

# **POLYANDRY, ADAPTABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY OF TANGIN, A HIMALAYAN VILLAGE IN NEPAL\***

Ganesh Man Gurung  
CNAS

## **Introduction**

The present paper attempts to provide a picture of Himalayan polyandry on the basis of empirical information gathered during the course of a short field study. The study was conducted in Tangin, a village in Humla District, north-west Nepal.<sup>1</sup> It assumed the hypothesis that polyandry is an outcome of adaptability in the ecological setting of the Himalaya, and the present environmental degeneration and a growing tendency towards monogamous marriage have made people's adaptability to present conditions a matter of serious concern. This study explores how the ecosystem shaped the lives and culture of the Humli people, the ecological factors underlying the practice of polyandrous marriage in the Himalayan region of Nepal with reference to Humla, and the major causes of environmental degeneration and its consequences for adaptation and survival.

## **The Interplay Between Ecosystem and People**

Nepal's northern border with Tibet is a high Himalayan region inhabited by Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid peoples scattered among rocky slopes and high river valleys. The various enclaves of Tibetan-speaking people in the north Nepal borderland are collectively referred to in Nepali as Bhote or Bhotiya (literally "Tibetans").

Humla is a remote, mountainous, extraordinarily rugged and secluded district on the border with Tibet. The ethnographic pattern of Humla is characterised by the close proximity of Tibetan-speaking Bhotiyas (who often refer to themselves as "Tamang") and Nepali-speaking Hindus, consisting

---

\* This paper was presented in the International Seminar on "Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalayas" on September 21-28, 1990, at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, in cooperation with the Swiss Directorate for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, Beme.

mainly of Thakuri and Chhetri castes. These populations are interspersed up to an altitude of about 10,000 ft., but the higher valleys are inhabited exclusively by Bhotiyas (Furer-Haimendorf 1971:99). The Humli Tamangs who dwell in the northern part are Buddhists who are similar to the Tibetans in culture and dialect. The Thakuri Chhetris and untouchables speak Nepali and are Hindus by religion.

Tangin is one day's walk from Simikot, the district headquarters of Humla. The village consists of two settlements an hour's walk apart. During the summer season the villagers go to a high altitude settlement in the lap of a high mountain known as Anjiluntar. In summer they descend to a settlement near the banks of the Tangin Karnali River. Both settlements are situated north of the river. On the south side of the Tangin Karnali, opposite the village, cultivable land is scarce, but there is ample forest which breaks the bitter wind.

The architecture of houses in the villages of this region is uniform, irrespective of the ethnic affiliation of the inhabitants. The style is one that prevails in much of northwest Nepal. Houses are built wall to wall in such a way that their flat roofs form large terraces, a feature made possible by the relatively low rainfall of the region. The clustered buildings cling to the slopes with each row of houses touching those below and above. The houses have many small rooms, an adaptation to severe cold. The ground floor accommodates cattle, while the different rooms of the first floor are used for cooking, storage and sleeping. The kitchen keeps the air warm inside. In spite of the smoke, family members prefer to sit around the hearth to protect themselves from severe cold. Consumption of firewood in Tangin is extremely high.

Directly above the upper settlement are green pastures that extend half way up the hill. Adaptability to the environment is reflected in the annual cycle of transhumance. From September to April the people inhabit the lower settlement near the Tangin Karnali, and from May to August they live at high altitude. They take their yaks, sheep, goats and a few cattle to the upland pastures, together with their tents, necessary food and cooking utensils.

To supplement their stocks of tsampa, wheat flour, buckwheat and butter, the villagers collect a small forest berry, called *dhatelo* in Nepali, from which they extract oil for cooking. Sheep's wool is used to make various types of mats and blankets known as *phingma*, *phere* and *liu*. Goat hair is used for making ropes and bags for loading grain and salt onto the backs of sheep, goats and yaks during trading excursions, as well as for larger domestic grain storage sacks.

The villagers are equipped against the cold climate with thick, warm clothing. They wear the Tibetan style garment called *bakkhu* in Nepali. Both men and women wear black and green *bakkhu*, woolen and cotton trouser, and tunics with silk or satin blouses underneath, woolen caps and sweaters, and strong hand-woven woolen shoes. Although kerosene is available, illumination is obtained by burning resinous splints cut from the trunks of pine trees.

The Tamangs of Tangin keep large number of livestock. Only one family remains to watch over the entire lower village while the others move to the high pastures. The herders shift from one pasture to another with their animals following a route that takes them as far as three or four-day walk from the upper village on the route towards Limi. During this season, many people go to Taklakot, a market on the Tibetan border, to trade their foodgrains and wood for Tibetan salt and wool. As winter encroaches, they gradually shift back down to the higher village, and then to the lower altitudes. During the winter the old and weak cattle are kept in the lower village, where hay is stored for cold and snowy days. Many of the Tamangs come down to the middle hills and inner valleys such as Achham, Surkhet and Bajura with their sheep and goats. The animals are loaded with salt and local products, such as blankets and honey, which are sold by the traders.

There is a small *gompa* (Tib. *dgon-pa*) just above Tangin, and the village has a small community of lamas and nuns (*jhuma* or *topeni*).<sup>2</sup> The villagers believe that their economy cannot flourish without the blessings and performances of the lamas. The presence of a lama is necessary in most social and religious activities, such as name-giving and head-shaving ceremonies, and marriages and funerals. Further more, lamas are required to perform rites to do away with evil spirits and prevent misfortune (such as hailstorms and adverse weather that might damage crops). In accordance with Tibetan custom the middle son of a household traditionally becomes a lama and the middle daughter a celibate nun.<sup>3</sup>

**Polyandry and Adaptability: An Ecological Discussion:** The ecological setting of Tangin is unfavourable for good agricultural production, with only one crop per year. Cultivated land is limited, rocky and infertile. In winter, all agricultural activities are suspended due to the heavy snowfall. The harsh environment makes survival difficult. Fraternal polyandry represents an adaptation to this environment, since it keeps joint families intact and avoids fragmentation of holdings. It enables a joint family of brothers to earn income from various sources and to pool their earnings.

Fraternal polyandry is a rare form of marriage that occurs in the northern regions of Nepal and India.<sup>4</sup> There are two forms of marriage among the

Tamangs of Tangin, arranged and love marriage. The first is a simple affair. The brother and some of their relatives visit the prospective bride's house following a route fixed by a lama. The bride's family entertains them, and the wedding is solemnised by the lama's recitation of prayers. After two days the grooms' party returns home with the richly dressed and adorned bride. Feasting, singing and dancing accompanied by musical instruments frequently mark the celebrations.

Since the woman becomes the wife of all the brothers, widowhood is rare. Forty percent of marriages in Tangin were found to be arranged, while 60 percent were love marriages, indicating a freedom of choice in marriage and 42.5 percent of the families were polyandrous, whereas 57.5 percent were monogamous.

Generally, sexual rights to the wife are determined by age, so that the younger brothers are entitled to access only in the absence of their seniors. If all the brothers are at home, the younger ones have to take the chance of approaching their wife in the daytime in the fields or other hiding places.<sup>5</sup> However, it was observed that in practice the division of labour provides them with sexual access in turns. Usually one brother will work as a herdsman, another as a trader and another with the wife in the fields or house. In such a social setup, the woman looks after all her husbands with equal favour, tact and ingenuity, without displaying preference. The skill with which she manages her role is crucial in maintaining family harmony and tranquility. Sometimes there is a great difference in age between a wife and her youngest husband. From childhood the youngest of several brothers develops the attitude that he is the potential or virtual husband of a wife signifies to him that he should exercise his privilege as a husband. She actively discourages the possibility that the youngest husband might marry another woman. However, there were said to have been many cases where the youngest brother in a polyandrous household had revolted and married separately because of the considerable difference in ages.<sup>6</sup> Consequently the majority of families in Tangin are monogamous. But a brother who marries independently loses his right to the family property and he must begin life anew by securing public land or entering his wife's household.

Two marriages in Tangin involved sororal polygyany. There were ten unmarried women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-two. When interviewed, they all expressed themselves in favour of polyandrous marriage. Polyandry enables a set of brothers to obtain the fullest benefit of several sources of livelihood. One can cultivate the joint landholding, another breed livestock, a third engage in trade and so forth, and pool their earnings with their common wife.

The claim has been made that polyandry is the result of an excess of males over females, but my research in Tangin does not support this contention. As stated earlier, the population of men and women is exactly equal (104 of each sex in thirty-one households). The female population included six celibate nuns and the ten marriageable but unmarried women.

Ninety percent of the family heads, including the heads of the monogamous families, looked upon polyandry with favour. The respondents informed me that polyandry had always been practised in Tangin and neighbouring villages. Geo-cultural and historical reasons are also responsible for the presence of polyandry in Tangin. Economic factors, shaped by environmental requirements, are the most important basis for polyandry. The principal result of polyandrous marriages is that the inheritance of land and livestock is transmitted intact to a group of brothers in each generation.<sup>7</sup> The subdivision and fragmentation of holdings would reduce the allotments of cultivable land into useless small tracts which provided insufficient food for the owners. Separate families would scarcely be able to maintain themselves on such divided and partitioned plots. Strenuous efforts have been made to bring every inch of land under cultivation in Tangin. However, agricultural production is still insufficient to meet the food grain requirements of local people, and animal husbandry, trade and cottage industry are important aspects of the local economy. In a typical family one brother is responsible for agricultural production, another takes charge of the herds and goes to the grazing grounds, while a third travels to Taklakot and the mid-hills for trading. The wives and sisters produce local goods such as carpets and wooden bowls (*phuru*: Tib. *phor-bu*). Thus one or two brothers in a family are absent from the village for long periods.

There are several illegitimate children, known as Thima (Nep. *batase santan*) in Tangin.<sup>8</sup> As observed in the field area, many such girls become nuns. By and large the life of these nuns is miserable. Rather than being a result of too few women, polyandry seems to produce an excess of unmarried girls who are left uncared for and lead lives of real hardship and difficulty.

### **Monogamous Marriage, Environment Degeneration and Challenges for Survival**

In the case of Tangin village, the interaction between people and their land and environment is so intense that one cannot be understood in isolation from the others. Ever since the earliest known times, the Tamangs of Tangin have been primarily an agro-pastoral group engaged in limited trade. The natural environment of Tangin is unsuitable for intense farming because of the rocky, infertile land and low rainfall. However, polyandrous domestic groups are better adapted to successful farming on the slopes of Tangin.

The range of domestic chores requires a collective effort and clear division of labour, which cannot be satisfied by monogamous families. Polyandry in Tangin is a response to the ecological demands of the region. But the tradition is being challenged by the younger generation. Ten boys between the ages of fifteen and eighteen stated during interviews that they felt uncomfortable about the custom and would not accept the aged wife of their eldest brother. Besides, increasing social contact with outsiders and new values concerning sexual relations have led to a growing tendency to abandon polyandry in favour of monogamous marriage. It is a matter of serious concern whether the gradual decline in polyandry will bring about a new and unexpected challenge to the local economy.

Tangin is economically backward, and alternative means of livelihood are not being introduced by any outside agencies. The forest is the source of firewood, timber, numerous medicinal plants and animal fodder. Cattle depend entirely upon the forest and grazing lands, but pastoral areas been declining every year, and severe deforestation has made the once green lands around Tangin naked and bleak. Monogamy has contributed to deforestation to the extent that increasingly large quantities of timber are required to build new houses, while each new house also represents another hearth in which fuelwood is consumed. The traditional system of inheritance is being replaced by the legal partitioning of land among the individual heirs in each generation.

The scarcity of arable land around Tangin poses additional problems, while forests are being cleared for cultivation by the villagers in accordance with their legal rights; herders regularly burn swathes of forest around Tangin during the summer. The environmental degradation of the Himalayas has created a crisis for survival.

With regard to the survival of people in this state of environmental degeneration in the Himalayas, the following questions have to be considered with special reference to Tangin:

1. How is it possible to overcome hardship in a community which is turning towards monogamy from polyandry, a form of marriage in which earnings of individuals are pooled?
2. What steps can be taken to save the Himalayan environment in the context of new values and pressures?
3. Should polyandry remain an obligatory tradition until new socioeconomic activities or plans are introduced?

In Tangin as in other Himalayan regions fraternal polyandry has prevailed for a long time because of economic factors which even now play a pivotal but changing role.

## Notes

1. This survey was undertaken as part of a research project "Entitled education for Rural Development, Kailali-Karnali Baseline Survey", sponsored by UNESCO. The field investigation was carried out by the present researcher for a period of about one month in May, 1989. The Tangin village consists of 31 Tamang families, with a total population of 208: 104 males and 104 females. It is a homogeneous, isolated group in a remote area of the district.
2. *Jhuma* Tib. *jo-ma*: the term *topeni* is a composite of the Tibetan *grwa-pa* "monk", and the Nepali feminine suffix *-ni*.
3. This tradition should be distinguished from the custom of lineage priesthood, common in Nepal's Tibetan-speaking communities, in which the eldest son becomes the head of the household as a married lama. The institution of lineage priesthood in Tibetan-speaking communities has been described by numerous authors, including Paudel (1986), Aziz (1978: 76-94, 210 ff) and Rable (1985). A woman becomes a nun after a retreat of three years, three months and three days. The present researcher was prohibited from seeing a nun who was living alone inside a cottage in Tangin.
4. Although it was the traditional form of marriage in Tibet, polyandry is practised not only by the Tibeto-Burman people of the Himalayas, but also by the Indo-Aryans of Himachal Pradesh, India (see Majumdar 1962). Although monogamy is spreading, polyandry remains common in Western Nepal. It occurs widely among Tibetan-speaking communities of the northern hill of Nepal, as well as the so-called Gurungs of Gorkha and the people of Manang District.
5. The teacher of Tangin school speculated that the Tamangs have a lower sexual desire due to the severe cold of the area, since one wife is sufficient for them. The teachers themselves are from the Terai.
6. Sometime when the younger husband marries outside the polyandrous union, the elder wife complains about the fact to the government offices (see Sharma 1988). But if the wife initiates a divorce and marries another man, her ex-husbands receive compensation from the new husband. The amount is usually between Rs. 20,000 and Rs. 50,000. However, during the field visit, the researcher heard that a compensation of Rs. 65,000 had been paid in Baraunse village, near Simikot.
7. Other authors have remarked that the coherence of landholding was the principal reason for polyandry in Tibet. Majumdar has noted that polyandry in different parts of the Himalayas is attributed to geo-economic factors. Similarly, on the subject of polyandry in Central Tibet, Goldstein remarks that the "monomarital" marriage principle, in which only one (polyandrous) marriage might be contracted in a household in each generation, was 'motivated by the strong desire to prevent partition of the corporate unit with its lands' (1971: 68).

8. Illegitimacy presents government officials with a problem in the distribution of citizenship certificates, which technically cannot be issued to an individual who has no recognised father.

### References

- Aziz, B. 1978. *Tibetan Frontier Families: Reflections of Three Generations from D'ing-ri*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Basnet, L.B. 1987. *Humla ma bahupati pratha: ek bibecana*. (Polyandry in Humla: an Explanation). In Nepali. Humla: Humla Sangam.
- Bista, D.B. 1967. *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *Prospects of Social Science Research in the Himalayas*. Workshop on Himalayan Studies held at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Sept. 23, 24, 1984.
- Eckholm, E.P. 1975. "The Deterioration of Mountain Environment." *Science*.
- Furer-Haimendorf, C. von (ed.) 1967. *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Goldstein, M.C. 1971. "Stratification, Polyandry and Family Structure in Central Tibet." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 27, 64-74.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975. "A Report on Limi Panchayat, Humla District." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, V. No. 2, 89-101.
- Majumdar, D.N. 1962 *Himalayan Polyandry*. New York: Asia Publishing House.
- Parmar, V.S. 1975. *Polyandry in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Poudel, B.H. 1986. *Kailash dwar Limi ek Parichaya* (Limi, a gate to Kailash: an Introduction). Humla: Humla Sangam.
- Ramble, C. 1984. "The Lamas of Lubra: Tibetan Bonpo Householder Priests in Western Nepal." Ph. D. Diss. University of Oxford.
- Sharma, B.R. 1986. *Humla ma Pandav Bibaha Pratha ra Tyasko Baidhanik Isthi* (Pandav polyandrous marriage in Humla and its legal status) In Nepali. Humla: Humla Sangam.