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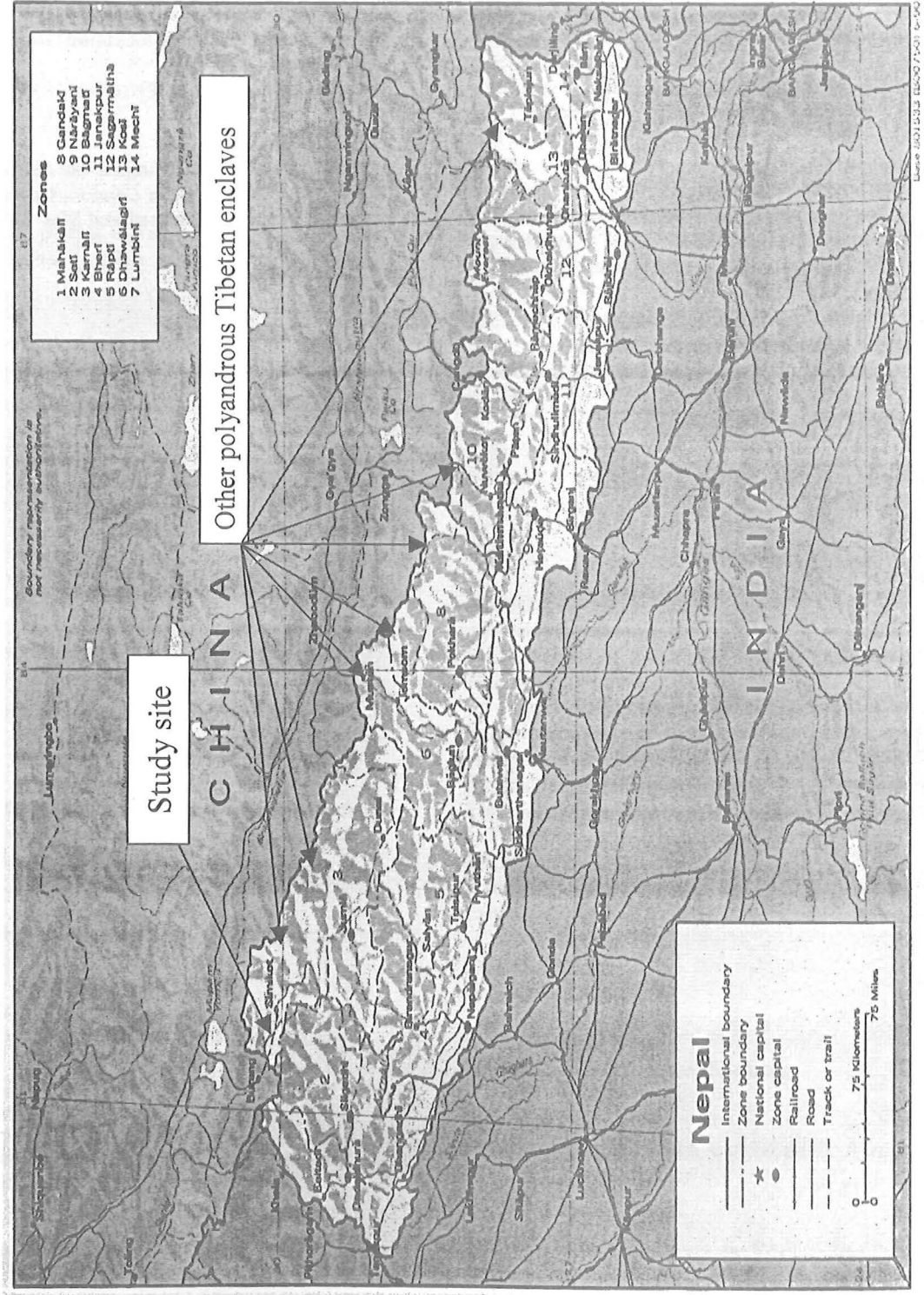
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“Excess Women”: Non-Marriage and Reproduction in Two Ethnic Tibetan Communities of Humla, Nepal

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In marital systems with any flexibility, it is important to understand the association between marital type and reproduction. This association can drive marital decisions and shapes broader marriage patterns, thus affecting aggregate fertility levels. In this report I focus on the reproductive outcomes associated with polyandry and one of its by-products: high rates of non-marriage for women. I demonstrate that a holistic approach to documenting and analyzing the factors associated with marriage and fertility in this system reveals patterns that may interest Himalayan scholars, anthropologists and demographers alike.

Polyandry and non-marriage

The phenomenon of non-marriage of women among the ethnic Tibetan communities of the Himalaya is a subject that has received surprisingly little attention in studies of marriage in the region. In this paper, I argue that in order to understand non-marriage one must take into account the types of marriage open to women, the reproductive prospects associated with them, economic and ecological factors, and clan affiliation. The mix of those factors creates social communities of women that are characterized by sharp social stratification, with unmarried women occupying the position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. To date, the only study focusing on this issue is Schuler's (1987) study of women of Chumik, in which she challenged stereotypes about the incidence of non-marriage in polyandrous communities, and about the 'high status' of Tibetan women in relation to men. Schuler's study of these issues showed how institutional factors such as access to property, clan hierarchies, and prestige of natal village can affect both a woman's marriages prospects and her position in society. In the villages of the upper Humla Karnali Valley and Limi Valley, non-marriage is affected by some of the same factors.

Polyandry was widespread in Tibet before the Chinese occupation, and continues to be prevalent in many ethnic Tibetan communities of Nepal and India. Though polyandry is otherwise rare across the globe, it has been noted in other places, including in communities of Nigeria and Northern Cameroon, in many parts of India, and among a number of hunter gatherer populations in the New World, including the Inuit, Paiute, Shoshoni, Ache, and Yanomamo. Only among the Tibetans, however, did polyandry achieve the status of a cultural "ideal", reified in tax and social structures and buttressed by a culture supporting and advocating its benefits. One of those benefits, articulated by Tibetans and researchers alike, is population regulation, though the rationale most commonly heard is economic—that ecological conditions in these Himalayan conditions necessitate multiple adult males per household for economic viability.

Marriage is universal for men but not for women in these communities, a sharp contrast to most of South Asia. Polyandry allows married women to "remove" multiple men from the marriage market and prevents over 30% of women in some communities from ever marrying. The reproductive rates of never-married women are very low, and their virtual exclusion from the sexually reproductive population keeps population growth rates at a relatively low level.

Ethnic Tibetans of Humla: Upper Karnali and Limi Valleys

This on-going research is being conducted in six polyandrous Tibetan villages of two valleys in Northwest Nepal (Figure 1). Included in the study are approximately 1500 individuals, in 239 households and 340 conjugal units of varying types and marital

histories. Data collection from the Karnali Valley is complete, while data from Limi Valley are still being collected. Data collected included complete marital, fertility, contraceptive and economic histories, as well as qualitative, ethnographic and attitudinal information.

In this paper I contrast marital patterns in the two valleys in the study, and isolate some of the economic, social and ecological factors that are associated with the proportions of never-married women and their reproductive fates in the two locales.

The Two Valleys Differ Along These Lines:

KARNALI

- Relatively forgiving ecology—steep but well-irrigated
- Villages at ~10,000'
- Per capita inheritance for males
- High rate of partitioning among polyandrous marriages
- Monastic tradition (Tibetan Buddhism) that allows nuns

LIMI

- Relatively unforgiving ecology—high, arid and cold
- Villages at ~13,000'
- De facto primogeniture inheritance for males
- Low rate of partitioning among polyandrous marriages
- No monastic tradition allowing nuns

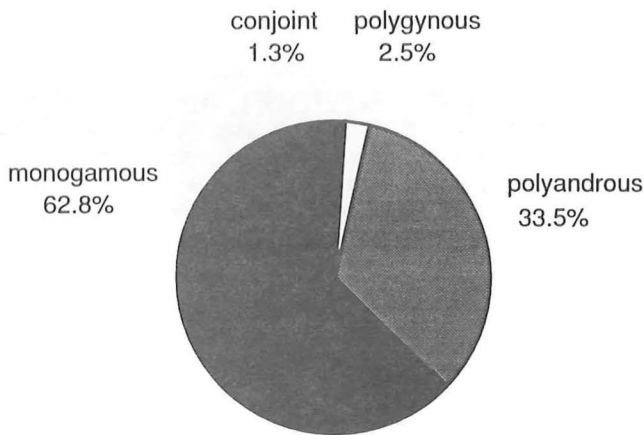


Figure 2. Distribution of conjugal units across marital types: Karnali.

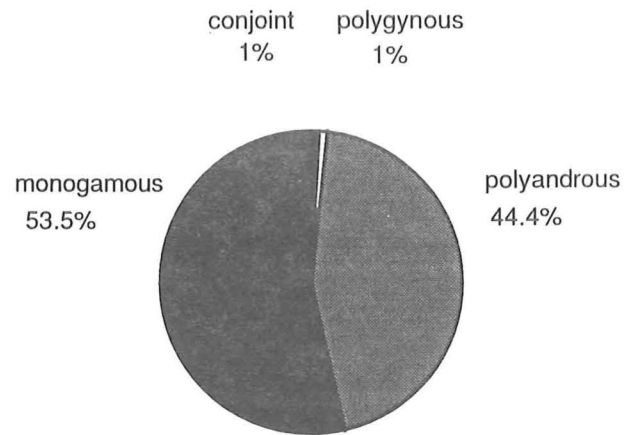


Figure 3. Distribution of conjugal units across marital types: Limi.

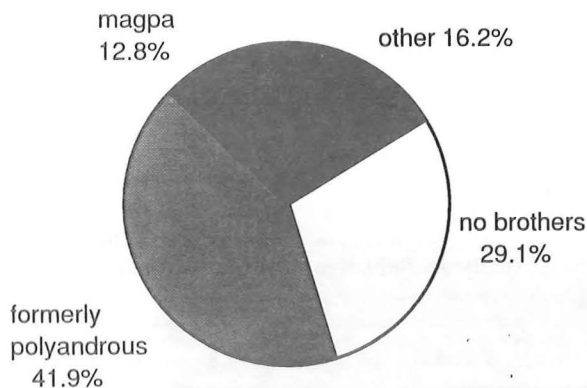


Figure 4. Types of monogamy among monogamous conjugal units: Karnali.

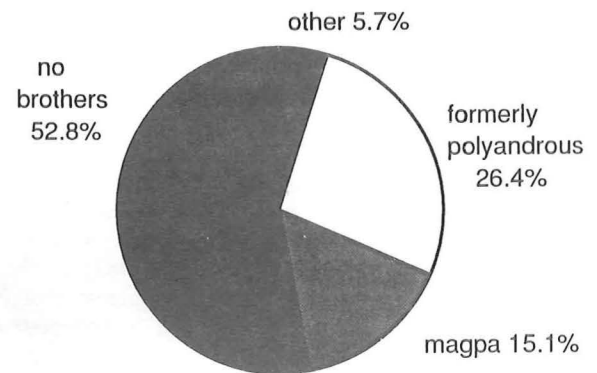


Figure 5. Types of monogamy among monogamous conjugal units: Limi.

Marriage patterns across two valleys

In these polyandrous communities, marriage is a flexible institution. Fraternal polyandry, in which brothers share a single wife, is the norm for any man with brothers. However, other marital types are permitted and accepted, including monogamy, polygyny, and polygyandry (a.k.a., "conjoint" marriage, involving multiple husbands and multiple wives [*sensu* Levine 1987]). Figures 2 and 3 show a snapshot of the distribution of conjugal units across marital types in 1995. In Karnali Valley, monogamous marriages are most numerous (63%), followed by polyandrous marriages (34%). Polygynous and conjoint marriages are the least common (3%). In the more remote Limi Valley, polyandry is more common, accounting for 44% of all marriages in 1995. Monogamous marriages are still more numerous (54%), however, and polygynous and conjoint marriages rare (2%).

In both valleys, competition for husbands is stiff. Women without husbands are invariably poor, stigmatized and cannot enjoy the material and social status brought by motherhood. Bearing sons is particularly important in this patrilineal society, and most women want as many children as they can successfully raise. Women recognize the tension between the expense of children in this environment and their desire to marry and bear them.

Snapshots in time are not as informative as marital histories in marriage systems as flexible as this one. It is therefore important to distinguish among the different types of monogamy. Though villagers in both valleys advocate polyandry and many discourage the dissolution of polyandrous marriages, many initially polyandrous unions dissolve as younger brothers reach sexual maturity and desire another wife, when conflicts among brothers arise and cannot be resolved, or when wives object to some of their husbands.

Figures 4 and 5 show that among the monogamous men is a significant proportion that was at one time polyandrous. These formerly polyandrous men are nearly all junior brothers who left their previous polyandrous marriages due to one of the reasons described above. Other monogamous men are monogamous because they had no brothers (only fraternal polyandry is permitted in this system), or because they married brother-less heiresses. Families with no sons, only heiress daughters, typically import a son to carry the lineage and estate forward. These "*magma*" men reside uxorilocally (with the wife) after marriage, against the normal virilocal pattern. A smaller proportion are monogamous for other reasons (disabled brother, brother emigrated, etc.)

The difference in the proportion of monogamous marriages that were at one time polyandrous, (42% in Karnali compared to only 26% in Limi) indicates the lower partitioning rate of polyandrous marriages in Limi. Ecological conditions requiring a high adult

male/household ratio in Limi increase the pressure on polyandrous marriages to remain polyandrous. The start-up costs associated with a new household are prohibitive in Limi Valley, and few junior brothers can afford them. During the Tibetan exodus in the late 50s and 60s villagers of Limi Valley were enriched by an influx of yaks, dzos, horses and other possessions left by Tibetans leaving Western Tibet. This caused a shift in production and subsistence and led Goldstein in his fieldwork there in the 1970s to predict that fewer men would be economically necessary in polyandrous marriages (1975). Goldstein predicted that this latitude in marriage would allow more men to marry monogamously and for population growth rates to rise accordingly. However, in the late 1990s, start-up costs associated with new households still appear to be prohibitively high. Rates of polyandry and non-marriage are very similar to those noted by Goldstein in the 1970s, and the stability of polyandry is relatively high as well.

In Karnali Valley, by contrast, ecological and economic conditions are more forgiving. Polyandrous marriages partition at a higher rate, drawing more women (eventually) into reproductive roles. Though the topography in the upper Karnali Valley is steep, land is relatively well-irrigated, as well as available for more extensification. Villagers were actively clearing new fields during all of my field seasons (1995-1998) and new households, though markedly poorer than stable, unpartitioned ones, were sustainable. Nonetheless, the lot of a new wife to a formerly polyandrous man was well-known to be a difficult one, as these women are more likely to marry outside of their village, to arrive without dowries, to work more distant and less productive fields, and to have less help from consanguineal female kin.

Marriage and reproduction across two valleys

Women who marry as the second wives of formerly polyandrous men are regarded as fortunate to have married, but, in addition to the hardships described above, they marry at later ages than polyandrous wives, reproduce until later ages, and have fewer surviving children than polyandrous wives or monogamous wives of men who were never polyandrous (*magma* husbands or brother-less husbands). With these factors in mind, women compete for the opportunity to marry into large, wealthy, polyandrous brother sets.

In general, monogamous women on average have fewer surviving children than polyandrous women, as seen in Figures 6 and 7. This pattern holds for both locations, though is statistically significant only in Limi. Polyandrous women by contrast have multiple husbands provisioning them and their children, marry into wealthier households, marry younger and stop bearing children earlier.

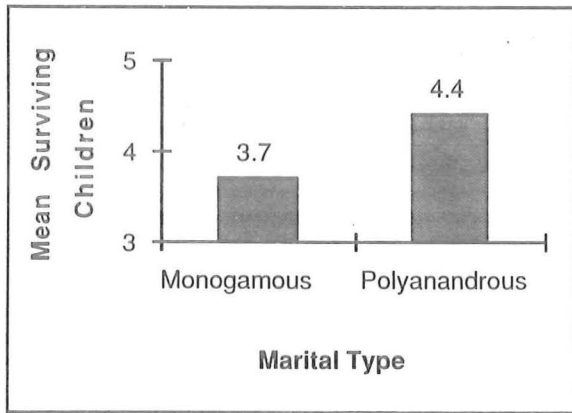


Figure 6. Mean surviving children to monogamous and polyandrous women: Karnali (n.s. ANOVA $p=.11$, $F_{1,61}=2.62$).

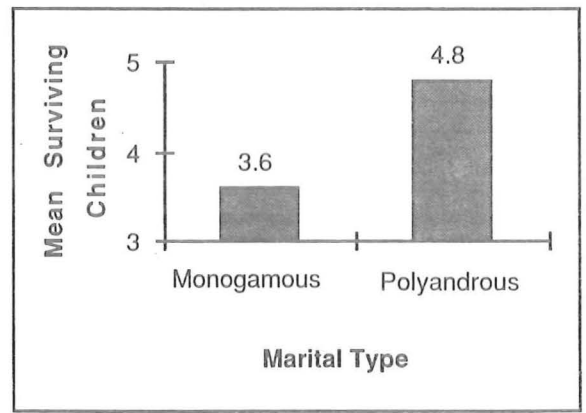


Figure 7. Mean surviving children to monogamous and polyandrous women: Limi (ANOVA $p<.02$, $F_{1,51}=5.46$).

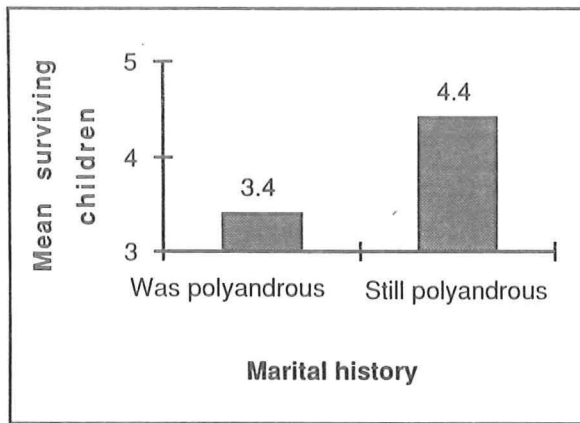


Figure 8. Mean surviving children to polyandrous women and monogamous second wives of formerly polyandrous men, Karnali (ANOVA $0<.05$, $F_{1,34}=4.72$).

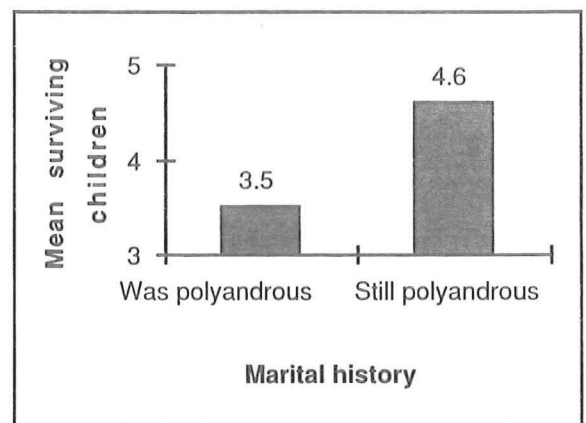


Figure 9. Mean surviving children to polyandrous women and monogamous second wives of formerly polyandrous men: Limi (ANOVA $p<.11$, $F_{1,29}=2.66$).

Figures 8 and 9 show that among those women who monogamously marry a formerly polyandrous man, reproductive outcomes are even lower than among monogamous first wives, and markedly lower than polyandrous wives. The reproductive outcomes of these women indicate one of the trade-offs that polyandrous men face when contemplating partitioning their prestigious, economically comfortable households. Though they may choose personal autonomy over fraternal solidarity, the economic costs associated with such a decision are not insubstantial. The wife they are likely to be able to acquire will be at a relatively advanced point in her life cycle—and this will affect her reproductive potential. Nonetheless this fate is preferable to women than never marrying. Aside from the handful of women who choose monastic celibacy at

an early age in Karnali Valley, women dread the possibility of being spinsters and mothers openly fear the possibility that any of their daughters, due to ugliness, poverty, or reputation end up unmarried.

Who are the never-married women?

There are individual-level characteristics associated with never-marrying. Some of these are mentioned above—girls who are considered to be physically unappealing, girls who will not bring a dowry of jewelry and clothing, and girls reputed to be lazy or irritable do not compete well for husbands. Girls from families that occupy the lowest level of the social hierarchy (clan-less girls) find it difficult to marry as well, as do girls from families with many daughters or families whose sons have recently partitioned the household (the latter factors increase dowry competition.

At a broader level, the factors that most strongly affect the rate of non-marriage for women in this Tibetan community can be seen in this comparison of patterns in marriage, non-marriage, and reproduction between the two valleys under study.)

Rates of non-marriage are most affected by the prevalence and stability of polyandry.

Table 1. Patterns in marriage and reproduction in Karnali and Limi Valleys

Valley	Proportion polyandrous	Partitioning of polyandrous marriages	% Never-married women age 25+	Mean surviving kids among never-married women	Available role for women outside marriage
UPPER KARNALI	34%	45%	13%	0	Celibate nun
LIMI	44%	15%	34%	1.42	<i>Morang</i> : consort to younger husbands in polyandrous marriages

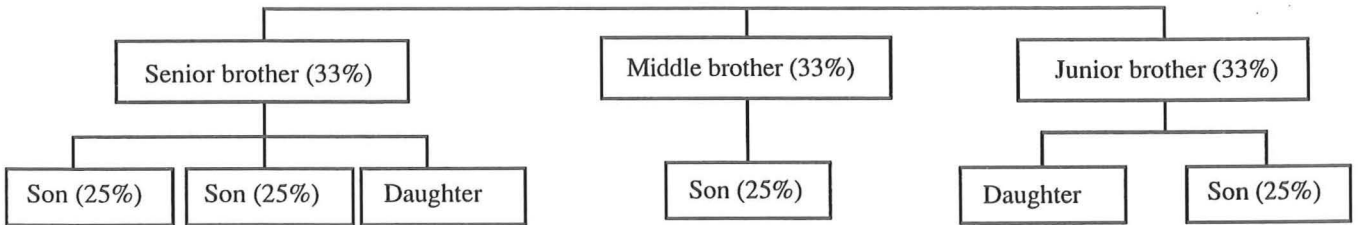


Figure 10. Karnali inheritance norms, upon partitioning: (*per capita* for males—monk sons and daughters inherit only small amounts of movable property [jewelry, etc.]).

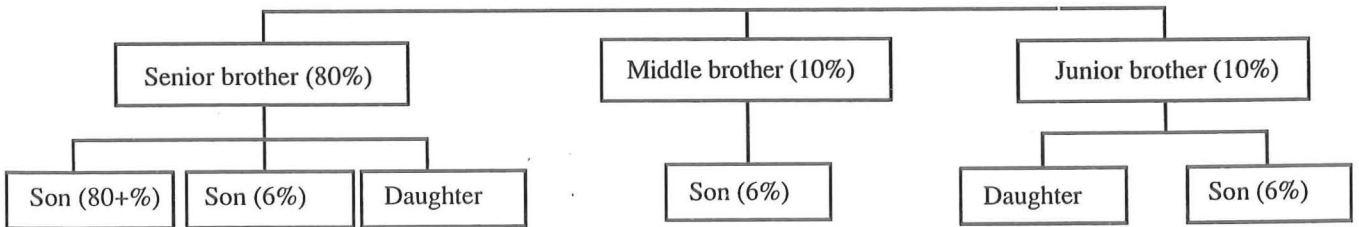


Figure 11. Limi inheritance norms, upon partitioning: (*de facto primogeniture* for males—monk sons and daughters inherit only small amounts of movable property [jewelry, etc.]).

When polyandry is more stable, as in Limi Valley (the more ecologically and economically limiting location), the number of women excluded from marriage is higher. When polyandry is less stable, as in the Karnali Valley, more women are eventually drawn into marriage as the second wives of formerly polyandrous men. Two factors may account for the difference in the stability of polyandry between the two locations. One, described above, is that limiting ecological conditions (little arable land, arid cold conditions) make start-up costs of new households prohibitively high in Limi. The second factor, inheritance, exacerbates this (see Figures 10 and 11). In Limi, the de facto primogeniture (impartible) inheritance system strongly favors the eldest son. Junior brothers seeking to remarry and start a new household with their share of the estate are strongly discriminated against by this system of inheritance. In Karnali Valley, by contrast, there is arable land available for building new fields, the elevation and mean temperatures are lower, and the per capita inheritance system allows some new households to be economically viable because they inherit an equal share of the estate they are partitioning.

The stability of polyandry and the reproductive prospects of never-married women are also linked. In Limi Valley, where polyandrous marriages are stable over time, many younger brothers take lovers (*morang*) from among the unmarried women, and father their children. The *morang* niche is a socially recognized, taxed category of person and household. It is widely recognized that one of the functions of *morang* is to ease some of the tension arising in polyandrous marriages that do not partition for reasons described above. Though the reproductive prospects faced by *morang* are not extensive, they do produce on average 1.4 surviving children.

In Karnali, by contrast, never-married women can not produce children outside of marriage. There is no social category for them or their illegitimate children, and the few illegitimate children who were produced by unmarried women died in their first year. For never-married women in these villages, the only socially recognized role is that of a celibate nun.

Conclusion

In polyandrous societies many women are excluded from marriage and reproduction. The high social value placed on the role of wife and mother forces women to compete for husbands with dowries and by attempting to make themselves physically and socially appealing. The proportion of women who do not succeed in this competition varies widely across communities.

As I show, this pattern relates to options for social roles outside marriage and the prevalence and stability of polyandry—which in turn depends upon inheritance rules, as well as ecological and economic conditions. The net demographic result of polyandry is that population growth rates are maintained at very low

levels. Calculations of TFRs and population growth rates are not possible for these villages yet, as data collection is on-going in Limi; however, for a similar polyandrous Tibetan community in central Nepal, the TFR calculated excluding nuns was 6.5, and including nuns was 5.3. The intrinsic growth rate calculated including nuns for the same community was only 0.97%, compared to 1.67% excluding nuns (Childs m.s.). The difference between these two rates (+0.70%) is indicative of the growth rate that would be achieved in these villages if all women were included in marriage and reproduction.

Other Himalayan scholars describe polyandry as fragile and predict it will disappear in the near future (e.g., Goldstein 1975). In order to anticipate the impact of such a development on fertility levels it is important to understand the phenomenon of non-marriage and its reproductive consequences across polyandrous communities. This will help us make accurate population projections for these groups, and may also help us understand contemporary and recent fertility patterns in Western China (Tibet Autonomous Region), where polyandry used to prevail, and is reported to be making a comeback (C. Beall, pers. comm.).

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