

2002

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Recommended Citation

Ahearn, Laura M. (2002) "The Magars of Banyan Hill and Junigau: a "Granddaughter's" Reflections," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 22: No. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol22/iss1/9>

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The Magars of Banyan Hill and Junigau: A “Granddaughter’s” Reflections

Laura M. Ahearn
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John Hitchcock was my academic “grandfather.” As the dissertation advisor of my dissertation advisor (Tom Fricke), he exerted a strong influence on me, even though I never met him. Even before I started graduate school I bought a copy of Hitchcock’s 1966 ethnography, *The Magars of Banyan Hill*, and digested it voraciously. So much of what Hitchcock said in that book about the residents of Banyan Hill in the 1950s and 1060s also applied quite well to Junigau, the Magar village where I had spent several years as a Peace Corps/Nepal volunteer in the early 1980s. The margins of Hitchcock’s book are filled with my jottings in various colors of ink—a different color for each time I re-read the book. Well-worn and stained faintly by the reddish color of the *rāto mātho* clay Junigau Magars use to build their houses, the book accompanied me on my first few fieldtrips to Junigau.

It is of course no longer considered logistically feasible or, in this post-writing-against-culture (Abu-Lughod 1991) age, intellectually or ethically justifiable to write an ethnography purporting to cover as many aspects of the cultural practices of a community as Hitchcock did. The chapters of *The Magars of Banyan Hill* span from one on the geographical setting, to another on religious practices, to several on family and kinship relations, one on caste, another on work, song, and dance groups, and a final one on politics and recent change. While Hitchcock states in the Introduction that Banyan Hill is not to be regarded as a representative Magar community, nevertheless, he goes on to say the following:

Banyan Hill is enough like any other Magar community I visited or learned about south of the main Himalayan ridge to enable one, using knowledge derived from it, clearly to distinguish Magar communities north or south, high or low, from neighboring communities inhabited by different groups, such as Brahmans, Thakuris, Chetris, Thakalis, Newars, Gurungs, and Tamangs . . . (Hitchcock 1966:2).

Such emphasis on homogeneity within a community runs counter to the current scholarly focus on internal heteroge-

neity or conflict, and yet I cannot overstate the value of *The Magars of Banyan Hill*, despite its “old-fashioned” approach. For one thing, Hitchcock avoids the worst sins of ethnographers from previous generations; his generalizations are based on years of careful fieldwork rather than on knee-jerk Orientalist assumptions. I was amazed the first time I read Hitchcock’s book how accurately he describes the nuanced details of everything from marriage ceremonies to the rituals a girl observes the first time she menstruates. And Hitchcock includes enough instances of practices that run counter to prevailing village ideologies to enable him to remind the reader that “behavior often slips through the interstices of the customary and legal norms and gives rise to ambiguities” (1966:37).

One such complex form of behavior studied by Hitchcock is the Magar preference for marrying certain kinds of cousins. For a woman, her ideal marriage partner is her father’s sister’s son (FZD, in anthropological terms); for a man, his ideal marriage partner is his mother’s brother’s daughter (MBD). In actual practice, however, most Magars in both Banyan Hill and Junigau do not marry their “real” (*sākhai*) FZD/MBD cross-cousins. Instead, Hitchcock reports that “of fifty-three recent marriages recorded in Banyan Hill, only about one quarter were to a real mother’s brother’s daughter or even to a girl who was born into the lineage of the real



Figure 1. Jiba Kumari Rana greets her sister-cousin, Hem Kumari Thapa.

mother's brother" (1966:64). This finding of Hitchcock's led me to investigate how the rates of various kinds of cross-cousin marriage in Junigau have changed over time.

FZS/MBD marriage forms the basis for kinship relations in Junigau—a fact that would have taken me far longer to realize if I had not read Hitchcock's ethnography, given the disfavor in which kinship studies were regarded in anthropology in the 1980s and early 1990s.¹ (They appear to have been making a comeback recently, however.) Junigau residents have a saying: "Magar kinship terms are like the teeth on a chicken's comb" (*magarko sāino, kukhurāko kāīyo*)—in other words, they are both numerous and varied. Almost everyone (including me) in Junigau is addressed using kinship terms rather than first names. As I describe in further detail elsewhere (Ahearn 2001), merely assigning two people the terms for FZS/MBD cross-cousins (*sālī* for a woman; *bhenā* for a man) is enough to initiate a flirtation, if only a joking one, even when the individuals involved are mismatched in age and marriage status, and even when the kinship relation is only a 'village kinship relation' or a 'speaking kinship relation' (*gāūle sāino* or *bolne sāino*) between

that is, a daughter of his mother's brother. His forbidden marriage partner would be his *bhānjī*, that is, a daughter of his father's sister. For a Junigau woman, on the other hand, her preferred spouse is her *bhenā* (father's sister's son), and her forbidden partner would be her *māmā* (mother's brother's son). Junigau residents therefore call preferred cross-cousin matches *sālī-bhenā* marriages, while taboo cross-cousin marriages are called *māmā-bhānjī* matches.

When a woman and a man marry in Junigau, they actually become FZS/FZS cross-cousins if they were not already related that way before marriage, and so they address their in-laws accordingly. Margaret Trawick writes of the Tamils, "If you marry a stranger, that stranger becomes your cross-cousin" (Trawick 1990:151; emphasis in the original). For this reason, a term like *pusai* means both 'father's younger sister's husband' and 'husband's father.' When the marriage is an actual FZS/MBD match—what villagers call *sākhai*—these two terms will refer to one and the same person. Otherwise, a woman's husband's father becomes, for the purposes of address, her father's sister's husband. Similarly, to take another example, a man's wife's father might not

be his 'real' (*sākhai*) mother's brother, but upon marriage he will be expected to address him as such. "Structure, which demands cross cousin marriage, interprets history as if cross cousin marriage had occurred, and prevails," Thomas Trautmann concludes (1981:225).

Moving away now from kinship as relations among categories of individuals, let us consider to what extent actual Junigau villagers follow the "rules" and practice FZS/MBD marriage. Although FZS/MBD kinship terminology and marriage rules definitely act as ordering principles for behavior in Junigau, as Hitchcock noted of Banyan Hill, by no means is every marriage in accordance

	Arranged (n=53)	Capture (n=16)	Elopement (n=18)	Row Total - All Marriages (n=87)
Actual MBD/FZS Cross-Cousins	15%	0	0	9%
Classificatory MBD/FZS Cross-Cousins	34%	38%	28%	33%
Distantly Appropriate	13%	6%	11%	12%
Distantly Inappropriate	0	13%	6%	3%
Extremely Inappropriate (MBS/FZD)	0	0	11%	2%
No Relation	38%	44%	44%	40%

Table 1. Premarital kinship relation according to women's first marriage types²

with these principles. Table 1 shows that only nine percent of marriages were with actual (*sākhai sālī-bhenā*) matrilineal cross-cousins, and all of these were arranged matches. The two marriages that took place between "extremely inappropriate cross-cousins" (*sākhai māmā-bhānjī*) were both elopements.

It was only in the 1980s that actual "wrong" cross-cousin (*sākhai māmā-bhānjī*) marriages began to occur in Junigau.

unrelated strangers. Hitchcock noticed the same interpellation, or calling into being, of erotically tinged relationships: "Since they are potential wives, he feels free to joke with them about sex and to touch them very freely" (1966:63-4).

Thus, Junigau's kinship terms carefully distinguish among the various types of cross-cousins, depending on their marriageability. A Junigau man's preferred spouse is his *sālī*,

¹The analysis that follows is adapted from Ahearn (1994:54-68) and Ahearn (2001:82-7).

²Figures may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

(See Table 2.) More distantly related *māmā-bhānjī* matches have taken place for a long time in the village, though the incidence of such marriages has never been high. Until the 1980s, most marriages were with either an appropriate actual cross-cousin, an appropriate classificatory cross-cousin, or a non-relative. Villagers married extremely distantly related FZS/MBD cross-cousins with far more frequency than they married closely or distantly related “wrong” FZD/MBS cross-cousins. In fact, “wrong” FZD/MBS marriages greatly disturb most Junigau residents, and when asked to explain why, they invariably describe how such marriages create confusion, sometimes irreconcilable, in kinship relations. Hitchcock found a similar aversion to “wrong” cross-cousin marriages in Banyan Hill. The reason villagers gave was that girls who fell into this kinship category belonged to the “milk side” (1966:64). The explanations I heard were somewhat different in Junigau. When someone marries the “wrong” kind of cousin there, kinship terms and subtle yet important hierarchies are turned on their heads, and kinship in general is said to be “confused,” “mixed up,” “broken,” “lost,” or “ruined.” People no longer know how to address one another, and as a result, sometimes they stop talking to certain individuals altogether out of awkwardness. The partial, and possibly eventually total, breakdown of the kinship system in Junigau is one of the most significant results of the increase in elopements. The ramifications of this breakdown are many, since kinship organizes everything in Junigau from labor exchanges to household composition to affectionate friendship.

What happens when a villager marries the “wrong” spouse? In Junigau, the answer is that there is both a highly formalized adjustment technique for reconciling conflicting kinship terms after a “wrong” marriage and some “make-shift” individual choices (cf. Trautmann 1981:228). As part of almost every marriage ceremony in Junigau, whether the marriage is arranged or the result of an abduction or an elopement, there is a ritual called the *ḍhobheṭ*. In the case of arranged marriages, it takes place the morning after the all-

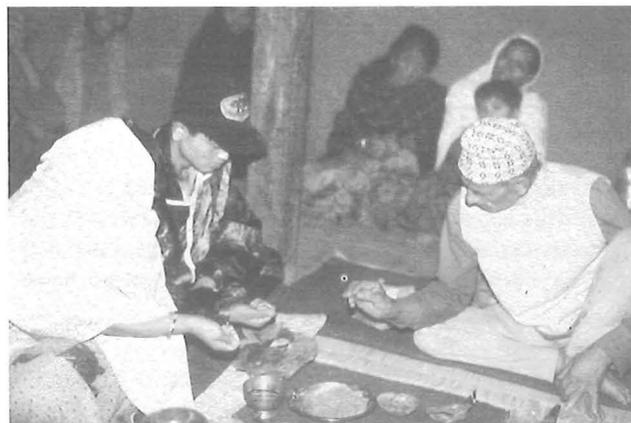


Figure 2. A Brahman priest shows Lali and Indra Rana how to make offerings at the puja following their elopement.

night “gift of a virgin” (*kanyādān*) ceremony; in capture marriages or elopements, the *ḍhobheṭ* occurs only after the bride’s parents decide to grant it. The essence of the *ḍhobheṭ* is the presentation of the groom to each of his new in-laws in turn. Before he greets each one with the correct hand gestures indicating the appropriate amount of respect, he places a coin on top of a yogurt container on the ground in front of him. The in-laws whom he greets then return the coin and the greeting, sometimes adding some money of their own if they are particularly generous or pleased with the match.³ Only the bride’s sisters may keep the money. Sometimes they, like the bride’s mother and grandmothers, are offered some cloth as a present from the groom, which they may either keep or return.

These *ḍhobheṭ* ceremonies resolve most dilemmas caused by marriages that are not with actual FZS/MBD cross-cousins in Junigau. Problems have arisen in recent years, however, as more elopements have been occurring with actual FZD/MBS cross-cousins (the “really wrong” kind of marriage). So many of these forbidden marriages have occurred in recent years in Junigau that many villagers bemoan the “loss of kinship” in the village. In one Junigau marriage, a woman eloped with her brother’s wife’s brother, who was already a distantly related MBS cross-cousin before her

	Before 1960 (n=34)	1960-1982 (n=26)	1983-1993 (n=26)
Actual MBD/FZS Cross-Cousins	12%	12%	4%
Classificatory MBD/FZS Cross-Cousins	35%	46%	19%
Distantly Appropriate	9%	12%	12%
Distantly Inappropriate	6%	4%	0
Extremely Inappropriate (MBS/FZD)	0	0	8%
No Relation	38%	27%	58%

Table 2. Premarital kinship relations in women’s first marriages over time⁴

³It seems to me that this return of a coin signifies a rejection of the practice of paying bridewealth for a woman, and, indeed, some people explained that the coin was returned because in Junigau, Magar men do not “pay a fee” for their brides.

⁴One case is missing because the exact date of marriage could not be determined.

brother's marriage and became an even more closely related one afterwards. Her parents were so upset at this "tit for tat" (*sātai sāt*) marriage (or direct sibling exchange), that they refused to grant a *dhobheṭ* ceremony for over five years, claiming that to do so would be ludicrous, for who would be willing to turn kinship relations on their head like that, making formerly junior kin senior and vice versa? As a result, the woman was prevented from visiting her natal home for all those years and was not supposed to talk to any of her natal relatives (although she did so secretly with the women in her natal family). Finally, her parents gave in and invited the couple back for a perfunctory *dhobheṭ* ceremony in 1994. No one outside the immediate family was invited, and kinship terms were adjusted only for the closest relatives.

In a similar case four years ago, a Junigau woman eloped with her mother's father's brother's son's son—an extremely close and extremely "wrong" form of cousin marriage. When her husband brought her home to his parents' house, his father refused to admit her as a daughter-in-law; instead, he sent his son out of the village and ordered the woman back to her natal home. Realizing that her natal family would not accept her back, as she was "polluted" (*bitulo*), the woman stubbornly remained in her husband's family's cowshed, begging food to eat from sympathetic relatives. After a few weeks, her husband's father relented, admitting her to the household and calling back his son. It was not until five months later that the woman's family granted the couple a *dhobheṭ* ceremony, and even then it was a perfunctory occasion at which kinship terms were changed only for the closest kin. The elopement eventually precipitated a break-up of the man's family, with the property and wealth being divided among all the sons so as to prevent the necessity of living in one large household under uncomfortable circumstances (cf. March 1991).

The ultimate "wrong" kind of marriage, that is, marriage with a non-Magar, has only happened a few times in all four wards of Junigau, but it appear to be on the rise with the increase in elopements. In the 1980's one woman became pregnant by a Newari man, possibly after a rape, and was sent to live with him in Tansen. One Junigau family moved to the Terai around the same time, and their eldest daughter married a Gurung man there. Another Junigau man was rumored to have married a Chhetri woman in the early 1990's in another district of Nepal, but he returned to the village without her and subsequently married a Magar woman. In the late 1990's there was a man from the central part of the village who met and married a Thakali woman while working as a police officer in another part of Nepal. Conflicts arose when he brought her home to Junigau, so the two have settled in Kathmandu. In another Magar village in Palpa District, a family that is related to a family in Junigau experienced the unprecedented "tragedy" of having first a daughter then a son elope with members of the untouchable Kami caste. In all these cases, even with the

relatively "high-caste" Chhetri wife, the non-Magar spouse was considered by Junigau residents to be of lower caste status than they themselves were. (On the other hand, members of all these other groups, except for the Kamis, would almost certainly consider the Magars to be of lower status.) This perceived lower status has implications for who will live with the non-Magar spouse, who will eat food that the non-Magar cooked, and other issues involving ritual purity. For this reason, in none of these few cases of marriage with a non-Magar does the couple live in Junigau. Even among those villagers who most vigorously advocate the right to choose one's own spouse, the thought of marrying a non-Magar is anathema, for it results in losing one's status as a Magar and as a member of one's own family.

As elopements become more common in Junigau, the incidence of "wrong" kinds of marriages is increasing, both with non-Magars and with "wrong" kinds of cousins. It is unclear whether "terminological adjustments" via the *dhobheṭ* ceremony will enable Junigau to remain a kinship-based FZS/MBD cross-cousin marriage society, and whether marrying non-Magars will ever be accepted enough to have the couple live in the village. What we are witnessing is the emergence of new structures of feeling (Williams 1977) that value individual choice and romantic love over family obligations and "appropriate" kinship relations between spouses, but longstanding village values surrounding kinship and Magar identity that were first noted by Hitchcock are still in evidence in Junigau and may remain so indefinitely.

In conclusion, I owe a great deal to my academic "grandfather," who was the first anthropologist to study the Magars intensively. By standing on John Hitchcock's ethnographically experienced shoulders, I have been able to see more and learn more than I ever could have on my own. For this I will always be grateful.

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