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# **Tibetan Fraternal Polyandry: A Review of its Advantages and Breakdown**

*Jeff Willett*

"Polyandry is primarily selected not for bread and butter motives - fear of starvation in a difficult environment - but rather primarily for the Tibetan equivalent of oysters, champagne, and social esteem." Melvyn C. Goldstein (1978).

The fraternal polyandry marriage relationship of Tibet is widely considered to be a means of preventing the division of a family's resources among its male heirs. As a family resource preservation strategy, Tibetan polyandry accomplishes the same goal of the European stem family system, but in a very different way. Researchers have suggested that polyandry developed in Tibet, because it provides a household with enough male laborers to fully exploit the marginal agricultural lands in the Himalayas, that it serves as a means of population control, or that it serves as a way of reducing tax obligations to feudal Tibetan lords. A more convincing explanation why Tibetan polyandry is practiced is provided by Nancy E. Levine. She claims that polyandry provides a household with a large labor force, enabling the family to pursue simultaneous and extensive involvement in the three different sectors of the Tibetan economy: agriculture, herding, and trading (1988). Since Tibetan polyandry provides such important economic advantages to households, one can assume that the reasons for the dissolution of polyandrous marriages are largely for individual interests. Levine (1981) and Melvyn C. Goldstein (1981) find that the breakup of polyandrous marriages is usually

caused by the younger brothers of the household, because of unhappiness with their spouse, their lower reproductive success than older brothers, a desire for personal autonomy, and difficulty in maintaining a large household. Goldstein (1981) also finds that brothers are more likely to leave polyandrous marriages when unexpected economic opportunities arise.

## **Tibetan Fraternal Polyandry**

Fraternal polyandry is the preferred form of marriage among the culturally Tibetan villages where Levine and Goldstein based their studies. The Tibetan's own explanations for the practice of polyandry are materialistic. They claim that a strategy of fraternal polyandry preserves the productive resources of their family units across generations (Goldstein 1978). Throughout pre-Chinese occupied Tibet, polyandry was considered the preferred form of marriage among agricultural upper class peasants, landholding aristocrats, and priest households (Levine 1988:158). The practice of polyandry is so common that in the village of Nyinba, landholding households with two or more sons enter into a polyandrous marriage 100 percent of the time (Levine 1988:143). Only Nyinba's landless former slaves avoid polyandry when there are two or more brothers.

In a polyandrous family, the eldest brother is the dominant authority member. The eldest brother is responsible for finding a wife and for making arrangements for bride-price and the wedding ceremony. Control of the family estate is passed from the

former household head to the eldest son soon after the marriage. As the head of the household, the eldest brother is considered the final authority in all family decision making (Levine 1988:115). He determines the allocation of cash, makes decisions about involvement in agriculture, herding and trading, and serves as the family representative in village political gatherings.

Upon marriage, all of the eldest brother's younger brothers (including possible unborn brothers) become co-husbands to the wife. Tibetan society stresses sexual access and equity for all of the co-husbands once they reach maturity (Levine 1988:151). The eldest brother generally concedes much of his sexual access to the wife once his younger brothers mature. Sexual preference is also generally shown for brothers who have been away from the village on trading trips or who have taken the herds to distant pasturage when they return to the household (Levine 1988:164).

In Tibetan polyandry, it is important for both the wife and the co-husbands to participate in sexual relationships. Wives who deny sexual access to their husbands are considered troublemakers, threatening the stability of the polyandrous union. Husbands who refuse to enter into or maintain sexual relations with their wives have renounced potential marriage claims (Levine 1988:151).

In addition, brothers in polyandrous marriages are expected to cooperate in household activities to maximize its economic, social, and political standing. Brothers often specialize in one of the three major aspects of Tibetan economy: agriculture, herding, and long distance trade. The co-husbands are also responsible for cooperating with child care and household maintenance activities. In short, solidarity among the brothers is at the core of Tibetan kinship

ideals (Levine 1988:159). A strong undivided household not only leads to benefits for the family, it also leads to stronger village viability. Stronger households are able to meet collective obligations such as payment of food during public rituals, occasional communal labor, better defense of infringement on their lands, and government obligations (Levine 1988:184).

Tibetan polyandry leads to more powerful households by preventing multiple heirs from dividing family resources. All male offspring of the polyandrous union replicate the household structure of their parents instead of each brother draining off estate resources through monogamous marriages. Poor soil fertility, lack of irrigation waters, and slope conditions are severe constraints to agricultural production in the Himalayas (Berreman 1978). The Tibetan villages studied by Levine and Goldstein have opened up all possible lands to agricultural production. Dividing a household's limited agricultural lands among male heirs would quickly lead to non-viable plot sizes and associated losses in economic and social status (Goldstein 1976).

Multiple male heirs would also split up family herds, making an individual family more vulnerable to herd depopulation through disease, drought, and theft. Luxury items such as jewelry, furniture, saddles, etc. are also held intact in polyandrous marriages. Stores of these items represent a household's savings account which can be sold during difficult economic times.

### **Polyandry and the Stem Family**

Researchers have shown how Tibetan polyandry accomplished similar goals to the stem family system of Europe and Japan (Goldstein 1978, Levine 1988). The prevention of dividing a family's resources among

male heirs was also the goal of pre-modern European societies. The stem family strategy developed in European societies had much different mechanisms for accomplishing this goal than the Tibetan strategy of fraternal polyandry. The system kept an estate's resources intact by allowing only one male child per generation to marry (Levine 1988:132). In the stem family system, primogeniture or ultimogeniture was practiced to pass the family estate to only one male offspring. Levine outlines the four components of the stem family system: 1) Only one person assumes headship of the estate, 2) Non-successors must seek their living elsewhere, 3) Impartible inheritance maintains the estate; and 4) The estate continues over generations. Tibetan polyandry maintains the estate with impartible inheritance and helps ensure that the estate survives over generations, but it allows all male offspring to share in the economic opportunities of the household.

Robert Netting provides an excellent example of the stem family system in his study of Torbel, a Swiss mountain community (Netting 1981). Torbel faces many of the ecological constraints faced by the Tibetan communities studied by Levine and Goldstein. Lack of fertile soils and irrigation, high slopes, and rocky soils limited the amount of land which could be converted to agricultural production. These limitations also prevented potential heirs from converting "virgin" lands to agricultural production to facilitate the creation of new households.

In Torbel, primogeniture gave control of the family estate to the eldest son. Unlike the Tibetan system where the eldest son gained control of the estate upon marriage, residents of Torbel were forced to wait as the father gradually gave up control of the family estate. The father may not give up total control of the estate until old age made

him unable to manage it effectively. This led to lengthy delays to marriage as older sons had to wait until they controlled enough of the estate to afford a family of their own.

Younger brothers and sisters had even more troubles. Netting (1981) found high levels of bachelorhood and spinsters in the community, many of whom were allowed to remain on the family estate as laborers. The brothers helped out with agricultural activities while their sisters often maintained the household and cared for elderly parents. It was very difficult for younger brothers to make a living on their own within the community, and in turn, many left the village to try and find their fortunes elsewhere.

#### **Explanations for Tibetan Polyandry**

Many researchers have tried to determine why Tibetans adopted polyandry, with its possible problems of sexual jealousies among co-husbands and reduced male fertility, rather than the stem family system of European communities like Torbel. These researchers have suggested that the marginal agricultural lands of the Himalayas required a number of male laborers to provide an adequate subsistence base for a household, and without this large labor force household members would be reduced to "beggary". The benefits of polyandry as a means of population control and a way to ease the tax burdens of landholding households have also been proposed. However, none of these explanations are sufficiently supported by the Tibetan communities in which Levine and Goldstein conducted their research.

Jesuit Ippolito Desideri, who lived in Lhasa in the early eighteenth century, summed up early opinions on the reason for Tibetan polyandry:

**"One reason for this most odious custom is the sterility of the soil, and the small amount of land that can be cultivated**

owing to the lack of water. The crops may suffice if the brothers all live together, but if they form separate families they would be reduced to beggary." (DeFilippi 1937, cited in Goldstein 1978)

Gerald D. Berreman presents information to support this argument (1978). Berreman claims that polyandry is a strategy which maximizes the ratio of people to resources. Polyandry maximizes the adult labor force in order to fully utilize or expand agricultural lands. Berreman contends that this large labor force is required in the Himalayas where conditions make agricultural production very difficult.

Berreman's argument does not fit Tibetan society where women represent the majority of agricultural labor. Levine notes that males are responsible for labor intensive agricultural activities such as plowing, planting, building and maintaining terrace walls and irrigation systems, and threshing (Levine 1978:207). Women, on the other hand, perform tasks which are much more time consuming, such as clearing fields of stones and brush, weeding, applying compost, and processing foods. As an example, a field which can be planted in one day requires from five to sixteen days of weeding. The former slaves which were kept by Nyinban households were used to help with agricultural and domestic activities a single wife couldn't keep up with. With these facts in mind, polygyny would appear to be a better strategy than polyandry if the goal is to maximize agricultural labor in Tibetan societies.

Goldstein also disagrees with the "beggary" argument. Younger brothers who split from polyandrous families and receive little or no arable lands are able to find other ways to make a living and are not reduced to beggary (Goldstein 1978). Labor shortages in Tibet provided an economic alternative to agriculture, although it was not as

lucrative as remaining within the polyandrous household. Levine's study of Nyinba shows that many families can utilize additional laborers as shepherds or extra hands during peak agricultural periods. Throughout history, the landless populations of Tibet have supported themselves through wage labor, craft making, and servitude (Goldstein 1978). Brothers leaving polyandrous marriages could have pursued any of these activities.

While there may be economic opportunities for brothers who partition from polyandrous marriages at the individual level, the practice of polyandry protects interests at the group level. Polyandry has been shown to be an effective mechanism for population control within Tibetan communities (Goldstein 1981, Levine 1988, Crook and Crook 1988). Goldstein has shown that a shift to monogamy would increase the population of one Tibetan community by sixteen percent. This increase would create major stresses on the region's ability to support the population (Goldstein 1976). The consequent stresses of population growth may be enough to reduce the majority of the community to poverty conditions. Levine supports this by showing that residents of Nyinba understand the population control benefits of polyandry (Levine 1988). Residents of the community discourage the breakup of polyandrous marriages, because of the strain that monogamous marriage and its associated increase in population puts on the community as a whole.

Goldstein has also argued that the development of polyandry was largely the result of tax responsibilities to feudal lords (cited in Pasternak, Ember and Ember 1997). Among the landholding serfs, feudal obligations were imposed on households rather than individuals. Through polyandry, a family would be able to pool its labor and economic resources to satisfy these

obligations. If the family were to break apart into several smaller units, each would have to satisfy the same obligations as before with fewer resources. Levine says that rather than being fooled by this "tax dodging" strategy, the Tibetan authorities encouraged polyandry among the landholding estates as a way of maximizing the household's economic efficiency (Levine 1988). This in turn led to greater stability throughout Tibet and more revenue for the government.

Although this argument may be the reason households adopted polyandry in the past, it does not explain why it continues. The feudal system ended well before the Chinese occupation of Tibet in the 1950's, yet families continued to practice polyandry. Levine even found that former slaves who never practiced polyandry in the past are beginning to adopt it today (Levine 1988).

### **Tibetan Polyandry and Economic Specialization**

Nancy Levine presents the most convincing explanation for the development of fraternal polyandry and its continued practice in contemporary Tibetan society: the ability of polyandrous households to maximize productivity from the three major aspects of the Tibetan economy (Levine 1988). The Tibetan alpine economy is made up of agriculture, long distance trading, and herding (in that order of importance). Unlike the stem family system of Europe in which agriculture was the dominant economic activity of the stem households, Tibetans can pursue one of three economic strategies. In Netting's study of Torbel, families devoted almost all of their labor resources toward agricultural production (Netting 1981). Families only kept two or three cows to provide dairy products, rather than accumulating large herds. Few animals required little labor from the husband, wife or children. Long

distance trading seems to have been completely absent from the Torbel economy.

Nancy Levine suggests that polyandry is the most effective way for a household to juggle agriculture, herding, and trade, because it provides a household with a large labor force able to pursue simultaneous and extensive involvement in the different economic sectors (Levine 1988:82). In polyandrous marriages, brothers are able to specialize in one of the three economic aspects. This specialization is encouraged and leads to greater returns for the household (Levine 1988:237). Larger polyandrous households also have greater flexibility which can protect them during periods of low return in one of the three areas. As an example, Levine describes how many polyandrous households were able to invest more resources in long distance trade during periods of declining agricultural yields in the early eighties. Brothers, rather than hired laborers, are the only individuals who can be entrusted with estate resources. This trust is especially important in long distance trade where men take a great deal of the household's resources and are away from the community for much of the year. It is interesting to note that Nyinban society does not allow non-fraternal polyandry, which may be the result of the inefficiencies and mistrust of these relationships.

In the Tibetan region, each major component of the economy offers a viable source of income, but agriculture is the central fixture of Tibetan life both economically and symbolically (Levine 1988). An estate's first priority is to productively utilize its agricultural lands to satisfy subsistence needs. As mentioned earlier, women supply the majority of agricultural labor throughout much of the year. Men, however, are responsible for labor intensive activities during peak periods of the agricultural cycle. Male labor is required from

March, when the fields are prepared for the year's first millet crops, to December, when barley is sown. During this time men are responsible for sowing all of the family's crops, for construction of walls and irrigation canals, and for irrigating the fields.

Like the Swiss community of Torbel, Tibetans follow a strategy which utilizes the micro-niches of alpine agriculture. An estate's agricultural plots are generally widely dispersed, often miles from the house, in order to capitalize on variations of sunlight, rainfall, and soils. These variations permit a wider variety of crops to be grown and helps reduce the risk of crop failures due to climatic shocks. Because of limitations of soil quality, slope, etc., the plots are rarely larger than one quarter of an acre. This leads to problems of dis-economies of scale (Levine 1988:211). The small, widely dispersed plots lead to a great deal of travel time each day for both men and women who need to work in several fields. It also means that a man may spend most of one month traveling to each small plot of land to plant that season's crop. This activity could be finished in a couple of days if the plots were consolidated.

A household's dietary success is often related to how well it can fully exploit each small plot of land. Nyinban households which understand the diversity of the micro-niches are able to grow vegetables such as turnips, potatoes, peas, cucumbers, pumpkin, and squash (Levine 1988:214). These households have a wider diversity in diet, and probably exhibit better health. Small amounts of soybeans, amaranth, lentils, and kidney beans are also produced by the more adept agriculturists and are used primarily for trading. Households which lack this agricultural finesse are limited to producing the staple crops of buckwheat, barley, millet and radishes.

In contrast to agriculture, herding

is the least desirable aspect of the Tibetan economy. Wealthy families often hire men to maintain their herds or give the task to an otherwise "unproductive" brother (Levine 1988:226). Owning herds provides several resources for Tibetan households: manure, butter, milk, meat, and pack animals for long distance trading. Despite its benefits, the risk of herding makes it less attractive than agricultural production. Residents of Limi told Melvyn Goldstein "land doesn't die the way animals do" (1978).

Males are responsible for the majority of animal husbandry activities, other than the preparation and application of manure to the fields. Levine stresses the importance Nyinba agriculturists place on applying manure to fields. This strategy helps replenish nutrients of double cropped and marginal soils. Levine says that Nyinban households which cannot afford herds of their own collect manure left on the roads. In order to gain access to as much manure as possible, wealthy families without labor to spare for herding hire men to take care of their herds.

Animal husbandry also provides a very important component of Tibetan diet and culture - butter. Butter is often required for many civil and religious celebrations, especially weddings. The average yak produces eight kilograms of butter each summer. Nyinban households keep around two kilograms for their personal consumption and use the rest as a trading commodity. The widespread lack of butter in other parts of Tibet and Nepal make it one of the most profitable trade goods for households. Obviously, the more livestock a household has the more butter is available for trade.

Households which are able to maintain larger herds have more access to both milk and meat, and have greater diversity in diet. Milk and meat consumption is highest during the

autumn and winter. In the autumn, traders return with sheep obtained in Tibet and several are usually slaughtered for celebrations. In the winter months, pasture lands are scarce and cattle are kept near the village and fed hay. During this time it is much easier to provide a household with milk.

Herding also provides pack animals for the last aspect of Tibetan economy, long distance trading. Long distance trade appears to have figured in the Tibetan-Nepalese economy for centuries (Levine 1988:215). It serves as the only way for relatively isolated and environmentally restricted Himalayan communities to gain access to a wide variety of resources. Although trading can be the most lucrative aspect of the economy, it is almost necessarily the last avenue pursued. Households must first focus on agriculture and then build up a sizable number of available pack animals before being able to enter into trading. Since the second or third brother can engage in long distance trading, it is a luxury that polyandry and its co-resident male laborers make attainable.

Trading is virtually a year round occupation which is performed exclusively by males. In Nyinba, the trading season begins in June when men travel into Tibet and acquire salt with the promise that it will be paid for with grain after the harvest. Until November, the traders remain near the Humla valley where they trade salt and other goods such as cattle, butter, and wool. In December, the traders generally return to Nyinba with provisions for weddings before heading south for the winter salt trade. The winter journey takes the traders across Nepal to the border of India where they trade salt for rice. Travel is slow as the traders take advantage of available grazing lands during the journey. Finally, in May the men return from the south with rice to provision another series of weddings and celebrations.

After a month of rest, the trading season begins again.

Trading, as opposed to agriculture and herding, directly benefits from each additional labor input. The more pack animals a household can load with trade goods the greater their returns can be. Similarly, the more villages a trading group can reach the greater the returns. Additional males help control larger herd sizes and allow the trading group to split up to reach different communities. While there is a clear relationship between the number of traders and profits, success in trading also depends largely on the skills and interests of the individual men (Levine 1988:222).

Participation in trading allows households to achieve what Goldstein (1978) describes as the "Tibetan equivalent of oysters, champagne, and social esteem." Successful traders bring home tremendous amounts of food which improve their diet and can be used to sponsor lavish feasts. On the trade routes, wealthy households are able to purchase high status jewelry, manufactured goods, and clothing items. Households which don't engage in trade suffer from diminished social status. These estates cannot sponsor feasts and must borrow or buy rice for weddings and funerals. Households with similar landholdings and agricultural production will have very different economic standings if one engages in trade and the other does not (Levine 1988:223).

Long distance trade readily accommodates changes in household size. Households may enter and leave trading from generation to generation depending on the availability of male labor (Levine 1988:224). In this way, trading is ideally suited to a polyandrous household system. It is easy to sell off excess animals when male labor is lacking and purchase them when more males are available. Land, on the other hand, is almost never bought and sold



making agricultural expansion nearly impossible.

Trade is also very adaptable to changing economic conditions. After the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Nyinba traders were unable to cross the border to trade for the salt necessary for the rice trade in the south. During this period of reduced trading opportunities, households focused more heavily on agricultural production and animal husbandry. When trade in Tibet was made possible again, households quickly reorganized to accommodate the salt-grain trade. The opposite occurred in the early 1980's when a series of bad harvests devastated agricultural production and households had a greater reliance on long distance trade for food needs.

The interrelationships between the three aspects of the Tibetan economy suggest why polyandry is the favored form of household organization. With three or more brothers, polyandrous households are able to specialize in each of the three economic sectors and pool their resources for the benefit of the estate. In alpine agriculture, with its microniche environments, this specialization is critical. Households which are able to fully utilize their plots to grow trade goods such as lentils and soybeans are contributing to an increase in overall socio-economic status. Having a full time animal husbandry specialist is also important. A specialist maximizes the number and quality of livestock. As a result, a household will have more butter and wool available for trade and will be able to contribute more meat to community feasts. Trade requires an almost year round commitment and specialized skills in bargaining and managing pack animals.

### **The Partition of Polyandrous Marriages**

Polyandry seems to provide Tibetan households with a number of

benefits. First of all, it prevents the division of the family estate similar to the stem family system of Europe. Unlike the stem family system, polyandry allows a household to maximize its involvement in the three aspects of the Tibetan economy. This in turn leads to greater social and political status for the household members. Polyandry also provides a flexible system that can shift its resources to adjust to major economic and environmental changes.

Despite all of these benefits, some brothers in polyandrous marriages choose to leave the marriage and try to make it on their own. Generally, it is the younger brothers who are responsible for the break up of polyandrous marriages (Levine and Silk 1997). Clearly, there are situations in which individual interests outweigh the desire to maintain the family estate and its associated socio-economic benefits. Levine and Goldstein offer several conditions which may lead a younger brother to break up a polyandrous marriage including the conflicts of a large household, lower reproductive success, less personal autonomy, a lack of satisfaction with an older wife, and new economic opportunities.

In a study of the Nyinba community, Nancy Levine and Joan Silk found that the probability of brothers partitioning from polyandrous marriages increases in households with more male siblings (1997). Marriages with four husbands ended in partition 58% of the time, those with three husbands partitioned 25% of the time, and households with two husbands partitioned only 10% of the time. Households which partitioned had an average of 3.9 brothers, while those which remained intact had an average of 2.9 brothers. Levine and Silk believe that larger marital units may be more prone to internal conflicts. All of the brothers must cooperate together and maintain an effective relationship for the marriage to last. With a greater number

of personalities in the household, cooperative relationships become more difficult. They also cite sociobiological explanations which state that a greater number of co-husbands leads to a further reduction of a male's reproductive opportunities. Finally, sexual jealousy may also lead to greater conflicts with more males competing for the same wife.

Levine and Silk (1997) also cite the influence of age differences between husbands and wives in the partitioning of polyandrous marriages. Elder brothers generally marry at age 20, and they find a wife an average of 3.8 years younger than themselves. Typically, all other brothers are younger than their wife. The third brother is typically seven years younger than the wife, and the fourth brother is typically ten years younger. This disparity in age between the brothers and the wife is directly related to the partitioning of the marriages. The younger a brother is than his wife, the more likely he is to initiate the partition of the marriage.

Levine and Silk (1997) suggest that men married to older women may find them to be less physically attractive, less satisfying sexually, and less satisfying companions. The researchers show that men who arrange new marriages after leaving the polyandrous union almost always marry a woman younger than their first wife. On average men forming new marriages leave wives 5.7 years older, and marry women 3.6 years younger than themselves.

Levine also shows that wives often take an active role in raising their younger husbands (1988). The Westermarck effect may have a strong influence on the dissatisfaction of the marriage. Younger brothers may view their wife as more of a mother or sister figure than a spouse, and therefore, will be unsatisfied with the marriage.

Levine describes how wives may tease or even abuse their younger

husbands (1988). Often when the younger brothers complain, they are told that the wife is just molding them according to her desires, and when they grow up they will be her favorites. Despite this possibility, younger husbands may resent their wife's abuses or feel uncomfortable around her after years of teasing.

Disparity in age between husbands and wives is directly related to the birth order of the husbands. Since authority in polyandrous marriages rests with the eldest brother, the youngest brothers would have a difficult time pursuing any of their own interests. The elder brother often determines how they will serve the household, and what economic tasks they will undertake. Free-spirited younger brothers may prefer to escape from the control of their older brothers and fend for themselves outside the estate. Levine and Silk (1997) found that second brothers initiated 22% of partitions and conjoint marriages, and men born later in the birth order initiated around 38%.

Levine and Silk (1997) also cite the lower reproductive success of the younger husbands as a reason for leaving the polyandrous marriage. In Nyinban society, determination of paternity is critical to membership in the kinship system (Levine 1988:38). It is usually the wife's responsibility to determine the paternity of her children and she uses a number of methods for this. First, Nyinban women believe they are most fertile during the second week of their menstrual cycle. The man who has intercourse with her during this time is the prime candidate for being the father. Long distance trading, and travel to distant pasturelands also limits the possibilities of certain husbands having fathered the children. Finally, the physical appearance of the child can determine its paternity, it is even possible for the society at large to change the paternity designations of children if their appearance resembles a

different husband.

At the beginning of the marriage, the eldest brother has an obvious reproductive advantage over his younger, less mature siblings. Levine and Silk (1997) found that 67% of first born children of the polyandrous marriage were attributed to the eldest brother. The eldest brother had also produced more children than any other brother prior to the termination of polyandrous marriages. Men who actively pursued the partition of the marriage produced .04 children per year of marriage after their 18th birthdays. Men who remained in the marriages produced an average of .1 children per year.

Levine and Silk (1997) suggest that younger brothers may be denied sexual access to the wife by their older brothers. This follows sociobiological motives that encourage males to maximize their own fitness. The researchers also suggest that younger brothers may deliberately avoid sexual relations with the wife to facilitate their eventual split from the household. This makes economic sense because males who father sons with the common wife are required to leave a share of his property behind for them.

Another explanation may come from the economic roles pursued by the brothers in polyandrous marriages. Since agricultural production is the first economic sector to be exploited and has the highest status, it is likely that the elder brother is generally in charge of it. The importance of economic specialization has been mentioned. Thus, it would be reasonable that younger brothers would focus on the trading or herding sectors. Both herding and trading require men to be absent from the community for extended periods of time. If the elder brothers remain in the household year round to engage in agricultural activities, they would have greater sexual access to the wife.

Melvyn Goldstein stresses that polyandrous marriages are more likely to split when brothers are presented with profitable economic alternatives (1978). During the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, thousands of refugees left Tibet and fled to India and Nepal. Many of the pastoral nomads of the Lake Manasarawa region of Tibet fled into Limi. Limi is at the end of the alpine steppe ecozone which was necessary to support the nomad's sheep and yak herds. Unable to take them any further, the nomads were forced to sell their herds to Limi households at a very cheap price or abandon them completely. The sudden abundance of livestock encouraged the fission of polyandrous households by many younger brothers during this time.

After the border of Tibet was opened once again to Limi traders, the Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal offered a large market for trade. Tibetan jewelry, crafts, and wooden eating and drinking bowls were in high demand among the refugees. Limi traders were able to make a large profit with very little economic investment during this trade. This too has led to an increase in the frequency in marriage partitions by younger brothers who could maintain their socio-economic status outside the polyandrous marriage by relying solely on trade.

Males, who decide to fission from polyandrous marriages because of personal interests, often find it impossible to survive only on their share of the estate's resources (Levine 1988). While Tibetan law ensures that each brother will gain an equal share of the estate if they decide to partition, this is usually not the case. Leaving a polyandrous marriage is a risky undertaking, because the partitioning males have no idea exactly how much of the estate they will eventually receive (Levine and Silk 1997). The elder brother, who wishes to see the polyandrous marriage remain intact and

is supported by the community as a whole, decides what resources the partitioner will take with him (Levine 1988). Partitioners may be given the worst agricultural lands or older, less valuable animals. The family may also decide that the partitioner only has rights to an equal share of his father's lands, an amount which is much smaller than a share of the estate as a whole. As a final deterrent to partitioning, males are required to leave portions of their shares behind for any sons they have fathered in the marriage.

### Conclusion

While Tibetan polyandry and the European stem family system accomplish the same goals of preventing the division of a family estate, they do so in very different ways. Traditional explanations for Tibetan polyandry describe it as a way that a household can provide enough male laborers for agricultural production, that a population can be controlled, or that tax obligations can be accommodated for the feudal lords. The Tibetan communities studied by Nancy Levine and Melvyn Goldstein do not adequately support any of these explanations. A better explanation comes from Nancy Levine who shows that polyandry allows Tibetan households to fully capitalize on the three elements of the Himalayan economy: agriculture, herding, and trading. A household's participation in these three sectors leads to an increase in social, political and economic status.

While Tibetan fraternal polyandry provides increased benefits at the household level, many younger brothers opt to leave the marriage and try to make it on their own. Nancy Levine and Joan Silk show that younger brothers are often unhappy with their older spouse, their lower reproductive success, and their diminished personal autonomy. Melvyn Goldstein also suggests that economic opportunities requiring little investment, such as the

availability of cheap livestock or lucrative trading opportunities, will encourage brothers to split from polyandrous marriages and the family estate.

Finally, it is clear that when the economic opportunities which Goldstein describes do not become available, forming a new household can be very risky for partitioning males. Despite having the right to an equal share of the family estate, they are often given smaller or less productive shares of the estate's resources. These brothers have few legal options for obtaining larger or more productive shares because the community often views their actions as a threat to community stability.

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