Institute of Social Studies

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

LOCATING POWER IN POLYANDRY:
SEXUALITY AND PROPERTY REGIMES IN GENDER RELATIONS IN THE
NEPAL-TIBET FRONTIER HOUSEHOLDS

research paper presented by

Youba Raj Luintel

(Nepal)

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

specialisation

(WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT)

Members of the Examining Committee

Dr. L.H.M. Ling
Dr. M. den Uyl

The Hague, December 2000

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies; the views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Research papers and theses are not made available for outside circulation by the Institute.

Enquiries:

Postal Address:
> Institute of Social Studies
> P.O. Box 29776
> 2502 LT, The Hague
> The Netherlands
>
> Telephone: -31-70-4260 460
> Cables: SOCINST
> Telex: 31491 ISS NL
> Telefax: -31-7--4260 799
> e-mail: postmaster@iss.nl

Location:
> Kortenaerkade 12
> 2518 AX, The Hague
> The Netherlands

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and the research problem

Polyandry is a form of marriage in which a single woman shares multiple men as husbands at a time. In fraternal polyandry, all the brothers in one generation share a common wife.[1] The practice of polyandry has been reported in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Tibet. Exceptionally, it has also been reported in the Amazon forest of northwest Brazil (Peters and Hunt, 1975). The existing literature on polyandry typically highlights mainly three reasons that account its practice: culture, demography and resources. The *first* argument claims that polyandry responds to the prolonged absence of males in the family - a phenomenon observed commonly in all polyandrous societies (Gough, 1959; Prince Peter, 1955). So polyandry is perceived as a security measure for the rest of the family members because it keeps many males within a family so that one could stay at home (Berreman, 1962; Kapadia, 1955). Others argue that polyandry is partly a way of getting rid of the pressure of a "heavy bride price" by avoiding many marriages (Majumdar, 1955). Polyandry is also interpreted as a practice that saves households from risks of friction and fission (Leach, 1955), since more marriage means diverse economic interests within a family, which might pose threats to the unity of the household.

The *second* argument takes demographic reasons into account and sees polyandry as a result of an originally higher sex ratio (Aiyappan, 1935; Prakashi, 1964; Westermark, 1922). Rivers (1906, cited in Peters and Hunt, 1975) argues that the practice of female infanticide fosters polyandry. It is also said that polyandry is a coping strategy of keeping the population down to a desirable size (Goldstein, 1971, 1976; Prince Peter, 1963).

---

[1] Most of the literatures on polyandry including this paper deal with fraternal polyandry. See Unni (1958) for non-fraternal polyandry practised in southern Malabar of South India.

1

The *third* set of arguments persuasively describes polyandry as a social response to an extremely adverse economic condition (Goldstein, 1971; Westermark, 1922). It figures out polyandry as a survival strategy of the poor (Nakane, 1966); a strategy of keeping family property and estate consolidated (Majumdar, 1962; Tambiah, 1966); a way of managing cooperative work among brothers due to the persistent economic hardship (Kapadia, 1955).

However, none of these researchers conceives polyandry as a complete social institution on its own right. They do not provide a complete framework of analysis for the complex institution of polyandry practiced cross-culturally. The anthropological literature in polyandry, for instance, is interested in seeking a pattern of regularity from promiscuity to monogamy. Their common focus has been the structure and function of polyandry: how and why people follow polyandry, how and why it continues to exist in some cultural groups, etc. They do not explain the internal dynamics of polyandry, nor do they look at polyandry from the vantage point of women.[2] They assume that every household tends to maximize the well-being of all of its members -- irrespective of their age and gender -- either through altruism or through freely exercised choices. Assumptions like this explicitly neglect intra-household inequality, such as gender. Feminism, which has been critical to those unitary explanations, offers a new insight in understanding gendered power relations within household.[3] But, most of the feminists (except for those very few who deal with polygamy in African societies) seem unaware of matters of gender relations in families other than monogamous ones.[4] Some prominent feminist anthropologists such as, for instance, MacCormack and Strathern (1980),

---

[2] Most of these analyses suffer from several biases. First, there has been an androcentric bias in the study of polyandry (Berreman, 1975, 1980). They put male at the centre of their analyses and ignore the centrality of female. Women often disappear from their analyses. Second, there has also been a romantic bias in the sense that polyandry is figured out as an exotic and a fascinating culture trait (Berreman, 1980; Levine, 1988:xiv).

[3] Bargaining in intra-household relations offers a very useful framework for analysing gender relations at the household level (see Agarwal, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1988; and Sen, 1990). In this paper, however, I do not apply the bargaining approach due to its different focus.

[4] Berreman's reflective criticism reminds me this point, when he writes, "we have tended to regard monogamy as expectable (even moral), polygyny as reasonable (even enviable) and polyandry as puzzling (even disturbing)" (Berreman, 1980:387).

2

Mitchell and Oakley (1986), Moore (1988), Nicholson (1990), Ortner and Whitehead (1981), Reiter (1975), Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974), and Thorne and Yalom (1982) do not even touch upon the case of polyandry.

Hence, the feminist discourse on gender and sexuality appears to focus on monogamy (that the Western feminists have successfully problematised). It is taken for granted that an understanding of gender relations in monogamy mirrors gender relations of all types. It does not take into account that women's subordination has multiple forms (polyandry being an immediate one). In polyandry, for instance, a single "patriarch" as one perceives in monogamy does not exist. It is therefore imperative to see how power is gendered in polyandry's social setting. It is in this context that the present study ventures to locate power. It focuses primarily on gender as it is produced in Nyinba society – a culturally Tibetan ethnic group in the foothills of the Nepalese Himalayas. This paper begins by arguing that gendered power relations in polyandry are significantly different from those of a nuclear, monogamous family, primarily because a centrally located single male figure does not exist there.

1.2 Research objectives

The relationship between husband and wife in polyandry is not "one to one" as it is in monogamy. Instead, the wife is the pivot of the relationships between and among the husbands (see Figure 1). Polyandry has, therefore, a different socioeconomic and ideological set up, which the literatures that deal with monogamy do not reveal. A thorough understanding of gendered power relations in polyandry is therefore theoretically stimulating that could complement the lacunas in both feminist as well as anthropological bodies of knowledge. This paper attempts to explore whether or not in polyandry the women compared to men have equal power at the household level. Specifically it attempts:

a) to present an ordered and critical exposition of the existing feminist knowledge in gender relations dealing with power, property and sexuality issues;

3

b) to assess the way polyandrous females compared to their male counterparts have control over the productive resources and are positioned in gender roles within the given division of labour; and

c) to critically examine the way sexuality is constructed and to assess sorts of control, if any, women in polyandry have over their bodies and their sexuality.

1.3 Research questions

The guiding research question for the present study is "does polyandry afford equal power to women as to men in the household?" The specific research questions are:

a) How do the main feminist schools of thought conceptualise and interpret power relations at the household level? How helpful are they in understanding gender dynamics in polyandry?

b) How is power exercised in the gendered regime of property and the division of labour in polyandry?

c) How is sexuality constructed and practised under the system of multiple husbands? Do women in polyandrous sexuality suffer the same level of subordination as their monogamous counterparts?

1.4 Methodological limitations

This paper primarily derives from previous research I conducted among the Nyinba (see Luintel, 1998). I stayed in Nyinba Gaon for about one month (in September 1997) and collected ethnographic information based on household surveys. I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 19 (of 23) Nyinba women and 14 (of 56) men who were in polyandry at the time. For the sake of comparison, I accomplished interviews with randomly selected men and women who were not in polyandry. To get a deeper insight into the issues I conducted some key-informant interviews, and collected some case studies (see Appendix 3).

In the field, I had two interpreters (one male, another female). The key-informants were very kind and cooperative. Still, being a male, the field study was not practically rewarding for me, especially due to the theme of sexuality.

I do not claim that this paper is completely immune of my personal biases. I do not claim to maintain "objectivity" either. Following Haraway (1988), I try to take the "view from below" from a "subjugated standpoint." What I have tried to develop is a "situated knowledge" taking a "conscious partiality" (Mies, 1979).[5]

Due to differences in the focus of the previous research and the present paper, I have to face several methodological constraints. First, I have a lack of information with sufficient depth to answer the questions posed. Therefore, I have to use Levine's (1988) text repeatedly. Since her study was conducted a long time ago, it may not reflect changes that have occurred over time. I therefore try to complement it with my relatively recent observations (of 1997). Finally, I would be very reluctant to generalise the findings from this paper to the diverse polyandrous society. It has not only a small sample size; it covers also a very small section of Tibetan polyandrous households.[6] It is amidst these limitations that attempts have been made to make this paper safe and sound theoretically as well empirically.

1.5 Importance of the study

Anthropological literature on polyandry just explore the "genesis of polyandry," not its existing dynamics. This paper focuses on the internal, gendered dynamics of polyandry. Conventional literatures perceive polyandry as an exotic culture (the "Other")

---

[5] Feminist methodology rejects the claims of "objective" neutrality. The notion that separation between researcher and the research subject produces a more valid account is challenged. Haraway says, feminists do not need a doctrine of objectivity. She says, "I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity...Feminist objectivity means situated knowledge" (1988:581). The idea is that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality. For that, objectivity (therefore, indifference) does not help much. It hides the oppressed understandings of the world. It is why Mies (1979) prefers conscious partiality that raises consciousness and facilitates a complete understanding of the social reality.

[6] For polyandry in Hindu society some call the *Pahari* polyandry (Berreman, 1962; Goldstein, 1978) while others call the *Himalayan* polyandry (Majumdar, 1962).

5

and attempt to explore its uniqueness. On the contrary, one of the points of departure of this paper is that it considers polyandry as a normal cultural practice in its own right. One very important contribution of this paper will be that it brings back the mid-twentieth-century feminist debates on sexuality and matriarchy into the feminist agenda for the twenty-first century by substantiating it with new empirical materials from polyandry.

The existing literature on polyandry is too general and theoretically less informed insofar as the *gendered regime of power* is concerned. (By the term gender regime of power, I refer to the social inequality between women and men and the associated institutional practices including access to and control over resources, gender roles, and issue of control over one's own body.) On this basis, I combine the Foucauldian concept of power and sexuality with a materialist interpretation of gender relations. By so doing I would like to sharpen the cutting edge of my analysis.

1.6 Positioning myself

In the background of this paper lies my overt dissatisfactions – personal as well as intellectual – with existing gender relations in Nepalese society that is largely unequal and unjust. My engagement with feminist discourse on power and gender stems from three issues. First, my own life experience as *the* son of a "widow mother"[7] in an orthodox, patriarchal, high-caste Hindu society has made me conscious of structures of gender and power, and relations of social control that deprive women of freedom, choice and autonomy. It exposed me to and helped me realise of my mother's lifelong experience of exclusion and subordination. I took it as a small manifestation of larger gender inequality. Second, trained in the positivist tradition of sociology and anthropology, and recently exposed to the feminist critique and reformulation of social science theories, I see the need to bridge a number of gaps of knowledge about gender relations, sexuality and power. Finally, my previous research had given me a preliminary insight into the typical gender relations that polyandry had. But, I found the feminist

---

[7] I have been told that my mother became a widow when she was in her early twenties. I was one and a half-years-old at that time.

6

theories that I was exposed to, in my graduate career at Institute of Social Studies, not so much sensitive to that sort of gender relations. I took this paper as an opportunity to learn how to make sense of women's subordination that we experience here and there at different levels. A theoretical understanding of different forms of gender inequality, I hope, will help us to strategise to transform it towards equity and equality.

1.7 Organisation of the paper

This paper consists of six chapters. This chapter introduced the research project: its problem, questions and methodology. Chapter two critically examines several feminist schools of thought and draws conclusion that informs my analysis of gendered regime of power in polyandry. Chapter three introduces polyandry as it is practiced in Nyinba Gaon, the site of this research. Chapter four describes the property system and the associated gender division of labour[8] in Nyinba polyandry: the focus being the gendered regime of material conditions. It is followed by Chapter five where I critically explore the construction of sexuality and demonstrate that the Nyinba women have relative control over their bodies and sexuality. Chapter six concludes this paper with brief but critical conclusions of the findings and draws their major implications.

---

[8] I would try to use the term gender division of labour (henceforth, GDL) throughout this paper, except when I quote other authors who use the term "sexual division of labour."

Chapter Two

GENDER AND POWER: THE RELEVANCE OF FEMINIST DEBATES TO GENDER RELATIONS IN POLYANDRY

2.1 Introduction

Women's subordination is a complex phenomenon, cross-cutting issues of property, sexuality, kinship and gender identity. The purpose of this chapter is to review different trends of feminist thoughts, their conceptions of power and their analyses of gender. Through this review, I intend to identify their contributions and weaknesses to inform my analysis of polyandry. In so doing I attempt to build a framework that gives me a critical perspective in analysing my empirical materials.

2.2 Theories Reviewed

2.2.1 Liberal feminism and the "woman question"

The overall thrust of liberalism lies in its conception of human nature: what are the human beings and how should they behave (Hubbard, 1990)? The liberal interpretation of human nature upholds three underlying assumptions. First, that the uniqueness of the human being lies in its individual capacity for "rationality" (Jaggar, 1983). Rationality, as liberals define it, is an ability of individual human beings to comprehend the rational principles of morality; and to secure the best means to achieve the desired objectives (Tong, 1998). It reflects liberal ideals of freedom and equality. Second, the liberal idea of "normative dualism" assumes that mind and body represent two different domains (Jaggar, 1983). Each is mutually exclusive of the other. Regarding gender it implies that knowledge is a product of the individual (male) mind as opposed to the (female) body. Third, and an important feature is, what Jaggar calls, "abstract individualism": the idea that the "essential human characteristics are properties of individuals and are given independently of any particular social context" (p. 42).

8

I review Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as a representative text of liberal feminism.[9] Its central message is that the roots of women's subordination lie in women's confinement to the bourgeois household. Friedan suggests that women need to find meaningful work in a full-time public workplace that gives them emancipation (Friedan, 1963:22). A woman who is a wife and mother and has no time for a career limits her development as a full human person. Friedan assumes, wives' and mothers' partial absence from the home makes husband and children self-reliant.

Friedan appears simplistic and superficial in her analysis. She posits women's domestic burden as the crux and neglects institutional bases of subordination such as marriage, kinship, family, property, sexuality, etc. As radical feminists argue, liberal feminists such as Friedan do not have a "drastic and dramatic program" to completely undo women's "oppression" (see Tong, 1998:2). Releasing women from domestic burdens to allowing them to participate in market employment may be one step forward, but it is not sufficient for their complete emancipation. Women's subordination is not simply a matter of getting jobs. It has roots underpinned in social ideology, production, and interpretation of knowledge, thereby power. Additionally, women's subordination is also a matter of not having care, compassion, choice and autonomy, which Friedan does not pay due attention.

Friedan's analysis is very ethno-centric and class-centric. Friedan addresses a largely white, middle-class, and well-educated group of women (Tong, 1998). It is why it makes sense for her to describe the "housewife" role as oppressive. She would not have argued so, had she considered the diverse positions that women have in general. Friedan's analysis, for instance, does not respond to the situations of women in non-monogamous, non-nuclear and non-bourgeois forms of family and marriage. Housework, for instance, tends to be experienced differently based on a woman's class, race and other contexts. Davis (1971:7, quoted in Tong, 1998) argues that housework is rather experienced as

---

[9] Friedan was not only a prolific writer, she was also one of the founders and the first president of the National Organisaton for Women (NOW) that took a leading role during the 1960s in the United States to bring a liberal equality agenda to the forefront.

liberatory than oppressive by the black, poor and the minimally educated women when they compare it with working as domestic servants in white women's homes. In the same way, Friedan's treatment of the issue of women's subordination may sound very strange and alien to polyandrous women, for example, whose lives are not so much segregated into so-called public and private spheres.

Part of the problem of women's liberation lies in the issue of how to bring men back home to share their wives' work burden, an issue liberal feminists such as Friedan do not pay due attention. Therefore, liberalism does not adequately challenge the conventional assumption that women are responsible for the private life of their family members (Eisenstein, 1986, quoted in Tong, 1998). Further, *The Feminine Mystique* gives a message that unless women become like men, they would never be liberated (Tong, 1998). This argument covertly undervalues femininity and accepts masculinity as the norm. Jaggar (1983) criticizes liberal feminists for their androcentric bias underpinned at its conceptual level. Liberal feminists conceive of the self as a rational, autonomous agent, which Jaggar (1983) argues, is a "male" self.

Liberals take it for granted that each and every individual is equally capable of self-fulfillment and social contexts such as caste, class, ethnicity, gender, etc. *do not matter*. What they simply plead for is equality. Equality, they hope, can be achieved through state intervention by pursuing a variety of social reforms and ensuring equal opportunities for women.[10] Without challenging the existing oppressive social and political systems and without intending to radically transform it, liberal feminism aims to achieve a full equality of opportunity for women compared to men in all spheres of life (Jaggar, 1983).

2.2.2 Socialist feminism and the issues of marriage and property

Socialist feminism is a highly diverse cluster of theoretical writings. It brings together the Marxian concept of "class oppression" and the radical feminist concept of "gender oppression." Thus the most common phrase socialist feminists repeatedly use is

---

[10] They simply ask the state to come and take care of babies (such as establishing day care centres), provide education and employment for women (such as introducing micro-credit programs), etc.

"capitalist patriarchy." "Socialist feminism develops a portrait of social organisation in which the public structures of economy, polity, and ideology interact with the intimate, private processes of human reproduction, domesticity, sexuality, and subjectivity to sustain a *multifaceted system of domination*" (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1996:480, italics original). For socialist feminists, the primary reference for the analysis of power relations in the family has been Engels' (1972) *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State.* Engels' important contribution is his postulation of an earlier stage of a "sex egalitarian" society that inspired some feminists very much.

Looking critically at sexuality, property inheritance and descent systems in the prehistoric age, Engels rigorously developed an evolutionary framework of the family. According to which, once in prehistory, human society was promiscuous because property was communal (Engels, 1972:50). Imposition of incest taboos, first on parents-children mating, and then on sibling mating, gave way to what he calls "consanguine" and "punaluan"[11] families, respectively. In promiscuity (and even in consanguinity), the biological father was not identified. So, both descent and inheritance had to follow the female line. Logically it was the mother who held the authority.

Engels' main argument is that whatever status women had in the past times, it was derived from her position in the household (Tong, 1998). Women's work was vital for the survival of the community so long as production was the activity inside the home. Once a large-scale production (primarily of the domestication of animals and breeding of herds) took place, the location of production shifted to outside the home, due to its increasing scale. This shift led to an entirely new source of wealth for the groups. Because of it, not only the value of women's work and her production decreased, more importantly, the status of women in society shrinked too. Property became more important now than ever before. One of its lasting results was the shift of inheritance from a matrilineal to patrilineal line. It is in this history of the "pairing" marriage that Engels locates "the

---

[11] Literally, it means "intimate companion" in the Hawaiian language. When group marriage was the norm, multiple husbands (who were not necessarily brothers) used "punalua" to address each another. So it was the custom of Hawaiian women to do so also (see Engels, 1972:53).

11

world-historic defeat of the female sex" (p. 68). It occurred due to the reckoning of descent through the male instead of female line. After this "defeat," the monogamous family came into vogue with the aim of "begetting children of the undisputed paternity."

Thus, Engels' historical explanation identifies social organisation of production as largely responsible for women's subordination. The emergence of private property and the shift of inheritance from matrilineal to patrilineal lines explain the transition of the family from the state of "mother's right" to patriarchy (Tong, 1998:103). Therefore, socialist feminists argue that if women are to be emancipated from their husbands, women must first become economically independent of men (Tong, ibid). In this point socialist feminists come closer to liberal feminists.

There are some major problems with Engels' thesis. First, Engels argues that monogamous marriage improved in woman's condition by giving her the right to marry "one man only." This idea is not empirically tenable, however. For instance, with growing industrialisation in the West, the rate of divorce has escalated also, a process which shows that monogamy has brought new troubles to women (and men). Second, Engels does not (or could not) explain how communal ownership of property (e.g., a tribe's animals) changed abruptly to family ownership and how matrilineal inheritance was outrightly displaced (Lerner, 1986; Tong, 1998). Engels' contention that in tribal societies the development of animal husbandry led to ownership of herds by male heads of the family is, therefore, questionable. Also, the ethnographic information on which Engels' thesis is based has been disproved with new anthropological and archaeological data.[12]

---

[12] Engels' assumptions are largely disproved empirically. Based on Morgan's work (1963), Engels assumed that men were the collectors/producers of subsistence. For hunting-gathering societies, the reverse was the norm (Lee and DeVore, 1968; Sacks, 1975). For the case of horticultural societies, it is often the women's activities which are the basis of subsistence (Brown, 1975). Engels also assumed that the domestication of animals preceded cultivation of the soil. Today a more commonly accepted theory is that cultivation and pastoralism developed at the same time in the same milieu (see Sacks, 1975). This does not mean, however, that there could not be any sex egalitarian society in the history of human beings. The way Engels confidently based his analysis is what remains questionable for critics.

12

Maria Mies, too, is critical of Engels. She says "(t)he search for the origins of the hierarchical sexual [sic] division of labour should not be limited to the search for the moment in history or prehistory when the 'world-historic defeat of the female sex'...took place" (Mies, 1986:48). She suggests a look at present times on the basis of materialist, historical, non-biological concepts of men, women and their relations to nature and history (Mies, ibid). Her main argument lies in her critique of biological interpretations of the production and reproduction of life. Accordingly, the GDL is part of larger processes of capital accumulation, so it cannot be understood separate from the political economy of the time. She says:

> we should no longer look at the sexual [sic] division of labour as a problem related to the family only, but rather as a structural problem of a whole society. The hierarchical division of labour between men and women and its dynamics form an integral part of the dominant production relations, that is, the class relations of a particular epoch and society, and of the broader national and international divisions of labour (Mies, 1986:49).

The various forms of asymmetrical, hierarchical divisions of labour are based on the social paradigm of the predatory hunters and warriors who appropriate and subordinate other producers including women (Mies, 1986:71). The GDL is produced and transformed in the course of history, so is not biologically determined. It means women's housework and child-care work are not a function of their biology but a result of social construction. For Mies, it is the process of "domestication" or "housewifization" that makes women disappear from the picture and confines them to the domestic sphere ever more. This domesticity seems as a more marginal place in the society as a whole (Uyl, 1995:51).

Despite some of her critical contributions, one must challenge Mies for her the "man-the-hunter" thesis. Her interpretation that it is weapons that gave men power to subordinate the women is eventually an essentialist interpretation. Women too used to contribute in the hunting business, a point Mies ignores. Anyway, Mies' critique does not replace Engels' analysis of women's subordination. Rather it adds to the cutting edge of his materialist stand. Engel's thesis argues that women's position varies according to the

prevailing economic and political relationships of the society and challenges the myth of the universality of women's oppression. Engels shows how women's social position declined as the system of the organizing principle of society was changed (Sacks, 1975:212).

For socialist feminists, Engels' significant insight is not his conclusion. Rather, it is the connection that he shows between women's access to and control over resources, on the one hand, and the systems of family, sexuality, GDL and ultimately kinship, on the other. In this paper, I shall describe how, among the polyandrous Nyinba, relations between a single wife with her multiple husbands are constructed and maintained so far as property is concerned. I shall see, whom -- men or women -- gets central importance in the production process and who have access to and control over economic resources. In so doing, I would attempt to locate power, its direction, and its manifestation in gender.

2.2.3 Feminist appropriation of structuralism

Structuralism as a theory was originally introduced by linguists who described language as a set of signs providing a structural framework for the social organisation. One variation of structuralism is the anthropological theory of kinship. Kinship is a network of relationships and social ties that is modelled on the relations of genealogical parenthood and marriage (Keesing, 11975, cited in Holy, 1996). Kinship is a historic relic of the cultural past that reflects the original mental scheme for a society's social organisation. Anthropologists have a shared belief that kinship as a cultural fossil helps understand the underlying logic of specific cultural practices (such as polyandry, in this context). Kinship maps people onto networks of near and distant family relationships, and attaches meaning to them. The structure of kinship divides all relatives into two broad

14

categories, viz., the "possible spouses" and the "prohibited spouses" (Levi-Strauss, 1969:xxiii). The kinship system embodies the basic structural scheme to norms of incest, exogamy and marriage (Levi-Strauss, 1969).[13]

Alliance theory,[14] developed by Levi-Strauss (1969), defines kinship as a mechanism of alliance created through the "repetition of inter marriage between...groups, typically descent groups" (Dumont, 1968, quoted in Holy, 1996). That means, kinship is more or less a durable network among certain families who prefer to "exchange their women among themselves," and create a monopoly over them.

The concept of marriage alliance applies more explicitly to societies which practice cross-cousin marriage (Holy, 1996:31). Cross-cousin marriage is a specific form of "exchange of women" between groups that conventionally create perpetual marriage alliances (Levi-Strauss, 1969). This issue is directly applicable to Nyinba who not only prefer to marry within their ethnicity but also among the cross-cousins.[15] The rules of incest and exogamy are, thus, to establish exchange relation between families in order to integrate them into a larger social network of (the masculine) solidarity (Holy, 1996).

In order to understand kinship in its entirety, one has to follow the terminology used, and infer meanings comparing it with the larger social milieu. Kinship assigns specific tasks to particular genders thereby regulating the sexuality of men and women. It allows some to inherit property, others, not (Maynes et al., 1996). It differentially avails life chances and opportunities to men and women. Accepting the importance of kinship in regulating sexuality, Foucault (1980) coins phrases such as the "deployment of alliance" and the "deployment of sexuality."

---

[13] This theory, called structuralism, was originally introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist by training (MacCormack, 1980). He describes language as a set of signs. Foucault's work is a further refinement on it, which highlights discourse that constructs and deconstructs the truth, therefore power. It is in this context that Foucault is considered poststructuralist or postmodernist, a point I will come back shortly.

[14] There are three ways anthropologists interpret kinship: the alliance theory, the descent theory, and the analysis of kinship terminology (see Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Holy, 1996).

[15] The prohibition on incest forces men to marry their sisters and daughters with men from other families, and as a reciprocity seek their sisters and daughters back as wives (Levi-Strauss, 1969).

> (R)elations of sex give rise, in a society, to a *deployment of alliance*: a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions...(T)he *deployment of sexuality*...like the *deployment of alliance*...connects up with the circuit of sexual partners, but in a completely differently way...The deployment of alliance is built around a system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit, where as the deployment of sexuality operates according to mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power (Foucault, 1980:106, italics original).

However, kinship as an autonomous domain of analysis has been strongly questioned by anthropologists interested in gender. They challenge the traditional analytical boundaries between gender and kinship, and argue that these two domains are not exclusive to each other (Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Yeatman, 1983). Feminists argue that gender is embedded in kinship (Cucchiari, 1981) and kinship terminology reflects this embeddedness. Therefore, feminists would like to redefine kinship as "a sociocultural system of differently distributed rights, duties, roles, and statuses, founded on an ideology of shared substances,[16] inextricably bound up with an embedded system of gender categories" (Cucchiari, 1981:36).

Feminist anthropologists, such as Rubin (1975), criticise Levi-Strauss for his depiction of women as the victims. Levi-Strauss postulated that it was always men who "exchanged" the women and not *vice versa*. In her influential paper "Traffic in Women," Rubin posits kinship as a "social organisation of sexuality" that reproduces the conventions of sex and gender (p. 168). Kinship systems do not merely exchange women as Levi-Strauss's claims, they also exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names, rights and people in concrete systems of social relationship. Rubin's basic argument remains that the kinship system is an inherent part of "'sex/gender system,' by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (Rubin, 1975:159). Following Rubin, Uyl posits kinship as the form of social organisation determined on the basis of social allocation of work and sexuality (Uyl, 1995). Rubin's argument that kinship is the regulating principle is what attracts Uyl most. However, Rubin has one clear limitation.

---

[16] These "shared substances" may be semen, menstrual blood, mother's milk, or even food (Cucchiari, 1981). It may differ from culture to culture.

16

She "takes the discussion about the role and place of women in society and detaches it from a debate on power and domination" (Uyl, 1995:49). It is due to this gap that I bring the concepts of power and sexuality in my analysis of polyandry.

2.2.4 Postmodern feminism and the issues of power and sexuality

Postmodernism is a critical approach to philosophy and metanarratives of human history. It refers to a range of overlapping positions, which does not have one fixed meaning (Weedon, 1987).[17] Within feminism itself, there is no consensus on the debate on postmodernism. A few feminists, such as Fraser and Nicholson (1990) and Hekman (1990), for example, are optimistic about the possibility of formulating a postmodern feminism. Others, such as Benhabib (1990) and Hartsock (1990) are skeptical of it and argue that the postmodern deconstruction of categories, such as agency, subjectivity, etc., denies the chance of articulating women's experiences (McNay, 1992). There are two leading streams of postmodernism: one, represented in the works of Derrida, the other, Foucault. The significance of Derrida's work in postmodern feminism lies in the fact that it poses a major challenge to what is called the "liberal tradition." It offers the notion of deconstruction: a critical examination of Western discourses that create binary oppositions (Klages, n.d.). One of the most influential contributions of postmodernism, however, derives from the work of Foucault that hinges on the relationship between power and discourse (Andermahr et al., 1997).[18]

Postmodern feminists refuse to develop one overarching explanation and solution for women's oppression. They are critical of any (feminist) thought which aims to provide *the* explanation for why woman is oppressed. They also refuse to prescribe any steps for women to achieve liberation (Tong, 1998:193). Some postmodern feminists are so suspicious of traditional feminist thought, says Tong, that they reject it altogether. In this paper, I am interested to know what postmodern conceptions of power and sexuality are.

---

[17] Postmodernism is originally represented in the works of Derrida (1973), followed by Lacan (1977), Kristeva (1982) and developed by Foucault (1980).

[18] Within postmodern feminism a number of scholars follow Foucault, namely they are McNay (1992), Ramazanoglu (1993), Sawicki (1991), Scott (1988), Weedon (1987), etc. (Andermahr et al., 1997:210).

I continue to seek to what extent postmodern feminism helps me to understand the dynamics of power between women and men in polyandry.

2.2.4.1 Power

It is Foucault who alerted us to the essentialist interpretation of power. Power, Foucault says, does not have any primary existence of a central point. There is not a unique source of sovereignty from which forces would emanate. Power is not an institution, nor a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with. Neither is power something that is acquired, seized or shared; that one holds on to or allows slipping away (Foucault, 1980:94). Then, what is power? According to Foucault:

> power must be understood...as the multiplicity of *force relations* immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the *process* which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the *support* which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions or contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the *strategies* in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies (Foucault, 1980:92-93, italics mine).

Foucault further says that power is a moving substrate of force relations: relations based on co-operation as well as contestation and disruption. For him power is relational that operates in a "capillary fashion" from below, and finds a shifting and unstable expression in networks and alliances (Pringle and Watson, 1996:55). It is based on patterns of interaction and assertion. The question is not who holds it but who asserts it in different sets of relations, which Foucault calls "force relation." Unlike the earlier, the "possession" model of power,[19] the relational model asserts that power is not possessed

---

[19] Max Weber's initial deliberation of power is one of the early systematic expositions. For Weber, power is the "possibility that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his [sic] own will despite resistance" (Weber, 1947:152). Peter Blau defines power as the "ability of persons or groups *to impose* their will on others despite resistance" (Blau, 1964:117, cited in Radtke and Stam, 1994, italics mine). It is in this context that Gramsci's "theory of hegemony" discusses why people appear subordinate to others within power relations in the society (Gramsci, 1971, cited in Faith, 1994). Power in this tradition is defined as domination-subordination relationship in terms of coercion, authority, influence or compliance. This monolithic conceptualisation perceives power as something to be held, owned and/or seized. Those who held it were considered "powerful" and others deprived of it "powerless." Marxists, for example, think that power is either possessed by the bourgeois or the proletariat.

but exercised; that power comes not from the top (centre) but flows from the bottom (periphery); that power is not always repressive but also productive. Foucault argues that power is permanent, repetitious, inherent and self-producing. It is a complex and strategic situation and is tense, unstable, unbalanced, and heterogeneous. Power has a multiple, unstable, contested, precarious and relational nature, which Foucault assumes, permeates every social relation.

In the Foucauldian conceptualisation of power, "resistance" appears almost parallel to it. Foucault says, "where there is power, there is resistance" (1980:95). Since power is omnipresent, the points of resistance too are everywhere in the power network. He says, resistance is inscribed in power irreducibly. Hence resistance too is distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots or focuses of which are spread over time and space in varying densities (Foucault, 1980:96). In other words, the existence of power depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance.

Despite Foucault's much acclaimed contribution to the area of power and discourse, feminists are quite sceptical of his position. Although Foucault offers no direct challenge to feminists, and rather seems personally sympathetic to women's struggle (Ramazanoglu, 1993), still his works have particular implications for feminist thought and politics. Several feminists have commented on his lack of interest in gender (see Braidotti, 1991; Faith, 1994; Ramazanoglu, 1993). They ask: why should feminist scholarship pay attention to Foucault's work? Ramazanoglu (1993:7), for example, maintains that "Foucault's version of social construction does not resolve problems about how one understands the body from the vantage point of subordinated women's bodily experiences." Others even argue that feminism may be pushed in danger of being shifted from an emancipatory global movement to a philosophical specialism if it follows the Foucauldian track of postmodernism.

> The ways in which Foucault's work challenges feminism...is by no means straightforward. While Foucault might criticise feminism for the limitations and rigidities of its conception of the 'truth' of patriarchy, feminists could criticise Foucault because he did not recognize that his supposedly neutral analysis of truth, power and sexuality as produced in discourses, comes from a male perspective (Ramazanoglu, 1993:4-5).

I find another important limitation in Foucauldian discourse that it does not properly theorise on the direction of power. Foucault challenged the conventional notions of power, but Mies complimented on it, through the analysis of GDL, how power is a constructed socially.

2.2.4.2 Sexuality

In feminist writing "sexuality" refers to an aspect of personal and social life that has erotic significance: not only erotic desires, practices and identities but also the discourses and social arrangements which construct erotic possibilities (Jackson and Scott, 1996). Feminists see sexuality not as a question of choice of women and men as individual biological beings, but as a political site of power relations. There have been two dominant paradigms to analyse sexuality: essentialism and constructivism (Wieringa, forthcoming; Wieringa and Blackwood, 1999). Essentialism as an idea assumes that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions (Rubin, 1984). Essentialists are biological determinists and argue that women's sexual (i. e., biological) difference from men is the main cause of women's oppression. But radical constructivists counter-argue that it is oppression not biology that produces sexual difference (see Wieringa, forthcoming). As the later argue, sexuality is a social construction produced historically. They do not consider sexual behaviour as fixed, but fluid and variable. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was a "decisive blow" against essentialism while Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* ultimately contributed to displace it (Wieringa, forthcoming). Foucault maintains that sexuality must not be seen as a drive, which is alien and natural, but as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power (Foucault, 1980:103).

A notion of the body is central to the postmodern feminist understanding of the oppression of women. In postmodern debates on sexuality, Foucault's work has been the

20

main impetus that problematises the "regulatory mechanism which circumscribes the sexualized body" (MacNay, 1992:11). Sexuality is a site that shapes, reproduces, articulates and transforms gender relations. Issues of sexuality are therefore integral in the whole spectrum of power relations between women and men. Sexuality as a concept offers important analytical framework in analysing the construction of gender regime of power. (In polyandry it is more so where a single woman has to accommodate multiple cohusbands.) Foucault argues that sex is a focal point of the exercise of power because it exercises control over the human body (Weedon, 1987:118), which Foucault calls the discursive constitution of the body (Foucault, 1980). Thus, the constructivist conceptualisation of sexuality offers a potentially creative and flexible analytical potential in understanding power relationship between women and men.

2.3 Conclusion

From this review, I find postmodern feminism as a framework of analysis nearly complete regarding my research questions. It is so particularly on issues of power and sexuality. Nevertheless, its emphasis on gender and body leaves out some equally important issues, such as property and the GDL. I, therefore, complement it by drawing some insights form socialist feminism. I apply Engels' analysis in understanding the dynamics of material conditions in polyandry, followed by Mies' conception of the GDL.

Following what structuralists suggest, I further complement this discussion on property and sexuality with the corresponding role of kinship and see its regulating role. Rubin regards sexuality and economy, kinship organisation and production system as "inextricably connected, without one being necessarily dominant over the other" (Uyl, 1995:48). Regarding liberal feminism, I find it not meaningful so much for my analysis of polyandry because of its excessive concentration on "housework" that explicitly leaves the issues of power and sexuality untouched. Liberal analysis responds to the position of women in the typical middle-class, the bourgeois and well-educated society in the West.

Chapter Three
THE WORKINGS OF POLYANDRY IN NYINBA GAON

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets an overall context in which Nyinba polyandry operates. It describes the human ecology of Nyinba polyandry and embarks into the aspects of communal history of the Nyinba society, which juxtaposes and reinforces the logic that polyandry brings prosperity, and that it is a mechanism of low growth population. Comparison of Nyinba with Thehe, a neighbouring Hindu village,[20] clearly reveals it. Discussion on Nyinba kinship demonstrates how the gendered regimes of property and sexuality are underpinned in it. Following Rubin (1975), I posit kinship as the regulating mechanism of sex/gender system that produces gender inequality in terms of property allocation and inheritance.

3.2 The community history of the Nyinba

Located in the remote and inaccessible northwest border adjacent to Tibet (see Appendix 1), Humla is one of the poorest districts in Nepal with the smallest per capita land holding and the lowest level of human development (NESAC, 1998). The study site is a high mountain valley at the centre of the district.[21] There are several small and clustered hamlets, located on gentle to steppe slopes approximately 10,000 feet above sea level. Although one finds many Tibetan settlements, the Nyinba in particular have an

---

[20] Due to the lack of space, I could not give the description on Nyinba's neighbouring Hindu village, such as Thehe. For an anthropological account of Nepalese Hindu society in general and position of Hindu women in the household in particular, see Bennett (1983).

[21] The district of Humla is not yet connected to any motorable road. One small airport is located at the district headquarters, but the plane service is not reliable. It is in a ten days of walking distance from the nearest roadhead.

exclusive concentration in four villages, called Bargaon, Buraunse, Limatang and Todpa.[22]

The Nyinba is a migrant Tibetan community. Their legends exemplify the glory of their ancestors, and link the history of their arrival as far as twelfth century. Nyinba legends commonly trace ties with high caste Hindus in terms of kinship (Levine, 1988:29). However, the Nyinba are ranked lower in the caste hierarchy by the Hindu (Levine, 1988:24).

Nyinba legends also reveal many facets of the past economic and demographic life in Humla and their relations with the neighbouring Hindu neighbours. One popular Nyinba legend says: *Aath alo Thihal, chaubis alo Barkhang* (means "there were [just] eight households in Thehe, in Bargaon 24"). Thehe is a nearest village to Bargaon (in a 15-minute walking distance) inhabited by monogamous Hindus. Although no one knows exactly which period of history this particular legend refers to, by 1997, the total number of households in Thehe was well over 300 while that of Bargaon it was still 48. If we compare the population of these two villages over the course of time, it may appear that the population growth in polyandry is much less than that in monogamy.

I saw and talked to many Thehe inhabitants doing wage labour in Nyinba Gaon. This was completely a reverse case compared to anecdotal observations of some five decades before when the poor Nyinba used to go to Thehe for wage earning, it is said. Due to monogamy in Thehe, each incidence of inheritance meant successive fragmentation of the household property, which the Nyinba managed to escape successfully because of polyandry. The Nyinba were also able to deploy several brothers in different production fronts. Under monogamy it was not possible for the Thehe villagers. The end result was

---

[22] The present study is based on one of these villages, nicknamed as "Nyinba Gaon" (means, "Nyinba village") to protect the privacy of the respondents. There were a total of 379 men and women during 1997. The average household size in Nyinba Gaon was considerably larger (7.4 members in 1997) than the national average in Nepal (5.6 members in 1991) (CBS, 1993). The average sex ratio was in favour of males (107 men per hundred women). Interestingly, the sex ratio of polyandrous households was much higher (149 men per hundred women) than nonpolyandrous ones (which was 81) (Luintel, 1998).

successive impoverishment of Thehe households vis-à-vis the Nyinba who had been prospering over the years.

3.3 The Nyinba kinship

Nyinba polyandry is fraternal. Usually, a woman goes through a marriage ceremony with one of the several brothers;[23] others presumably join her as husbands later. If one of the brothers decides not join her, no one can force him. But if he gets into another marriage, usually he is expelled from the home whether or not he had joined the common wife any time before. In such a case, he has no customary rights to claim over property.

The wife has to address each of the husbands by a common term *khimjang* (see Appendix 2 for kinship terminology). The children from these alliances would recognise the group of brothers as the group of fathers. They address all of them as *aaya*, using suffix if the fathers are many. In a similar way, irrespective of paternity, all brothers treat all of the children equally and use the common terms to address them (*puja* for son and *pu(n)* for daughter).

Most important to Nyinba kinship is what anthropologists call "bifurcate merging." In Nyinba society, while all the father's brothers are grouped with the father (*aaya*) and addressed by the same term,[24] the mother's brother is, however, treated somewhat differently and given a separate term (*aajang*). Since these terms (*aaya* and *aajang*) bifurcate the collateral lines (that is, they differentiate between the kins of father's and mother's sides), and merge one of them (here, father's brothers) with the lineal kin (that is, father once again), it is called "bifurcate merging" (see Lowie, 1950).

Bifurcate merging is important for the Nyinba in two senses. First, it places all fathers on an equal footing (reflected in the use of the common term). What is more important is that the Nyinba do not have an individualising term to single out the *pater*

---

[23] Of the 19 polyandrous women I interviewed, 10 reported that they were married with the eldest; the other 9 with junior brothers.

[24] In case, father's brothers are too many suffix is added to avoid the confusion, thus *ganda* (the eldest), *parwa* (next in the order of age), *jyonda* (third one) and *chima* (the youngest), etc.

from the group of fathers. Since any one of mother's several cohusbands could be a real father ("genitor"), all brothers in father's generation are, therefore, recognised equally as "likely fathers." Second, the system of bifurcate merging has multiple impacts on kinship relations at secondary and tertiary levels regarding property and sexuality. So far as a Nyinba marriage is concerned, bifurcate merging implies much. Since it separates out an ego's mother's brother (*aajang*) from the group of father's brothers (*aaya*), thereby allowing the ego to marry with an *aajang*'s children. The result is the practice of cross-cousin marriage, a practice the Nyinba preferred customarily.[25]

Regarding the collateral sides, the Nyinba use different terms for brother's and sister's children. To the brother's children a male ego applies exactly the same term he uses for his own children (see Appendix 2). But a sister's children are addressed by distinct terms. An ego calls *chhou* for sister's son and *chhau(n)* for sister's daughter. Once again, different terms are used to denote the children of equal collateral distance can be understood in the context of social organisation of polyandry. In Nyinba polyandry, a brother's children might mean one's own children if the ego is under cohusbandship, a case never applicable to a sister's children.

For the Nyinba, "descent and kinship are genealogical matters which are grounded in theories of hereditary transmissions" (Levine, 1988:38). The Nyinba express a number of formalised ideas regarding how property inheritance should be managed. Its underlying system is embedded in kinship. At the symbolic level, the Nyinba state that *ru* ("bone") passes in pure form from father to child through the medium of sperm. As the Nyinba believe it, women also have a similar bone as men have but she can pass it to their children only through the medium of *sha* ("blood") (see footnote 16). For Nyinba it is "bone" that matters more than "blood." Consequently, men inherit property and women receive "proper maintenance" relative to it (see section 4.3).

---

[25] One possible explanation for using a separate term to mother's brother might be that under cross-cousin marriage, he becomes closer as affinal kin. It is one example that shows the functional utility of kinship in regulating Nyinba sexuality and constructing gender identity.

3.4 Interpersonal relationship in polyandry

3.4.1 The question of paternity

Although the eldest brother acts as the "social father" for all the children begotten by that marriage, in the daily life the Nyinba tend to identify the "genitor." The main responsibility of designating paternity is that of the wife. It is through this responsibility that women's autonomy within the household is recognised. By Nyinba perception, this is also an "excuse" for her illegitimate and extra-marital liaisons,[26] if any (see section 5.4). (By designating paternity she could "legitimise" it, as it is said.) This is one of the privileges for the Nyinba women to upgrade her position within the power hierarchy of household. Designation of paternity to one against other cohusbands is a politics through which she could share a sense of marital belongingness to many cohusbands tactfully. She could even play "tricks" in designating paternity to the particular husband who has grievances of being sexually neglected.

In a very few cases, paternity is also designated by order of birth, when the first child is attached to the eldest brother, second to the next and so on. It rotates back to the eldest again if the number of children exceeds the number of fathers, which is very rare case. This custom has also been reported in the case of *Pahari* polyandry (Berreman, 1962). In either case (whether paternity is assigned on mother's discretion or decided on the basis of rotation), physical resemblances between the child and particular father may be established. However, once paternity is established, nobody questions it, until something serious happens.

3.4.2 Fraternal solidarity and the female-head

Levine argues that an ideological emphasis on the equality of the brothers is central to the Nyinba perception of polyandrous marriage and is evidenced in interpersonal relationships. It is considered wrong for any brother to try to gain a monopoly over the

---

[26] Division of marital and extra-marital sexuality like this is my own categorisation for the sake of analysis.

26

woman's attention and services (Levine, 1980:287). Domestic authority is customarily exercised by *aaju* (the eldest brother). He is considered as *dag-pa*, the male-head of the household. The customary leadership of *dag-pa* is established firmly. The marriage gets (legal) recognition in his name. For administrative purposes the children are "registered" as his children. The estate and property are his property. By virtue of this authority, the *dag-pa* may manage himself to stay at home the whole year. This has two benefits: first, he can enjoy regular sex with the wife for most of the time.[27] Staying at home and looking after the estate is not only an easy job but also gives political authority outside the family. Although some *dag-pas* take advantage of monopolising this authority, there are others who pay much attention to the comfort and convenience of younger brother(s).[28]

Despite some politico-legal authority, however, the *dag-pa* has no absolute rights: neither sexual (such as over access to the wife), nor reproductive (such as over children) or otherwise (over property, for example). It seems that Nyinba polyandry is a system of balance of power and operates on a mutual understanding where individuals (both male and female) are willing to sacrifice their personal comforts. On the whole, there does not appear a monolithic center of power. For example, the *dag-pa* cannot avoid the *dag-mo* (female-head). The *dag-mo*, too, cannot avoid other co-husbands because of their respective contribution to the prosperity of the household's economy. Instead, if the eldest brother is not "smart," the clever one may emerge as the de facto *dag-pa*. Since the *dag-pa*ship is not a position, but a set of expected roles, the role of *dag-mo* in the household, I argue, is much more vital for Nyinba social life.

---

[27] In the course of trade or transhumance other brothers remain outside the home every year for several months by turn.

[28] For example, there are some cases where the elder brother would not formally marry with the girl he loves. Rather he would wait a couple of years so that the younger brother is sufficiently grown up to select particular girl he likes to marry. The elder brother(s) will join up her after the marriage.

Figure 1: Location of men and women in different forms of marriage

| Polygyny | Monogamy | Polyandry |
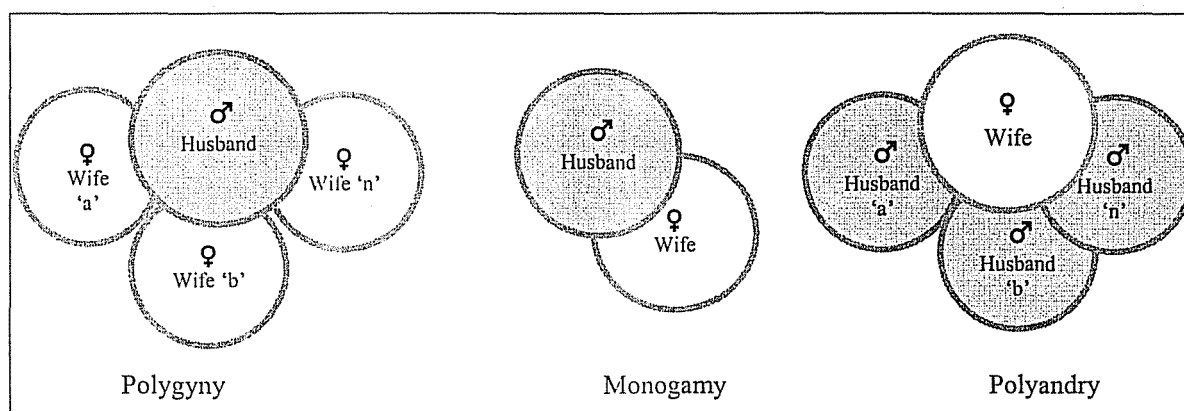
Polyandry without fraternal solidarity can neither sustain, nor make any sense. It is a system of delicate balance within contestations and negotiations of power depending on the extent of mutual understanding and co-operation. At the center of this is the *dag-mo*, the female-head, as the pivot. Due to her centripetal role, Nyinba males consider each woman a potential nucleus for a separate property (thereby, separate family). Presence of more than a woman in a family therefore logically transforms the direction of power towards centrifugal character. In order to avoid family break ups (and thereby minimise potential partition of labour power and property), they prefer to stay under one marriage per generation. Thus, because of the presence of a single woman amidst many men, she is positioned at the centre of the kinship within the family (see Figure 1).

In a Nyinba household, if there is any one having extensive information and knowledge over every domestic issue, it is *dag-mo*. She is the locus of communication and medium of contact for all the cohusbands. Regarding property, the *dag-mo* has access to, if not ownership of, all frontiers: trade, transhumance[29] or agriculture. She can have an extensive account of economic activities throughout the year. Despite the fact that the *dag-pa* (male-head) has recognised authority in all the decisions, in practice the *dag-mo*

---

[29] Transhumance is a pastoralism-based subsistence activity materially and ideologically based on movement in a seasonal rhythm (see section 4.5).

has pragmatic power due to her central position. It appears that the *dag-pa* is a titular head vis-à-vis the *dag-mo*, as some Nyinba maintain it.

Chapter Four
LOCATING GENDER AND POWER IN SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF PROPERTY

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I attempt to apply the Foucauldian concept of power to the economic aspect of gender relations. I also attempt to combine Foucault (1980) with Engels (1972), Mies (1986) and Rubin (1975) to see how a property regime in polyandry is constructed and maintained and to know whether it favours one gender (arguably the male) against other (the female). As Engels (1972) indicates, the historical shift of inheritance from the mother's side to the father's side was the result of the principle of social organisation itself. When I look at this issue from the Foucauldian perspective, I see a clear connection between power and property, because property was the organising principle of the society that shifted the line, flow and direction of power through the corresponding pattern of sexuality. This chapter shows that property is the base of Nyinba polyandry where women's economic interests are largely ignored and marginalised for the sake of so-called fraternal solidarity.

I take property not just as a matter of subsistence, but as an effective site of force relations. What appears to me is shifting, dynamic and plural relations between women and men that involve economic co-operation and support as well as resistance and contest. In an attempt to search the material base of gender relations, I also explore the GDL. Following Leibowitz (1986:43), I argue that the GDL is not simply a division of productive activities by sex. More comprehensively, it is the totality of social relations between men and women joined together in a production system. It seems to me that the GDL reproduces a socially mandated institutionalisation of the gender-based social organisation (Leibowitz, 1986).

30

In Nyinba society, power permeates in property in the form of gender inequality. What matters to me is, how are economic relations shaped between Nyinba women and men. To be precise, I try to answer: which property is valued and which not? Who holds and controls it? What are its gender implications? In this context, one may be interested to see whom -- men or women -- have legitimate claim over productive resources? How is property shared within a household and how is it handed over to the next generation? What are the regulating roles of kinship regarding all these processes? How are gender relations shaped due to differential access to property and different gender roles? To maintain the particular form of property regime, what sort of sexuality has been deployed? What linkages are there between the domains of property and sexuality? These are some of the questions that pave way to establish a link between power, property and gender relations.

4.2 Nyinba property system: An overview

The Nyinba evaluate a household's wealth primarily through the extent of its land-holdings, the size of herds and cattle. Ownership of valuables follows next, comprised of money, gold, ornaments, turquoise, coral beads, brass utensils, carpets, silk and ceremonial clothing, etc. (Levine, 1988:233).

Agriculture, transhumance and trade are the three main pursuits of subsistence, each of which demands full-time labour. Agriculture is vulnerable due to the area's high elevation, steppe slope, poor soil fertility and low levels of rainfall, etc. Although better than other Humli villages, Nyinba Gaon is still not self-sufficient in food supply. An important source of cash is transhumance (breeding and selling animals) called *pakhar*. The Nyinba domesticate a relatively larger number of cattle and herds than their Hindu neighbours. Numerically speaking, sheep used to be the single most important animal the Nyinba keep. Of total livestock (2352 in 1997), sheep and goats occupied 83 percent, followed by horse, *jhuma* (female yak), and cows (8 and 4.5 percent, respectively).

31

For the Nyinba, trade and transaction (called *chhalam-chhongdo*) are a matter of pride. Among other things, the social status of a family very much depends on the extent of its involvement in *chhalam-chhongdo*. *Chhalam-chhongdo* is characterised by long distance trade, usually seasonal, if not year-round. Traditionally it involves a huge number of pack animals, slow but an incessant movement and "on-the-way transaction" (that is, bartering, such as, for instance, grain for salt). Involvement in trade demands a large number of adult males followed by a sufficient number of herds and cattle, and skillful "tradesmanship." It is possible only to those who follow polyandry. Monogamous households cannot arrange all these complications because usually they have only one adult male.

4.3 Kinship and women's economic exclusion

The Nyinba accept that the animals and other material goods do enhance a standard of living, but unlike land these are "impermanent." Movable properties are not considered important so far as maintaining *trongbat*[30] status is concerned. The logic is that such property can be easily sold or even given away in daughters' dowries, so are less reliable. For the Nyinba, land provides a principal source of subsistence. It gives a household name (thereby, fame). Land is not available for sale any more, since the best areas were put into production generations ago.

Nyinba is a patrilineal society. Therefore, the inheritance of property takes place through the male line. But the absolute rights to lifelong membership accrue to all children born to any married partners in the household. It is unconditional. In polygyny the child from the first wife would enjoy precedence, however (Levine, 1988). In polygynous polyandry,[31] as in Chumik (another polyandrous society in the district of Mustang), a Nyinba daughter from the first wife would get "an unusually good dowry."

---

[30] *Trongbat* is a group of households originated from a common ancestor. In anthropology it is called a lineage group.

[31] Polygynous polyandry is a marital situation when many cohusbands share at a time many wives, which often takes place due to not having a son by the first wife. (I came across one case in which one man brought as many as seven wives consecutively to ensure having a son.)

(However, the estate would go to the second wife's son, if any.) Thus there is a precedence of son over daughter, irrespective of whether he is from the first or second wife. The same does not apply to the daughter.

Second, in practice, it appears that children usually remain with their mother in case of a divorce (Schuler, 1987:105). Ironically, it is the father who deserves rights over property. The woman who divorces her husband gets nothing except her own dowry back. The woman who is a widow cannot sell or bequeath any of it. She has to "keep" her husband's estate so long as the children are grown up. It is the later who will have full rights to the property of the deceased father.

Third, while sons succeed absolutely to head the household and estate, daughters only receive a dowry when married (or "lifelong maintenance" if never wed). The quantity and the value of dowry vary considerably, depending on the resources and generosity of the parents. In most cases the dowry consists of kitchen utensils, brass pots, woollen blankets, leather overcoat, and pack animals such as horse, female yak, sheep, etc.[32]

Of the 19 polyandrous women (of the 23 total), 10 did not get a dowry of any sort. It might be attributed to the higher rate of "love marriage" than "arranged" ones. One partial explanation for higher rates of love marriages is to avoid the burdens of dowry and other ritual expenses. Of the 19 female respondents, five reported that their dowry had already been mixed up in the household property, which they could reclaim if they wished. In the remaining cases, there was no record at all. When asked, did they feel any sense of economic security with a large dowry; all the women replied "no." One of them volunteered to remark "you would find no Nyinba woman feeling safe on the grounds that she had a good dowry." All of them, however, acknowledge that dowry amount matters at the time of a daughter's marriage, when mothers would be willing to add to a daughter's dowry on her behalf.

---

[32] I found very few cases where dowry consisted of land also. The location of such land, however, was very marginal, and the size too small. So the land given in dowry was not an independent cultivating unit.

One final note. In Tibetan society in general and Tibetan polyandry in particular, the existence of *trongbat* appears at the core of property inheritance. *Trongbat* is a group of households sharing a common lineage. *Trongbat* holds an ultimate right of inheritance of the household estates. A household without any child (to serve as heir), for example, transfers its estates to the household most closely related to in the *trongbat* alliance, and these two households thereupon merge (Levine, 1988:29-30). This happens when one of the families fails to produce "even" a daughter who could marry uxorilocally[33] to continue the household (Levine, 1988:187).

4.4 Sex roles and gender stereotyping

Two decades ago, a multi-community study in Nepal examined the GDL and the time spent on work in rural households (Acharya and Bennett, 1981). The study revealed that in *conventional economic activities* (animal husbandry, manufacturing, and paid employment) the actual level of women's contribution is closer to 80 percent of men's. When *subsistence activities* (such as food processing, water collection, etc) are added, it goes to roughly equal to those of men. And when *domestic works* (washing, cleaning, cooking, etc.) are added, women are found to be working 3.5 hours more than men (11 hours for female and 8.5 hours for male per day) (Acharya and Bennett, 1981:159). In a similar way, an adult Nyinba women works two hours more (8.80 hrs.) than her male counterpart (6.80 hrs.) on an average day (Levine, 1988:156).

Nyinba women usually concentrate on agriculture: the primary source of income. They contribute far more time in agricultural tasks than men do. By contrast, men specialise in diverse nonfarm tasks (Levine, 1988:205). They are more apt in trading than in agriculture. The pride of Nyinba is trade, which only men do, while the work depreciated is agriculture, which mainly women do. For men, involvement in agriculture is sporadic, and the demands of trade take many of them away from the home for months, a point I come back in section 4.5.

---

[33] In uxorilocal marriage husband moves to the wife's location as resident son-in-law.

Men are responsible for ploughing and planting seeds at regular intervals throughout the agricultural season. They also build and maintain terrace walls. Nevertheless, women engage in a broader range of agriculture tasks and shoulder the major responsibility. Their tasks require regular labour for longer periods, such as weeding, and those considered distasteful, such as preparing compost. Weeding is particularly time-consuming. Levine (1988:207) estimates that men's work in a plot of field takes a day to plow, while it takes a woman from five to fifteen days to weed thoroughly in the same plot of land. Some crops require two or even three cycles of weeding.

Women are engaged in agriculture work throughout the year except the deepest winter (December to March), when the ground is covered with snow. Then they spend more time in food-processing and cloth preparation for the family - tasks left over from the summer. Women carry loads on their back, while men use animals to carry their loads. Men are responsible for activities requiring greater strength, while women concentrate on activities requiring slower and sustained labour and finer work. Women are often provided with tasks of preparing compost, manuring the land, cleaning cloths, washing dishes, etc. Women's involvement in those "unpleasant or polluting tasks" is explained by their lower status (Levine, 1988:211).

Men rely on women not only for certain kinds of agricultural work, but also for the processing of food and its preparation and other domestic activities that must be performed on a daily basis throughout the year. Men undertake some of these tasks occasionally, but not very happily (Levine, 1988). Because of this, households cannot survive without the labour of adult women.

4.5 Polyandry, prosperity and the rhythm of movement

The Nyinba require deploying labour activities in widely different frontiers simultaneously. Involvement in a single sector means impoverishment (as the case of Thehe illustrates, see section 3.2), which the Nyinba would never accept. One man stays with the cattle in high altitude pastures, another might follow the herds towards the

lowland winter pasture. Still a third one stays in the village looking after children, the elderly, the estate and the property. Hence, they are involved in a delicately balanced rhythm of movement for trade and transhumance (and, occasionally pilgrimage), which is possible if they are under polyandry (see case one, Appendix 3). Thus, every year Nyinba men spend a considerable length of time away from their homes.

Male mobility fulfills many requirements. First, it eliminates the possibility of sex jealousy among the brothers. Second, it reduces the number of family members depending for subsistence on the limited domestic production. Third, outside involvement maximizes total output. It is one of the means of economic prosperity that makes it possible for Nyinba to maintain a "pride of polyandry." Otherwise, they would remain as poor as their Hindu neighbours.[34] The gender implication of all this is that men are widely informed; they keep wider outside contacts and are proud of being engaged in it. They also glamorise their activity of trade. Women, on the contrary, are confined to housework and the farms, which the Nyinba give less value.

---

[34] The economic gaps between the Nyinba and their Hindu neighbours were clearly revealed in 1998 famine when more than 200 Humli were reported to have died due to a lack of food and the spread of cholera. Almost all of the victims were from the Hindu villages and none of them were from any Tibetan settlement.

Chapter Five

DIVERSE SEXUALITY, WIDER CHOICES:
POWER-PLEASURE SPIRAL IN POLYANDRY

5.1 Introduction

The issue of power that appears in sexuality is a complex one. It is Foucault who draws our attention to a large set of productive power relations operating throughout the social body which constitutes the subject of modern sexual experience (Sawicki, 1991). As Foucault argues, power has not operated primarily by denying sexual expression but by creating forms of sexuality we practice. In this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate how sexuality is practiced among the Nyinba and how power spirals in that form of sexuality. I argue that power in Nyinba sexuality is more productive than repressive. I demonstrate it by Nyinba perception that sexuality is not only for reproduction but also for pleasure as reflected in their diverse forms of sexuality. Nyinba sexuality is open, flexible, multiple and dynamic. It does not have "sexual rigidities" that the Hindu neighbours have. For both men and women there is enough scope for sexual choice and negotiation, contestation and resistance (not only among partners but also between spouses). Nyinba polyandry is so rich in extra-marital sexuality that girls and boys, men and women have enough space for making decisions of their own.

As mentioned repeatedly, the position of women among multiple husbands is central. Because of her virtual central location, she can deploy different forms of sexual practices based on specific situation. Assignment of paternity based on the wife's conscience is one of several Nyinba practices to demonstrate that Nyinba women have relative autonomy within the household. Freedom of mate selection, possibility of easy divorce, multiple forms of marital and extra-marital sexuality are some of the issues, as I would illustrate soon, which reveal that power in polyandry is neither male-centered nor is monolithic.

The section on "marital sexuality" shows how Nyinba women manage their sexual relations with their multiple husbands. The "extra-marital sexuality" demonstrates how rich the Nyinba are with respect to their sexuality outside marriage. I argue that Nyinba is an open society regarding sexuality, not because it is Tibetan (as some tend to argue), but more so because it is polyandrous. Gender relations in polyandry therefore potentially call for an alternative analysis of power relations between men and women, which is completely different from the ones feminist literature is acquainted with. It also challenges the analytical applicability of the universalising and homogenising concepts such as "patriarchy" and the radical feminists' claims that (hetero)sexuality is oppressive to the women cross-culturally.

5.2 Marriage rules and mate selection

For the Nyinba, there is no standard pattern of marriage. There are some cases where a family has only one son, thus the question of being polyandrous or not is inapplicable. In other cases it is explicitly fixed that the entire group of brothers would share a wife right from the moment marriage occurs. Still in some other cases, one of the brothers (not necessarily the eldest) leads the marriage rituals (with or without consultation in the presence of the others) and "brings the wife," whom the others could share if they wished. Hence, some marriages are monogamous originally but lead to polyandry; others are polyandrous right from the beginning. There might be some cases appearing monogamous, but are polyandrous by origin. In such cases one of the cohusbands expires. There are many cases when brothers sharing a wife split off and (re)marry monogamously. In such a case, polyandry breaks up due to fraternal dislike or misunderstanding. As a result, what was once polyandry breaks into monogamy.

Since the Nyinba follow the practice of ethnic endogamy, they cannot go beyond four Nyinba villages for mating. The Nyinba also follow a rule of *nyen* (cross-cousin) marriage. This is, however, a customary preference. In practice, an overwhelming majority of Nyinba marriage is non-cross-cousins. For example, of the 89 ever married women in Nyinba Gaon recorded during this study, only seven marriages were cross-

38

cousins.[35] Of the total 89, a vast majority (84 per cent) of marriage was *samthache* (love marriage), followed by five per cent *paklen* (arranged marriage) and the rest *jari* (elopement), *dyakcha* (marriage by capture), and *syuna* (informal celebration).[36] One possible explanation for the high rates of love marriage, including elopement, is that the families involved can avoid the burden of dowry and other expenses such as lavish feasts, etc. A love marriage offers a short-cut and economic way of avoiding ritually tiring formalities of arranged marriage.

5.3 Marital sexuality and women's autonomy

Among the Nyinba, marriage is usually patrilocal and normally monogamous or polyandrous, followed by very few cases of polygyny. Unlike Tibetan practices, bi-generational polyandry (father and son sharing a spouse)[37] was not found in Nyinba Gaon. Polygynous polyandry (two or more brothers sharing more than one wife simultaneously) was also not found. As in Limi, another Humli Tibetan village, bilateral cross-cousin marriage was esteemed but rarely followed in practice.

In Nyinba Gaon, 23 of the 73 current marriages recorded were polyandrous (Luintel, 1998).[38] The 23 polyandrous marriages included 23 females and 56 males. This means each polyandrous marriage accommodated approximately 2.43 males per female. Two husbands sharing a wife was the most popular (16 cases) case. There were also cases of three husbands (four cases) and even four husbands (three cases). Tambiah (1966) found up to seven husbands for one wife among the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka, which was not the case among the Nyinba.

---

[35] Of these seven women, four were groom's mother's brother's daughters while the rest three were his father's sister's daughters.

[36] *Dyakcha* (marriage by capture) is practiced when a girl is not willing to marry with the boy. In such a case, the boy accompanied by his friends captures her "forcefully" and brings back to his home. After a couple of days this forceful marriage is formalized with a payment of some nominal punishment to the family of the girl. *Syuna* is an informal and short celebration of marriage once groom is brought in with her voluntary consent.

[37] Not mother of the son, but a new one brought once his mother dies.

[38] Out of 73, two households consisted of unmarried children with widow female-heads.

39

The eldest brother usually sleeps in the main bed of the kitchen, called *mahang*. Customarily, he has priority in having sex with the wife. This is reflected by the fact that the wife is supposed to sleep in **his bed**. The junior brothers' beds are usually in other rooms, such as *lahang* on the first floor, just opposite of *mahang*, or *chyang-ma* on the second floor.[39] Younger brothers will have access to her but later, in order of seniority, if it is applicable. Sometimes, they have to wait a long for their turn, even weeks, if there are many brothers.

It is the Nyinba belief that no two siblings should sleep in a single bed at the same time. It might bring "ill health, loss of herds, loss of profit in trade and other such harms." They could easily tolerate "sharing mouth"[40] or even intercourse (with common wife or girl friend), but never a bed. So, logically, each brother has to sleep separately.[41] Access to the wife is not a serious problem for other reasons also. *First*, almost all (except one) adult Nyinba male would spend most of the months away from home. The possibility of confusion, conflict and jealousy related to sex is therefore significantly reduced. *Second*, in case more than one husband happens at home at one time, the Nyinba have a customary norm that the arriving brother has the first right to be with the wife. In such a case, usually after dinner, the one who was at home would go to the village and come back late at the night. By that time the wife is expected to have been occupied by the arriving husband already.

Third, if there is more than one husband staying at home for a longer period (say, for example, a couple of weeks), this is, of course, the most inconvenient time. In such a case (see photographs, Appendix 4), the wife has two choices. Usually, she has to set a rule of sleeping with one husband for a couple of nights, and joining another subsequently.

---

[39] The traditional architectural design of the Nyinba house is so convenient that the wife, for example, can move across all rooms and floors in pin-drop-silence and without knocking on any door.

[40] "Sharing mouth," means sharing the same dishes. Sharing dishes has ritual significance regarding sexuality. Once boys and girls "share" the same wooden bowl, called *furu*, while drinking liquor, they are not supposed to be sexual partners any time in their life. So the ideology is either share sex or mouth, not both.

[41] It was perhaps one of the social taboos the Nyinba developed to maintain sexual privacy. It could ease a wife's discomfort at approaching one of the several cohusbands.

Unfortunately, sometimes it happens that the junior cohusband is too aggressive and impatient to wait for his turn. In such a case, the wife has to "understand" him. The only second option she has is to visit each husband by turn within a single night so long as she feels physically and psychologically capable.

In polyandry, a single rule for sexual arrangements does not work all the time and in all circumstances (Levine, 1988:151-152). It is the wife who has to strategize and deploy a set of alternatives specific to situations. It is the "duty" of the wife to share not only sex but also emotions among all so as not to let the situation become complicated.

Despite her "fair deal" with and sincerity to all the cohusbands, problems do arise (see case two, Appendix 3). If there is perceived to be or real discrimination against particular husband(s), its repercussions appear in other ways. No brother complains directly that there has been unfair access to the wife. Exceptionally, if the one who had "first brought the wife" has grievances, he might seek his prerogative over her and challenge the other brothers (including the elder) to show their calibre by "bringing a wife" of their own.

Levine's (1988) observation is quite true when she writes that most Nyinba women initially like the eldest husband more regarding sex. The reasons are several: the two are often close in age, and usually the first sexual partners (within at least that marital union). Later years, women are apt to turn to younger husbands who are likely to be "sexually more attractive" by then (Levine, 1988). Sometimes the one very young in age and possibly even sexually socialized right from the beginning by herself becomes the most affectionate partner later in her life. Despite it, many of my polyandrous female respondents (12 out of 19) found the eldest husband more "reliable" of all, since unlike the others he was not likely to (re)marry monogamously.

There is no clear precedence regarding "who (husband or wife) should approach first at night?" Some women do not hesitate to approach their husbands. Others think his is

41

too forward and let their husbands come to them (Levine, 1988).[42] My female respondents expressed paradoxical claims. Some claimed initiating contact, others maintain that they waited for their husbands to approach first. This ambivalence, however, provides Nyinba women choice and space for negotiation, but sometimes also complication such as the case of Karchangma illustrates (see case two, Appendix 3).

5.4 Extra-marital sexuality and women's choice

Extra-marital sexual relations are observed among different cultural groups. Among the Sherpa, an ethnic Tibetan group in Nepal which had polyandry before, a boy was "free to enter into casual sex relations" with any unmarried girl within the limits of clan exogamy (Furer-Haimendorf, 1964). Among the Naik, polyandrous Khasa of Kumaon, India, extra-marital sexual relations were so much that it had threatened the very durability of the family unit (Majumdar, 1962). Aziz (1978) presents another interesting case of flexible and multiple sexual relations among the people of the upper Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal, adjacent to Tibet. Parmar's (1975) description gives still another account of "loose sex relations" in the polyandrous society of Himanchal Pradesh, India. A "fairly free sexual life" was also observed among the Bhotia of Sikkim (Nakane, 1966). "Sexual laxity and sexual experimentation of the wife" was reported among the polyandrous Sinhalese of Sri Lanka also (Tambiah, 1966).

Nyinba society is not an exception. Yet, marital and extra-marital sexual relations in Nyinba society are highly sober and institutional in the sense that it follows rules of endogamy-exogamy effectively. I would demonstrate in the following section that multiple venues for sexuality offers space for Nyinba women to exercise their agency, subjectivity and power. It is through this space that they are able to negotiate within the household. What follows is a description on the practice of extra-marital sexuality among the Nyinba. For the sake of convenience, I would categorise them into four types:

---

[42] In this strategy, the problem is that more than one husband may approach at a time. Therefore, usually husbands expect that it is wife who should approach first, or give hints to certain husband beforehand.

5.4.1 Chaya

The term *chaya* literally means "singing and dancing." Nyinba boys and girls (and sometimes even men and women) establish casual affairs under the *chaya* system that provides them after-work entertainment and sexual socialisation. This is a time (during September-October) when all Nyinba arrive in the village, bringing down yak and sheep from the high altitude pastures of the Tibetan frontier. This is a time of harvesting buckwheat, one of the principal staple crops. This is therefore also a time of getting together, sharing happiness and exchanging best wishes to each other.

Nyinba boys and girls make agreements in advance to get together at a fixed time at night. To ensure their commitments, boys and girls exchange items of interest, a custom called *kau*. The *kau* is an occasion to express preliminary consent of participation in the *chaya*. This is a time a girl can say "no." There is no argument if she denies it. As an expected norm of *kau*, the boy tries to stretch a girl's scarf. If willing, she allows the boy to take it. Otherwise, she offers some other items she has at the moment. In exchange, the boy gives a handkerchief, torch, or sometimes even a watch. He tries to make the value of items exchanged equivalent. The items exchanged are considered tokens of love and affection. Therefore they try to use as lovely an item as possible. The moment of *kau* is already an opportune time for them to initiate their liaison. Once an exchange of items is over, it "removes hesitation" if they had before. During the *kau*, they are not only in a close proximity, but also in a lonely place. They therefore do not hesitate to "join cheeks," a phrase used by Nyinba to refer to foreplay.

Actually, *chaya* is performed the next evening. The boyfriends come out at night with their male companions. To inform the girls of their arrival they whistle a long and use torch-lights on the way. If the girls are ready to depart at the moment, they will reply "*O s s rangi*" in a screaming voice. Then both sides advance to the customarily fixed place of *chaya*. It begins with singing and dancing in the group. The boys and girls pass the whole night being joyful and cheerful, talking, and laughing. Before dawn they bring

matters to a climax and are parted in pairs and may involve in sexual relations if they wish.[43]

Next morning, quite interestingly, all the boys and girls pretend to have come out of their own beds. Awakening in one's own bed is the condition that parents want to have adhered to by their sons and daughters. Otherwise, parents have to inquire where they were during the night. One possible explanation for this subterfuge may be that Nyinba parents perceive it as a form of sexual socialisation of their children, an essential part of their "youth culture." This is a time when boys and girls choose their prospective life-partner. High rates of love marriage (and even elopement and *jari* marriages) attest to this observation.

5.4.2 Khamdu-doya

Of the several boys and girls participating in *chaya,* some may fall in deep affection to proceed for *khamdu-doya* relationship, which literally means, "meet the friends." Under *khamdu-doya,* boys or men usually go to girls or women's beds secretly at night (see case three, Appendix 3). Their beds are almost in the fixed storey or room of the house.[44] Those are the parts of a Nyinba house where even a stranger can reach without any obstruction (see footnote 39).

If he finds her fast asleep, he softly strikes on her nose to wakening her. Once wakened, the girl is not afraid to see him at her bed at that time. It does not make any difference to her, provided they have mutual affection. She receives him with care and inquires about whether he faced any obstruction to see her. After an exchange of formality like this, they enjoy with titillation, romantic conversations and "joining their

---

[43] All these activities are not beyond the knowledge of the parents. The boys' whistling, girls' response in high-pitch voice, and singing songs are open activities. Nonetheless, the parents do not bother to peep on. There might be two reasons. First, it is one of the accepted Nyinba practices, which, I would say, is a part of their youth culture. Second, the parents themselves might have done the same during their youth, thus loosing any moral ground in prohibiting their sons and dauthers.

[44] The girls' usual place of sleeping is either veranda, called *khamdan* or *chyang-ma* room at the second floor. Alternatively, they can also sleep at the corridor (called *fikur*) or *lohang* (outer) at the first floor.

cheeks." If both of them wish to have sex, first they decide the place. Finally, the boy leaves the girl on her usual bed and returns back to his home. Process like this continues for years, so long as they enjoy it.

5.4.3 Syarba-syarmu

A third and still advanced level of liaison, especially between married men and women, is called syarba-syarmu: a kind of extra relationship outside formal marriage. The terms syarba and syarmu denote male and female partners, respectively. Usually but not necessarily, syarba-syarmu liaisons are established among married persons whose pre-marital affection was unsuccessful due to social taboos or other causes. It is a kind of permanent and established "adultery" that operates almost parallel to marital unions (see case four, Appendix 3).

Initially, a saitire ("matchmaker") helps initiate a syarba-syarmu affair. The saitire may be the same person who had contributed unsuccessfully to make their match at the time of formal marriage also. Involvement of the saitire indicates how institutionalised the syarba-syarmu liaisons are. At the beginning, the syarba sends secretly some gifts as a proposal.[45] If syarmu is willing, she invites the syarba for dinner on a suitable time. Again the saitire is the messenger. On such an occasion, she usually offers thutt.[46] If she is rich and skillful, she will also delight in offering old liquor, pickles of meat and jagdul (a kind of cake roasted in butter). These foods are also shared with the saitire as a reciprocation of his/her contribution to forming the liaison. After that, the saitire has to leave. He/she either returns to home or sleeps somewhere in the same house. Both the syarba and syarmu then come in close proximity with sexual intimacy and merryful conversations. With this, they establish a kind of durable sexual relation without destroying their marital unions on either side.

---

[45] In the gifts usually items of common use, such as shoes, socks, shirts, shawls, etc. are given.

[46] The thutt is a kind of sweet-cake made up of butter, sugar and yak butter. One piece of it usually weighs one kg. Offering the thutt as one of the items in dinner is a symbolic indication of ritual consent on behalf of the woman.

45

It is not always (possible) that they meet at home. A young *syarba* from a distant village might go on a horse at night to see his *syarmu*, or bring her somewhere in a lonely place. Upon completion of their business, the *syarba* escorts her back to home and comes back. (As an expected Nyinba practice, he comes out from his bed in the morning.) By Nyinba standard, a normal and expected age of *syarba-syarmu* liaisons is thirty to fifty years. However, the *syarba-syarmu* liaisons like this may continue for years even during their old age (probably even during their sexually passive days). There are even cases of an old *syarba* going, on a regular interval, to see his *syarmu* in the next village.

I have a number of cases collected from Nyinba Gaon which enable me to roughly estimate that the magnitude of *syarba-syarmu* liaisons is parallel to and little less than half of the marital unions. One may ask, what about the spouse of the person involved? Does not he or she mind? Of course, he or she minds it as the case of Karma exemplifies it (case four, Appendix 3). But the issue is that he himself (or she herself) might have similar affair with other woman (or men). In such case the person may loose moral ground to come in protest against spouse's liaison with other person. The best way for him or her is to ignore it and turn a blind eye. There are very rare cases that the husband protests against such affairs or vice versa. Indeed he or she can protest, but cannot stop his wife or her husband if they are really committed to continue it (case four, Appendix 3 illustrates it).

5.4.4 Casual occasions

Nyinba boys and girls have many other occasions on which they can entertain with new friendships and casual sexual relations. By Nyinba perspective, these "casual practices" do not follow any sexual norms. Sometimes they do not take into account even incest. It is why such sexual liaisons are considered "deviant" or "non-conformist." *Chhwa-jyagna,* held in the Raling monastery (somewhere on full-moon nights in May) is one such occasion. It is one of the most important Buddhist festivals of the area. It is also a kind of public display of Nyinba prosperity and sexuality in front of their monogamous Hindu neighbours. Boys and girls, "unmarried surplus women," and married men and

46

women alike take part in *chhwa-jyagna*. *Syon-thicha*, popularly called *bhotey nach*, followed by *deuda* are some of the popular dances performed. During the dance, teasing, snatching and scuffling, etc. are not considered "sexual harassment." Even unfamiliar persons are unhesitant to do so. Dance and associated physical intimacy are sort of pre-sex activities for the persons involved. It removes hesitation and lack of confidence, it is said. This is a group session during which willing boys, girls and married/unmarried persons may select their favourite partners for the night. Those who succeed with can leave the dancing crowd at any moment for *nyaula-charu-doya* (sexual indulgement). Pairs of girls and boys, men and women leave the dance gradually in between, and go somewhere nearby. The dance continues at night so long as there are still some hesitant aspirants.

The next is the fair of *saune punni* (fullmoon in July-August). By origin, it was a *khasia* (a category and a derivative of Hindu) fair, held at the Simikot Airport in the district headquarters. During the whole day, there is a public display of a variety of Humli dances including the famous *dhami* dance (dance of the village oracles). There is a break of three to four hours in the evening for dinner. What begins then is the second and the glamorous part of the fair in which the *khasia* boys and girls converge to participate in the *deuda* dance. From the last decade or more Nyinba boys and girls too are taking part in it, especially in the *deuda* dance. The dance includes teasing, snatching and scuffling (similar as *chhwa-jyagna*, described above). Eventually the boys and girls, who succeed in removing hesitation, and getting attached to the favoured ones, leave the dancing crowd, come down beneath the airport where there are a lot of bushes. They pass the whole night there.

Some of my informants at Simikot, who have been observing *saune punni* for the last several years told me that the fair has increased its charm once Nyinba boys and girls began to participate in it. They even estimate that about one quarter of the boys and girls who participate in this fair initiate their liaisons thereafter, either temporarily or permanently. And most interestingly, Nyinba boys and girls have begun to outnumber the *khasia* boys and girls in recent years.

47

Chapter Six

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Summary and Conclusions

The thematic focus of this paper is "power" as it is produced, shaped and exercised in polyandrous form of sexuality and the corresponding social organisation of property. The position of women in the Nyinba household is more or less equal to men, though the women do not hold any political positions. This finding is widely supported by the case of other polyandrous society also. Opler (1943, cited in Peters and Hunt, 1975), for example, maintains that in polyandry the status of women is well above the norm. Uyl (1995) too has a similar observation in the matrilineal society of the Nayars of India. Levine and Sangree (1980:390) argue that "polyandry is associated with high status for women." They also mention that "Tibetan [polyandrous] women have...been noted to have considerable autonomy and to act with a degree of self-possession" (ibid). Similar case has also been observed in the case of the *Pahari* polyandry in India relative to their monogamous sisters in the plain (Majumdar, 1962).

Regarding the direction of power, polyandry differs from monogamy and polygyny in the sense that it does not have a single locus of authority in the family. Therefore, polyandry has *horizontal* circuits of power as opposed to *vertical* power networks that exist in monogamy and polygyny. Despite that the male-head (*dag-pa*) holds the authority in principle, still due to other socio-economic and ecological causes, his authority is far less effective. In practice, it is female-head (*dag-mo*) who is powerful due to her virtual central location in the family. It means, there are multiple centres of power, and it flows not in a top-down but in a horizontal fashion.

48

The practice of resident son-in-law -- in which men enter into subordinate status to the women -- gives an indication that a tradition of women's higher position in the intra-family gender relations still continues. Although property is inherited by the male (usually, the eldest one), ownership is collective rather than individual. Due to the familial ownership of property, it matters little to an individual woman (in that sense to man also) who inherits it. Nyinba women feel secure in polyandry than in monogamy due to two mutually reinforcing reasons. One, in case one husband dies, another will be there to take care of her. So multiple husbands give them a sense of security, thereby avoiding the pity and stigma associated with widowhood (as it has to be faced by their monogamous sisters as well as Hindu women in neighbouring villages). Also, polyandry makes the household economically prosperous (due to the nonpartition of the property and pooling of the labour power) (see case one, Appendix 3).

For the Nyinba, children are important for two reasons: first, as labourers and second, as heirs. Since children are socially recognised as belonging to the family, not to an individual *pater*, women experience relative autonomy in control over their sexuality. A similar conclusion in the case of polyandrous women of Chumik village (in Mustang) has also been found (Schuler, 1987:67). Menon (1996) argues, sexual restrictions are relaxed in those societies where identification of individual fatherhood does not mater (such as among the Nyinba). Furthermore, as the diverse forms of Nyinba sexuality show, sex is not only for reproduction but also for pleasure. This pleasure aspect of sexuality gives Nyinba women enough space to negotiate at the household level. Considerably high sexual freedom for both genders in selecting a sexual partner or spouse (or conversely, seeking divorce) gives the female as much power as to their male counterparts.

Since there is not a single (male) authority in the family, power in polyandry is fluid and multiple. The multiple forms of Nyinba sexuality and its manifestations in aspects of gender relations erode away any potential of gender hierarchy to a considerable extent. As the case studies reveal, resistance and contestation in gender relations within the household have as much space in Nyinba society as co-operation and compromise have.

49

On the whole, it appears that Nyinba women are not just subservient "housewives," they are also active agents in exercising power with their male counterparts.

6.2 Theoretical implications

This research bears a number of theoretical implications. First, despite the practice of plural husbands and that of outside sexual liaisons, absence of sexual jealousy is observed remarkably high. Aiyappan (1935) too has a similar observation in the case of fraternal polyandry in Malabar. The way paternity is assigned at the discretion of the wife provides strong ground to argue that feelings of jealously are very much a matter of social construction. For the Nyinba, it does not matter so much who the biological father is, given that social fatherhood is a collective and symbolic expression of power configurations at large. Therefore, the sense of jealously is reduced structurally as well as psychologically. It is structurally reduced in the sense that all husbands do not stay at home simultaneously.[47] It is psychologically reduced because emotion is constructed and deconstructed within the power dynamics of what I would call the "shared sexuality." I do not claim that jealousy is completely absent in Nyinba gender relations. Following Foucault (1980) I arrive at the conclusion that jealousy as human emotion, as sexual emotion is very much a social construct underpinned in the entirety of the cultural milieu (of polyandry in this case).[48]

Second, in contrast to the gendered power relations in sexuality, the property system explicitly excludes women and favours men. The gender relations regarding property are, therefore, not egalitarian as one might expect based on the point just made before. Nyinba kinship upholds the discriminatory ideal of the so-called "blood vs. bone" dichotomy that excludes women overtly. Furthermore, the field observation reveals that the tendency of an excessive dependence of the Nyinba economy on trade and transhumance and less on

---

[47] For instance, during the entire period of my stay in Nyinba Gaon, I could find just two households where two cohusbands were simultaneously at home (see photographs, Appendix 4).

[48] I have empirical observations to substantiate my argument. I saw a man bringing a step-father for his widow mother. I also found couple of cases where elder brothers were waiting for their junior brothers to

agriculture has produced a kind of material and symbolic gaps within society. One of its manifestations is that men occupy trade and transhumance that are "mobile and external," and women are confined to agricultural tasks that are "static and local". The GDL that exists among them very much attests to this distinction.

Nonetheless, I argue that Nyinba women are not marginalized to the extent their monogamous counterparts are. In polyandry, practically it does not matter so much who owns property and who inherits it, as much as it matters to monogamous women and men. This finding is closer to Engels's (1972) assertion that the status of women in society depends on the nature of the social organisation of production (and organisation of property). To reiterate again, since property is inherited patrilineally, yet owned and used collectively, polyandrous Nyinba women do not suffer from a lack of economic independence as much as their monogamous sisters.

Third, this research does not support the excessive economic interpretation of Prince Peter (1965:192) when he says, "anything and everything is possible in...[Tibetan polyandry] in matters of marital arrangements, provided that it is suitable economically." His biased interpretation of polyandry does not pay attention to fraternal solidarity -- the ultimate ideological aim of Tibetan polyandry -- which fulfills the social, cultural, and spiritual needs of the polyandrous society. As this paper shows, polyandrous sexuality is not as promiscuous as Prince Peter fabricates it. Norms of incest and exogamy exist not only in marital but also and more importantly in their extra-marital sexuality,[49] a point Prince Peter misses out.

Fourth, there appear a number of similarities between polyandry and matriliny, despite descent systems from opposite lines. Take the case of the Nayars, for instance (see Uyl, 1995). Both among the Nyinba and the Nayars, the position of women is more or less equal to men. The position of widow too is not much wretched as in monogamous

---

grow up and choose a common wife for all. Both of these phenomena, I argue, are highly and emotionally unimaginable in the monogamous Hindu society in the immediate neighbourhood of the Nyinba.

[49] It is why Nyinba consider sasual sexual liaisons in fairs (such as Raling festival or *saune punni*, for instance) "deviant" due to their normlessness (see section 5.4.4).

(Hindu) society. It is important to note that in either case, *both children and property belong not to an individual father, but to the family (or the group of fathers)*. The practice of resident son-in-law exists in both societies. Despite multiple husbands and fluid sexual relations, sexual jealousy is remarkably low. The biological value of reproduction is also low, because in both societies sex accounts for pleasure also. So, there exists a relative autonomy for women with regard to their sexuality. Hence, this study offers strong empirical support to the long held anthropological argument that polyandry is a remnant of a matrilineal past[50] (see Kapadia, 1955; Majumdar, 1974). I agree with Lewis when he says, "polyandry...seems...better suited to matrilineal than to patrilineal conditions" (Lewis, 1985:262).

Finally, this study brings back the debate on matriarchy and sexuality and broadens our understanding of the gendered power relations in family. It contributes to the gap of knowledge, that exists sofar as understanding the roots of women's subordination is concerned. It shows that women's subordination has not only an economic base as liberal and socialist feminists claim, but it also has a sexual and power base, a point they ignore. Following Foucault, this paper shows that sexuality is a social construction that produces power and is manifested in gender relations.

6.3 Future research questions

This study has not answered all pertinent questions that one might expect. I had to depend on Levine (1988) more than I expected. I would like to put on record that there are many theoretical, methodological, biographical and temporal gaps between the two of us, but I

---

[50] An empirical remnant of matrilineal society can still be found in Tibet (Prince Peter, 1965). As in Tibet, Nyinba practise both uxorilocal (husband moving to wife's location) and virilocal (wife moving to husband's location) marriage (see Levine, 1988; Luintel, 1998; Schuler, 1987). When a household becomes "heirless" (that means, when there is no son), the most popular option is to bring a resident son-in-law in order to continue the *trongbat*. Prince Peter (1965) argues that it is a typical cultural trait found among the matrilineal society. Levine says that among some nomads of the east Tibet (near the Lake Quighai and also among the Golok groups), some women did not marry, but had children (information based on e-mail communication, November 2000). Stein (1972) calls those cultural zones the "kingdoms of women" where some sort of matrilineal system prevailed. I myself found three such cases in Nyinba Gaon. When an unmarried woman begets child it is called *nhelu*. Now, such cases are not so frequent as before due to easy availability of contraceptives such as condoms.

have to leave many important questions unanswered. Now I feel that there are many issues that I was not sensitive enough to while in the field. It was partly because this was my first exposure to any polyandrous society. For example, now I am interested to know how decisions are made in Nyinba households and what the role of gender is in this process? What about widows and divorcees, and what I would call the "surplus unmarried women"? What is the social status of a *nhelu* child (born out of wedlock)? What is women's own feeling regarding polyandry? As this paper shows there is a higher sex ratio in Nyinba society. In the long run, what are the coping strategies of the Nyinba society to this problem?

Due to polyandry there is also a problem of "surplus unmarried women." How is the socio-economic status and gender identity of them? What is the socio-political position of mother's brother in his sister's home, a point I regrettably missed during my field-work. It is important especially when I compare women in polyandry with women in matrilineal society. Finally, what are the external pressures on polyandry as a minority cultural practice? These research questions will definitely help us to broaden our understanding of gendered power relations at the household level. I expect to answer them in the future research.

References Cited

Acharya, Meena and Lynn Bennett (1981) *The Rural Women of Nepal: An Aggregate Analysis*, (Vol. 2, part 9 of "The Status of Nepalese Women" series), Kathmandu: Centre for Economic Development and Administration.

Agarwal, Bina (1997) "Bargaining and gender relations: Within and beyond the household," *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 3(2), pp. 1-51.

Aiyappan, A. (1935) "Fraternal polyandry in Malabar," *Man in India*, Vol. 15(283), pp. 108-283 (reproduced in 1987 in M. K. Raha (ed.) *Polyandry in India*, pp. 269-276. Delhi: Gian Publishing House).

Andermahr, S., T. Lovell and C. Wolkowitz (1997) *A Glossary of Feminist Theory*, London: Arnold.

Aziz, Barbara N. (1978) *Tibetan Frontier Families: Reflections of Three Generations from Dingri*, New Delhi: Vikash Publishing House.

Beauvoir, Simone de (1993) *The Second Sex* (trans. and ed. By H. M. Parshley with an introd. By Margaret Crosland), New York: Knopf (orig. pub. in 1947).

Benhabib, S. (1990) "Epistemologies of postmodernism: Rejoinder to Jean-Francois Lyotard," in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 107-130. New York: Routledge.

Bennett, Lynn (1983) *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Berreman, Gerald D. (1962) "Pahari polyandry: A comparison," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 64(1), pp. 60-75 (reproduced in 1987 in M. K. Raha (ed.) *Polyandry in India*, pp. 155-178. Delhi: Gian Publishing House).

Berreman, Gerald D. (1975) "Himalayan polyandry and the domestic cycle," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 2(1), pp. 127-138 (reproduced in 1987 in M. K. Raha (ed.) *Polyandry in India*, pp. 179-197. Delhi: Gian Publishing House).

Berreman, Gerald D. (1980) "Polyandry: Exotic custom vs. analytic concept," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 11(3), Special issue "women with many husbands: polyandrous alliance and marital flexibility in Africa and Asia," pp. 377-383.

Blackwood, Evelyn and Saskia Wieringa (eds.) (1999) "Introduction" in *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures*, pp. 1-38. New York: Columbia University Press.

Blau, Peter (1964) *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, New York: John Wiley.

Braidotti, Rosi (1991) *Patterns of Disonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brown, Judith K. (1975) "Iroquois women: An ethnohistoric note," in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.) *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, pp. 235-251. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) (1993) *Population Census-1991: Nepal (National Volume)*, Kathmandu: CBS, His Majesty's Government of Nepal.

Collier, Jane F. and Sylvia J. Yanagisako (eds.) (1987) "Introduction," in *Gender and Kinship: Toward a Unified Analysis*, pp. 1-13. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Cucchiari, Salvatore (1981) "The gender revolution and the transition from bisexual horde to patrilocal band: The origins of gender hierarchy," in Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, pp. 31-79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davis, Angela Y. (1971) "Reflections on the Black women's role in the community of slaves," *Black Scholar*, vol. 3.

Derrida, Jacques (1973) *Speech and Phenomenon*, Enabston: Northwestern University Press.

Dumont, L. (1968) "Marriage alliance," in *International Encyclopaedia of Social Science*, 10: 19-23.

Eisenstein, Zillah (1986) *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Engels, Frederick (1972) *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (introd. by Evellyn Reed), New York: Pathfinder Press.

Faith, Karlene (1994) "Resistance: Lessons from Foucault and feminism," in H. L. Radtke and H. J. Stam (eds.), *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice*, pp. 36-66. London: Sage Publications.

Foucault, M. (1980) *The History of Sexuality*, Volume One (An Introduction), Harmondsworth: Pelican (originally published in French in 1976).

Friedan, Betty (1963) *The Feminist Mystique*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Furer-Haimendorf, C. von (1964) *The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist Highlanders*, Calcutta: Oxford Book Co.

Goldstein, Melvyn C. (1971) "Stratification, polyandry and family structure in Tibet," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 27(1), pp. 64-74.

Goldstein, Melvyn C. (1976) "Population, social structure and strategic behaviour: An essay on polyandry, fertility and change in Limi panchayat," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 4(2), pp. 47-62.

Goldstein, Melvyn C. (1978) "Pahari and Tibetan polyandry revisited," *Ethnology*, Vol. 17(3), pp. 325-337.

Gough, Kathleen E. (1959) "Is the family universal? The Nayar case," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 89, pp. 23-34.

Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (eds. By Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith), New York: International Publishers.

Haraway, Donna (1988) "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14(3), pp. 575-599.

Hartsock, Nancy (1990) "Foucault on power: A theory of women?" in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 157-175. New York: Routledge.

Hekman, S. (1990) *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Holy, Ladislav (1996) *Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship*, London: Pluto Press.

Hubbard, Ruth (1990) "The political nature of human nature," in Deborah L. Rhode (ed.) *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, pp. 63-73. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Jackson, Stevi and Sue Scott (1996) "Sexual skirmishes and feminist factions: Twenty-five years of debate on women and sexuality" in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (eds.) *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.

Jaggar, Alison M. (1983) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Sussex: Rowman and Allanheld Publishers and the Harvester Press.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988) "Bargaining with patriarchy," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 2(3), pp. 274-289.

Kapadia, K. M. (1955) *Marriage and Family in India*, second ed., Bombay: Oxford University Press.

Keesing, R. M. (1975) *Kin Groups and Social Structure*, New York: Holt, Reinehart and Winston, Inc.

Klages, Mary (n.d.) "Structuralism/Post-structuralism," http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012klages/1derrida.html. Downloaded in September 2000.

Kristeva, Julia (1982) *Desire in Language*, trans. by Leon Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press.

Lacan, Jacques (1977) *Ecrits*, London: Tavistock.

Leach, E. R. (1955) "Polyandry, inheritance and the definition of marriage: With particular reference to Sinhalese Customary Law," *Man*, Vol. 55(199), pp. 182-186.

Lee, R. B. and Irven DeVore (eds.) (1968) "Problems in the study of hunters and gatherers," *Man the Hunter*, Chicago: Aldine.

Leibowitz, Lila (1986) "In the beginnings...: The origins of sexual division labour and the development of the first human societies," in S. Coontz and P. Henderson (eds.), *Women's Work, Men's Property: The Origins of Gender and Class*, pp. 43-75. London: Verso.

Lengermann, Patricia and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (1996) "Contemporary feminist theory," in George Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, third ed., pp. 447-496. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Lerner, Gerda (1986) *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Levine, Nancy E. (1980) "Nyinba Polyandry and the allocation of paternity," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 11(3), Special issue "women with many husbands: polyandrous alliance and marital flexibility in Africa and Asia," pp. 283-298.

Levine, Nancy E. (1988) *The Dynamics of Polyandry: Kinship, Domesticity and Population on the Tibetan Border*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Levine, Nancy E. and Walter H. Sangree (1980) "Conclusion: Asian and African Systems of Polyandry," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 11(3), Special issue "women with many husbands: polyandrous alliance and marital flexibility in Africa and Asia," pp. 385-410.

Levi-Strauss, Claude (1969) *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, revised ed. (translated from French by J. H. Bell, J. R. von Strumer and Rodney Needam), London: Social Science Paperbacks in association with Eyre and Spottiswoode (originally published in 1949 under the title "Les Structures Elêmêntaires de la Parentè").

Lewis, I. M. (1985) "Vital statistics: Marriage and kinship," in *Social Anthropology in Perspective: The Relevance of Social Anthropology*, second ed., pp. 234-280. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (originally published in 1976 by Penguin).

Lowie, R. H. (1950) *Social Organisation*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Luintel, Y. R. (1998) The Changing Context of Polyandry: Sex, Society and Subsistence in Nyinba Gaon, a Himalayan Village of Humla, North-West Nepal, a report submitted to the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu.

MacCormack, Carol P. (1980) "Nature, culture and gender: a critique," in Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (eds.) *Nature, Culture and Gender*, pp. 1-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacCormack, Carol P. and M. Strathern (eds.) (1980) *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Majumdar, D. N. (1955) "Family and marriage in polyandrous society," *The Eastern Anthropologist*, Vol. 8, pp. 85-110.

Majumdar, D. N. (1962) *Himalayan Polyandry: Structure, Functions and Culture Change*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House

Majumdar, D. N. (1974) *The Fortunes of Primitive Tribes*, Lucknow: The Universal Publishers Ltd.

Maynes, Mary J., Ann Waltner, Brigitte Soland and Ulrike Strasser (eds.) (1996) "Introduction: toward a comparative history of gender, kinship, power," in *Gender, Kinship, Power: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary History*, pp. 1-23. New York: Routledge.

McNay, Lois (1992) *Foucault and Feminism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Menon, S. (1996) "Male authority and female autonomy: A study of the matrilineal Nayars of Kerala, South India," in Mary J. Maynes, Ann Waltner, Brigitte Soland and Ulrike Strasser (eds.) *Gender, Kinship, Power: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary History*, pp. 131-146. New York: Routledge.

Mies, Maria (1979) *Towards a Methodology of Women's Studies*, Occasional Paper No. 77, The Hague: Institute of Social Studies.

Mies, Maria (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, London: Zed Books.

Mitchell, J. and A. Oakley (eds.) (1986) *What is Feminism?* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

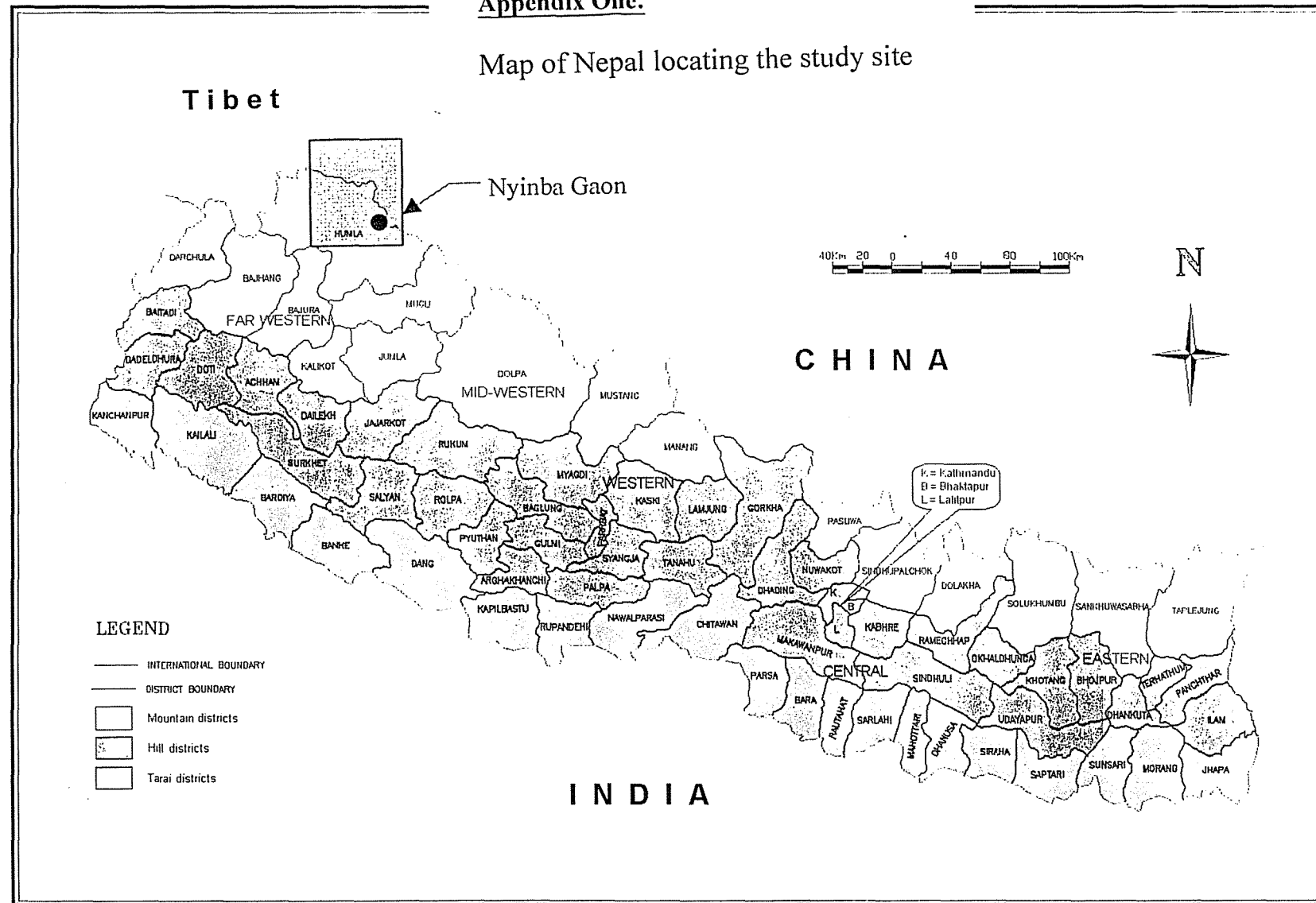Moore, Henrietta L. (1988) *Feminism and Anthropology*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Morgan, L. H. (1963) *Ancient Society* (ed. Eleanor Leacock), Cleveland: World Publishing Co.

Nakane, Chie (1966) "A plural society in Sikkim: A study of the interrelation of Lepchas, Bhotias and Nepalis," in C. von Furer-Haimendorf (ed.) *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, pp. 213-263. London: Asia Publishing House.

Nicholson, Linda J. (1990) "Introduction" in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, pp. 1-16. New York: Routledge.

Opler, Morris Edward (1943) *The Character and Derivation of the Jicarilla Holliness Rite*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Ortner, S. and H. Whitehead (eds.) (1981) *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, London: Cambridge University Press.

Parmar, Y. S. (1975) *Polyandry in Himalayas*, Delhi: Vikash Publishing House.

Peters, John F. and Chelster L. Hunt (1975) "Polyandry among the Yanomama Shirishana," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 6 (2), pp. 197-208.

Prakashi, Kanti (1964) "A note on differential sex ratios and polyandrous people," *Man in India*, Vol. 44(2), pp. 161-174 (reproduced in 1987 in M. K. Raha (ed.) *Polyandry in India*, pp. 377-393. Delhi: Gian Publishing House).

Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark (1955) "Polyandry and the kinship group," *Man*, Vol. 55, pp. 178-181.

Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark (1963) *A Study of Polyandry*, The Hague: Mouton.

Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark (1965) "The Tibetan family system," in M. F. Nimkoff (ed.) *Comparative Family Systems*, pp. 192-208. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Pringle, R. and S. Watson (1996) "Women's interests' and the poststructuralist state," in M. Barrett and A. Phillips (eds.) *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, pp. 53-73. Cambridge: polity Press.

Radtke, H. L. and H. J. Stam (eds.) (1994) *Introduction to Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice*, pp. 1-14. London: Sage Publications.

Ramazanoglu, Caroline (ed.) (1993) *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*, London: Routledge.

Reiter, Rayna R. (ed.) (1975) *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Rivers, W. H. R. (1924) *Social Organisation*, London: Dawsons.

Rodgers, Barbara (1980) *The Domestication of Women: Discrimination in Developing Societies*, London: Kogan Page.

Rosaldo, Michelle Z. and Louise Lamphere (1974) *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford, California: California University Press.

Rubin, Gayle (1975) "The traffic in women: notes on the 'political economy' of sex," in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.) *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, pp. 157-210. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Rubin, Gayle (1984) "Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality," in Carole S. Vance (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, pp. 267-319. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Sacks, Karen (1975) "Engels revisited: Women, the organization of production, and private property," in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.) *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, pp. 211-234. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Sawicki, Jana (1991) *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body*, London: Routledge.

Schuler, Sydney Ruth (1987) *The Other Side of Polyandry: Property, Stratification, and Nonmarriage in the Nepal Himalayas*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.

Scott, Joan W. (1988) "Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: or the uses of poststructuralist theory for feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14(1), pp. 33-50.

Sen, A. K. (1990) "Gender and cooperative conflict," in I. Tinker (ed.) *Persistent Inequality*, pp. 123-149. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stein, R. A. (1972) *Tibetan Civilization*, London: Faber.

Tambiah, S. J. (1966) "Polyandry in Ceylon: with special reference to the Leggala region," in C. von Furer-Haimendorf (ed.) *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, pp. 264-358. London: Asia Publishing House.

Thorne, Barrie and Marilyn Yalom (eds.) (1982) *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, New York: Longman.

Tong, Rosemarie P. (1998) *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, Boulder: Westview Press.

Unni, K. Raman (1958) "Polyandry in Malabar," *Sociological Bulletin*, a journal of the Indian Sociological Society, Vol. 7(1 & 2), pp. 62-79, 123-133.

Uyl, Marion den (1995) *Invisible Barriers: Gender, Caste and Kinship in s Southern Indian Village*, Utrecht: International Books.

Weber, Max (1947) *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (trans. by A. M. Heunderson and T. Parsons), Chicago: Free Press.

Weedon, Chris (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc.

Westermarck, Edward (1922) *A Short History of Marriage*, London: Macmillan.

Wieringa, Saskia (forthcoming) "Essentialism virsus constructivism: time for a rapproachment?" in *Gender Realities: An Anthropology of Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought*, Kingston: University of the West Indies Press.

Yeatman, A. (1983) "The procreative model: The social ontological bases of the gender-kinship system," *Social Analysis*, Vol. 14, pp. 3-30.

Appendix One:

Map of Nepal locating the study site

Tibet

Nyinba Gaon

CHINA

HUMLA

DARCHULA

BAJHANG

BAITADI
FAR WESTERN
BAJURA
BAJURA

MUGU

DADELDHURA
DOTI
ACHHAM
KALIKOT
JUMLA

KANCHANPUR
KAILALI
DAILEKH
JAJARKOT

DOLPA
MID-WESTERN
MUSTANG

SURKHET
RUKUM

MANANG

BARDIYA
SALYAN
ROLPA
MYAGDI
WESTERN

BAGLUNG
KASKI
LAMJUNG
GORKHA

PASUWA

BANKE
DANG
PYUTHAN
GULMI
SYANGJA
TANAHU

NUWAKOT
SINDHUPALCHOK

K = Kathmandu
B = Bhaktapur
L = Lalitpur

ARGHAKHANCHI
PALPA
DHADING
K
B
DOLAKHA

KAPILBASTU
RUPANDEHI
NAWALPARASI
CHITAWAN
L
KABHRE
RAMECHHAP
SOLUKHUMBU
SANKHUWASABHA
TAPLEJUNG

MAKAWANPUR
CENTRAL
OKHALDHUNGA
EASTERN
TERHATHUM
PANCHTHAR

PARSA
SINDHULI
KHOTANG
BHOJPUR

BARA
RAUTAHAT
SARLAHI
MAHOTTARI
DHANUSA
UDAYAPUR
DHANKUTA
ILAM

SIRAHA
SAPTARI
SUNSARI
MORANG
JHAPA

LEGEND

——— INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY

——— DISTRICT BOUNDARY

☐ Mountain districts

☐ Hill districts

☐ Tarai districts

I N D I A

40Km 20 0 40 80 100Km

N

Nyinba Kinship Terminology[1]

Primaries		
Husband	:	Khimjang
Wife	:	Pangma
Mother	:	Aa(n)
Son	:	Puja
Daughter	:	Pu(n)
Brothers		
Elder	:	Aaju
Younger	:	Nho
Sisters		
Elder	:	Aaji
Younger	:	Nhu

Lineal Ascendants		
Father's father	:	Mhi
Mother's father	:	Mhi
Father's mother	:	Aabi
Mother's mother	:	Aabi
Great-grandfather	:	Mhi
Great-grandmother	:	Aabi
Great-great-grandfather	:	Mhi
Great-great-grandmother	:	Aabi

Lineal Descendants		
Grand son	:	Chhou
Great-grand son	:	Chhou
Great-great-grand son	:	Chhou
Grand daughter	:	Chhau(n)
Great-grand daughter	:	Chhau(n)
Great-great-grand daughter:		Chhau(n)

Collaterals		
Father's brother	:	Aaya
Father's sister	:	Aani
Mother's brother	:	Aajang
Mother's sister	:	Aa(n)
Father's brother's son		
Senior than the ego	:	Aaju
Junior than the ego	:	Nho

Father's brother's daughter		
Senior than the ego	:	Aaji
Junior than the ego	:	Nhu
Mother's brother' son	:	Aajang Chyo(n)
Mother's brother's daughter	:	Tuchima
Brother's son		
Of male ego	:	Puja
Of female ego	:	Chhou
Brother's daughter		
Of male ego	:	Pu(n)
Of female ego	:	Chhau(n)
Sister's son		
Of male ego	:	Chhou
Of female ego	:	Puja
Sister's daughter		
Of male ego	:	Chhau(n)
Of female ego	:	Pu(n)

Affines		
Husband's father	:	Kyobu
Husband's mother	:	Ghyugmu
Wife's father	:	Kyobu
Wife's mother	:	Ghyugmu
Son's wife	:	Chhau(n)
Daughter's husband	:	Magpa
Husband's brother		
For mother's brother's on:		Chhou
For father's sister's son:		Aajang
Husband's brother's wife	:	?
Husband's sister		
For elder than ego	:	Tu (n)
For younger than ego	:	Chhau(n)
Husband's sister's husband:		?
Wife's brother		
Father's sister's son	:	Chhou
Mother's brother's son	:	Aajang Chyo(n)
Wife's brother's wife	:	?
Wife's sister		
Father's sister's daughter:		Chhau(n)
Mother's brother's daughter:		Tuchima

---

[1] Source: Luintel (1998)

Case Studies[1]

Case One

Norla, a resident of Nyinba Gaon, has five members in his family. His grandfather had two brothers: Fyure and Lopchang. Each of them married monogamously. As they were already poor, monogamy led both of them towards further poverty. At the time, while other households used to keep hundreds of sheep, Fyure and Lopchang had not more than 40 each.

There were three brothers in Norla's father's generation: Kharku, Tanba and Samthane. All of them married polyandrously. By the way, their father-in-law became "heirless," so by kinship tradition, all of his property came to them. Besides, Samthane got a job in Nepal Police; Tanba used to engage in *pakhar*, while Kharku, the elder brother, was looking after the household and agriculture. Tanba became successful to increase the number of sheep up to 300. Around 1978, The number of sheep reached 400 and *jhopa* (yak oxen) 25. Norla's household became famous in his father's generation as one of the rich Nyinba households in Nyinba Gaon.

Norla, our respondent, had four brothers. Of them, the eldest died. So Norla had to take responsibility of *pakhar*, so far Tanba was undertaking. Unfortunately, Funjok, his elder brother, appeared slanderous. He began to loiter in India, engage in gambling, prostitution and other addictions. To meet the expenses, he began to sell the sheep. It is estimated that he sold at least 200 sheep out of 400. (By that time one sheep was sold at the rate of approximately US$ 40 in average.)

In 1990, Kharku, Norla's father, died. After it, the family disintegrated: Norla got married monogamously, Funjok and Chhala, however, managed to stay in polyandry. (Consequently, the whole property including land, herd and cattle was to be divided.) After this, Norla could not maintain the whole businesses alone. He sold 50 sheep of his part. Funjok and Chhala too sold at least 150 sheep of their common share.

---

[1] Adapted form Luintel (1998).

Process of selling continued successively on both sides. Now Norla owns just 12 sheep, while Funjok and Chhala have even not a single. This has become a reference case in Nyinba Gaon to show how is prosperity gained and ruined because of marriage.

Case Two

Karchhangma, a resident of Nyinba Gaon, has a problem created by the ambivalence of "who should approach first" for sex. She had an arranged marriage with Thilla and was told that she would have to accommodate Pema (Thilla's younger brother) also. Karchhangma was first approached by Thilla. She hoped, Pema too would approach her, which he never did. Karchhangma thinks it is husband who should approach first in matter of sexual relation. So she never thought of approaching first. Now the case has been complicated. She is 25 years already; her two cohusbands are 24 and 23 years, respectively. Since, Pema never tried to share her sexually during five years of their union, Karchhangma suspects that he might have an outside affair whom he might want to marry. She says, "I would never allow for the partition of this home. If Pema brings another wife for his own, he should support her at his own dispense. Ultimately, what did I do for punishment of this kind? I have been trying to receive him sexually and emotionally. It is he who never approached me."

Pema has different kind of complaint against it. He responds, "How can I accept Karchhangma as my wife, so long as she never comes to me. She was formally married with Thilla, not with me. By the way if I approach her now, she would immediately publicize it to push me under moral pressure to accept her forever. How can I accept the much senior woman as my wife? She is worried recently more because she could not beget a child from Thilla."

Case Three

Kalu, now 28 years, has been married polyandrously. Before this he was one of the active boys of Nyinba Gaon for *khamdu-doya*. He even used to go to other Nyinba villages for *khamdu-doya* liaisons. During 1987, he had an affair with Karsang, an 18 years old girl from a neighboring Nyinba village. Kalu used to meet at her bed almost

every night. She used to sleep in *chyang-ma*, an outward room in the second floor, the easiest most part of the Nyinba house for a stranger to visit.

Anyway, Karsang's two co-fathers came to know it. They tolerated it for some time. But since, the social and economic standings of Kalu's household was below than average Nyinba level and far below than their own, they decided not to let the affair continue any more. One night both of them were watching whether Kalu was to come. As usual, Kalu arrived during that night also. The moment he was to enter into the room where Karsang was sleeping, both of them captured him suddenly and beat severely in the dark. In the morning they came to see him and apologised pretending that they did not identify him during the night. They also expressed concerns over injuries in his body. Since Kalu was severely, not in position to move, they kept him for a couple of days. Meanwhile, they told Kalu that they did not have any objection if Kalu was really ready to marry Karsang. Kalu, however, returned to his home without any reply and never dared to visit Karsang again.

Case Four

Urgen, now 70 years, has an affair with Chyangbuti, now 55, begun long before, since the time they were unmarried. When Chyangbuti's father became heirless (a state of not having son), Karma was brought as resident son-in-law. Later, Karma knew that Chyangbuti has a long established liaison with Urgen, a man in the same village. In 1994 an incident happened to them. One day Karma went out to Chunwa Khola (a local river) to look after yaks left there for grazing. Taking the advantage of his absence Chyangbuti invited Urgen immediately. Urgen came with *jand-chindo*, very old therefore tasty liquor, as an informal ritual practice. The moment both of them were enjoying, Karma appeared there all of a sudden. Karma was in fact searching a proof for protesting against wife for her indulgment in adultery. That night he returned to his home deliberately after watching waited outside the home to cross-check whether Urgen was to come.

Upon his arrival, naturally both Urgen and Chyangbuti became shocked. He scolded them badly and challenged Urgen that he would have taken its revenge had his daughter-in-law still alive. But Urgen replied that his liaison with Chyangbuti had

been very old, more than at least Karma joined the house as resident son-in-law. Karma had nothing to reply. He had two options: either he could dare to break the marriage immediately and return back to his own village or to send Chyangbuti with Urgen. Both had a heavy cost for him, since he might loose the authority over the estate and other property of Chhyangbuti that he has got due to his resident son-in-law position. Urgen and Chyangbuti are continuing their *syarba-syarmu* liaison even today, while Karma has become just a patient onlooker.

A rare occasion for the Nyinba: Two cohusbands simultaneously at home