:

The reason⁴² my orphan's eyes cannot see is because of/
/my unendurable burden of greatest sorrow
/arising from the pain of separation
My heart-and-mind imagines 100-1000 thoughts:
it seems the pain of separation came
/from uphill and from down below.
Why was I born in this my own lifeform?
Why, oh, My Own Mother, for what reason was I born/
/in this unbearably suffering sundered lifeform?

³⁹ Meaning that there was no easy way for her to go and live there after her parents died.

⁴⁰ Referring to the author.

⁴¹ Herself.

⁴² Literally, the "trail by which . . ."

The pain of separation and memory

There are many images of the “pain of separation” in Tamang talk and song: a woman’s separation from her parents’ house at marriage; a child’s separation from parents at death, divorce, or remarriage; or so much “tripping and tumbling” after worldly desires. All evoke a clear, if complex, chain of reflections on the nature of human existence, both women’s and men’s, and especially about the place of memory, desire, and worldly attachment. In Tamang narrative and song, those things for which one might feel the pain of separation when they are gone are *mhemba*, or “recalled to mind with desire,” that is, simultaneously to “want,” “need,” and have something “come to mind.” Foremost among these remembered desires are sensory pleasures: food; clothing; parents’, friends’, and lovers’ affection; and ultimately the remembered warmth of early childhood security.

Underlying the opposing textures of a woman’s two houses, as women represent them, is the remembered warmth of their original home. Each time a verbal stone is cast against the house into which they were married, they simultaneously savor and “remember/desire” their first home. “In the hearts-and-minds of two small children” (as in the *Sai Kholā* cited above), the memory of togetherness, of house pillars standing together, is undoubtedly stronger than the factual nature of past events and rivalries. The “taste” of a mother (in Tschirto’s phrase) clearly becomes sweeter as time passes. Indeed, it is probably the basis for one of the commonest of Tamang food-images in love songs, that of “milk-sweet love.” The Tamang song expression “love sweet love” uses a term for “sweetness” that is properly only applied to milk, the sweetest of which is mother’s milk. These images of remembered love and milk-sweet love recur in one of my favorite Tamang songs, “The popcorn song”:⁴³

Popcorn, popped, oh! Hey-ho!⁴⁴
Memories linger in my mind
of the affection we two shared;

⁴³ Again I am including the entire song here but have highlighted only the most pertinent verses.

⁴⁴ When people go off to festivals or on pilgrimage, they must take food with them. Popped corn is a particularly popular snackfood. Although popcorn is also eaten as a snack in more mundane contexts, like village workparties, it is associated in the imagery of this song with the more festive courtship songfests.

Echoes ring here in my ears
of the affection we two shared.
 Love happily chosen is sweet
 like wild red-vine berries;
 Love courteously given is gentle
 like Acacia-tree seeds.⁴⁵
 The echoes ring here in my ears.
 Oh! my very own love!
 Popcorn, popping, eating! Hey-ho!

Let the memories stay in our minds
of the affection we two shared!
Let the echoes ring in our ears
of the affection we two shared!
Remember! Listen!
 Let's enjoy what our minds would recall.
 Beer fills the drinking bowl
 the way love is gathered in our minds and hearts.
 Lo! Hey-ho! Let's make love,
 the way love is gathered by our hearts and minds.
 Beer fills the drinking bowl
 the way love is gathered in our minds and hearts.

We made love where none had been made before;
 we found love where none had been found before.
 Where will I find such a love again?
 Where will I find such kindness again?
 The mustard field on the hillside is barren,⁴⁶
 But I won't relinquish even a handful of our bygone love.
Love once made can't depart just like this;
love once found can't be lost just like this.
Let us remember!
 We, too, let us enjoy our love!

Just as my father spoke, I, too, will speak out;
 just as my mother spoke, I, too, will speak out.
 Just as my father went roving, I, too, will roam;
 just as my mother went roving, I, too, will roam.
 Just as the machete is girded on at the waistband,

⁴⁵ This metaphor is somewhat unclear. Perhaps the song is referring to the reported Tibetan women's practice of making their faces up with a powder made from the Acacia tree when going courting, but this is not, to my knowledge, Tamang practice.

⁴⁶ Metaphor uncertain.

Just as a father enjoys his sons and daughters,
 in our hearts-and-minds, we will seem to have enjoyed!⁴⁷
Let the memories linger on! milk-sweet love!
Let the echoes ring on! milk-sweet love!

In a literal sense, milk may be offered in place of beer or liquor if the latter are not available or if people have had enough alcohol to drink already (or if they do not drink alcohol). But it is surely not just the literal substitutability of milk for beer that is evoked here. One site of the earliest Tamang memories of love is at the mother's breast and in the *mhémé khor*, the "circle of a mother and her child(ren)." This circle, this mother-and-child unit, is purely affectionate: it has no jural basis for specific authority in Tamang society; yet it is, like the "uterine family" about which Margery Wolf (1972) has written, a zone of intense emotion and identification.

People use the idea of the *mhémé* conversationally to tell, for example, that a particular woman-and-her-child have gone to such-and-such a place in constructions like: [name of mother]-*mhémé* [name of place] *yarji*; [named] *mhémé* went to [named place]. It is from the mother, and these *mhémé*-units, that the Tamang idea of a maternal side to one's background, a *nghyé gyam* or "milk trail," emerges and is marked in various important rituals, especially those of death.⁴⁸ "Milk-sweet love," then, is first the love between mother and child in intimate family units.

"Milk-sweet love," however, is also bittersweet; it is inevitably left behind. Just as these Tamang women's narratives and songs worry about whether their mothers might have "forgotten" them, courtship songs fear abandonment by lovers. The sorrow of not being allowed to drink one's mother's milk stands as a powerful image of total abandonment. Like Tschirto's grievance that she never got to "taste" her mother, the "Calf's Lament" is a song about being deprived a primal opportunity for this maternal love:

La-ha-i-lo!
 Incenses please and suit the mountain-gods.

⁴⁷ A line omitted from the original recorded version was later added by assistants and other listeners as we worked on translations/meanings, to wit: "just as a mother enjoys her sons and daughters, in our hearts and minds, we will seem to have enjoyed!"

⁴⁸ *Mhémé* and the *nghyé gyam* are specifically contrasted with *phépé* ("father-and-children") and *pot gyam* or *ruigyam* ("bone trail").

Milk pleases and suits the serpent-gods.⁴⁹
 You eat cheese and even golden butter,
 but you don't give even a little bit to me.
When you didn't give me any milk,
tears rolled down from my eyes.
 After tears rolled down from my eyes,
 downstream a river came into being.

In that song, as Phurko interpreted it for me, a selfish herder drank up all a calf's mother's milk, so that, (in the calf's voice) "when you didn't give me any milk, tears rolled down from my eyes." So many tears, in fact, that the Marsyandi ("Butter Churn") river came into being. According to Phurko,

He [the herder] drank the milk in one gulp. It's said he'd drink the milk in one gulp; it's said he wouldn't give the poor calf even the tiniest little bit. When that happened, the calf sang this song that way, they say. It was someone else's mother's milk, though, wasn't it!? He should have given it at least a little bit.⁵⁰ Doesn't it have to eat, too? After all, it was someone else's mother's milk! A little . . . it has to eat just a little bit, doesn't it? But he would drink every last bit, he would! That's what they say he'd do. So when he was doing like that, just after the calf sang its song, the Marsyandi River sprang up, in the beginning then, in the time of the gods, from the calf's tears, they say.

Singing gender in the balance

Comparing the use of same- and cross-sex imagery in women's and men's everyday speech and song compositions invites us not only to consider how the sexes construct and engender their worlds, but also to ponder the relation between verbal genres and the negotiation of realities.

Whereas the prose of the life history materials with which I have been working arises in specific interpersonal exchanges that are presumptively intimate and dialogic, Tamang song is public and shared in a very different way. The former can only be produced for and circulated among familiars, an individual discourse on events and people largely

⁴⁹ Incense is the proper offering for ("pleases and suits") the category of divinity known as *lha* ("gods"); milk is appropriate to the divinities of the lakes and underground sources of water, the *lu*, who are often glossed with reference to Hindu *naga* or serpent-divinities.

⁵⁰ In the usual herding practice, half the milk goes to the calf and half to the herder.

known to the hearers; it provides a personalized perspective, interpretation, and emphasis. The latter can be produced—and here the word “performed” becomes more appropriate—for a larger public; it circulates, affirms, and creates shared images. Although each sweeps into the other, life stories are traced at the personal end of the Tamang oral pendulum, songs at the cultural. In the tellings reproduced here, both forms were self-consciously and imaginatively deployed: but the dialogic life tales were generated in and of the personal moment; the momentum of song carries its signification farther and beyond the individual.

Songs, in this context, provide a way for tellers to situate their personally garnered words in a more palatial symbolic edifice. Invoking songs in the *sotto voce* of personal storytelling embeds self in culture, or at least a contingently produced self in a partially represented cultural frame. It also, then, provides a means for us, as reader-hearers, to understand how person and culture might be linked—a venerable objective in life history work. In particular, it lets us look at some special questions about woman-persons and cultural constructions.

Several logical possibilities offer themselves, depending upon the relations of sex, authorship, and gender. Women (as persons) might also share distinctively female cultural constructions, arising within and informing their world as they know it and creating both separate stories and songs.⁵¹ Under such circumstances, we would expect people who were men to experience, interpret, and represent a different male reality—parallel, opposed, ascendant, or impoverished. Such divergently engendered cultures would presumably coincide with sharply sexually dichotomous societies. Under some circumstances, as the cultural presentation of one sex or the other became more widely ramifying—as it resonated with, say, nationalist, militarist, colonial, or international forces—the other might well become submerged; expressions of female culture would then, like Gold’s Rajasthani women’s songs (1997) or Trawick’s work on Tamil women’s song (1986), sound discordant with a dominant public culture that is male in origin and privilege.

Neither of these appears to be the case among Tamang. Tamang women and men certainly do not represent the world identically, nor do they live in it in the same ways. Indeed, the deep and definite signs of their different perspectives constitute the symbols of Tamang gender. The future may well bring increased Hindu caste hegemony into the region and, along with it, increasingly segregated and hierarchical gender. But for the

⁵¹ Such as appear to be the case in Ardener’s now-classic *liengu* spirits (1972) and some of Harrison’s more recent Quechua songs (1989).

moment of these stories and songs, the different personal vistas of men and women did not culminate in noncommunicable (sub)cultures.

Instead, Tamang women and men are quintessentially *ngyen brelba*—“marriageable kin exchanging”⁵²—not just because they become husband and wife, but more importantly because they are both members of households, lineages, and localities that exchange in cross-cousin marriage. Cross-cousin marriage for Tamang means that brothers and sisters become parents-in-law to each other’s children, children who find spouses “along the trail” of one parent or the other. The maleness of men and women comes from their identification as sons and daughters of a patriline and locale, with the “bone trail” of their fathers along which there can be none but incestuous traffic in marriage. Femaleness is culturally possible for both women and men when they identify with the “milk trail” of their mothers, mothers’ brothers, and all those with whom marriage-partners can be exchanged.

Likewise, songs are not the provenance of one sex or the other. Both women and men were noted song specialists in Stupahill.⁵³ Some songs were circumscribed by ritual constraints, such as the song for beer and fertility (March 1987), but to my knowledge none were thought of as belonging to women or to men alone. None were known, attributed to, or could be sung by only one sex, even though many were sung, quite literally, between the sexes in the exuberant song exchanges of Tamang festivals and courtship. But, even in these most imaginatively erotic songs, the images, the point of view, and the cultural frame they provided was explicitly accessible to both sexes. Sometimes the symmetry was striking, as in the lines from the dancing song cited above:

Just as my father spoke, I, too, will speak out;

⁵² Literally *ngyen*, “marriage(able)-partners,” “a married couple,” “affinal kin,” and *brelba*, “to exchange with.” Note some peculiar links to modern Tibetan, especially its orthography: the Tibetan *gnyen*, pronounced as in Tamang, is given (Goldstein 1984:457) as “relative, kinsman; friend” and *brelba* also translates (804) as “to have connections/relations/links, to associate with” but is pronounced (with the retroflex “T”) as “Teba.” In the absence of many sources on contemporary Tamang, I sometimes found myself curiously perusing Tibetan dictionaries and was repeatedly startled to find conventional Tibetan orthography a more accurate representation of Tamang than Tibetan pronunciation.

⁵³ With the possible exception of the *gurpa*, singer-chanters in the lamaic textual tradition, who came to Stupahill from a nearby community when their expertise was required.

just as my mother spoke, I, too, will speak out.
 Just as my father went roving, I, too, will roam;
 just as my mother went roving, I, too, will roam.
 Just as the machete is girded on at the waistband,
 just as a father enjoys his sons and daughters,
 in our hearts and minds, we will seem to have enjoyed!⁵⁴
 Let the memories linger on! milk-sweet love!
 Let the echoes ring on! milk-sweet love!

Even songs about birth, orphanhood, mother-love, and child-loss were cast in terms readily invoked by both sexes—of calves and herders, budding larvae, and orphaned birds. Indeed, the idea that men and women should work to understand one another was at times the very theme of song itself, as in the lines from Setar's *bomsang*:

If a beloved man is on one side of the river,
 /hill, or mountain,
 and if a woman is on the other,
 their affection, their love, is called
 /great, ancient, and most senior, if,
 after tucking flowers in their hair,
each comes halfway.

The inevitable course of human life, as Tamang know it, means that everyone will lose the emotional and interpersonal unity they desire-remember of their earliest days. Some will lose this integral sense of harmonious well-being by being orphaned; more, by being left behind with a mother's remarriage; most, eventually, by surviving their parents' deaths. These are individually specific memory-desires; marriage is the more conceptually ubiquitous experience. Although marriage is experienced as rupture only by women, and the suffering women endure is imaginatively a distinctive female pain, the idea of their pain of separation is recognizable by both men and women.

The overriding theoretical conclusions of these Tamang images are essential, but simple: sex is not gender, and all expressions of difference are not conflictual. As sexed individuals engaged in securing their worlds, women and men may contest each other's authority and envy each other's comforts. In contemporary Nepal, Tamang authorities are increasingly men, but their authority is precarious and women's counter-arguments continue to be both vociferous and effective. But the collective

⁵⁴ Again, assistants and later listeners added a line here because they felt it had been omitted in the original singing: (to wit) "just as a mother enjoys her sons and daughters...."

constructions of dialogue and song work to negotiate shared spaces. Gender, in these constructions, takes statements about sex-specific experience as much to call to mind the shared human embeddedness in a cycle of painful rebirths as to dispute whose pain is greater, women's or men's.

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