

## Book Review

*The Other Side of Polyandry: Property, Stratification and Nonmarriage in the Nepal Himalayas*, 1987. Sidney Ruth Schuler. 196 pages. A Westview Press Publication in the Series, Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective; Boulder Colorado. US \$ 22.00.

*The Dynamics of Polyandry: Kinship, Domesticity and Population on the Tibetan Border*, 1988. Nancy E. Levine. 309 pages. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. US \$ 17.95.

Polyandry continues to be a subject of serious study by anthropologists living and working among Tibetan speaking peoples. Given the opportunity to be with Tibetans, few westerners can overlook it. And I myself took considerable interest in the subject when I lived with Tibetans from Dingri who migrated into Nepal and settled there as refugees 30 years ago. After that experience, returning to the West, I found Europeans and Americans highly curious about my experience in close proximity to polyandrous marriages. How a single woman is married to several men excites the imagination of monogamous people tremendously. We have no difficulties with the idea of a man with more than one wife, so common across the world, including Nepal. That hardly warrants comment, even by feminists. In contrast, a woman accomodating several husbands, constantly calls for 'special' explanations. Our contrasting curiosity about these customs is itself worthy of some reflection. But that is not the subject of the two books under review here.

Both books are not really about polyandry itself but about a whole range of social relationships--population dynamics--in a society whose normal system of marriage is polyandry--the Tibetan style. In that respect these studies are more sophisticated than any early book on the subject. These examine conditions surrounding polyandry, the results and/or covariables of this unique living arrangement. The analysés deal with household patterns, labor management, inheritance rules.

Both studies are by experienced fieldworkers who conducted their research in northwest Nepal. Sidney Schuler, author of *The Other Side of Polyandry*, worked in a region, Chumik, comprising 12 villages, lying in Muktinath and Kagbeni Panchayats in 1978 and 1979. Nancy Levine, who wrote *Dynamics of Polyandry*, worked in four connected Tibetan-speaking settlements in Humla in two periods, 1978 and 1983. Dr. Schuler and Dr. Levine represent the high level of commitment by women researchers to work in Nepal's remotest regions. They also express the increasing degree of sophistication in demography, particularly developments that take account of women's and girl's

lives. Of two books under review, Schuler's is more directly concerned with how women live and how they are viewed and used. It is not for this reason alone however that I find it the more insightful and worthwhile study.

Schuler begins chapter 1 with this paragraph:

"The sun withdraws suddenly. A baby wakes and cries, two other children run off, and the women pull their shawls up around their heads and gather their wool and spindles. The wind howls and whips its way through the narrow streets of the walled village, slinging sheets of dust in its path. The women move in closer and twist their shawls more tightly around themselves as the dust hits them, drowning their words and filling their lungs. As the wind lets up they move apart and resume speaking." (p.8)

Further on, under her account of 'Six Women', Schuler records a song one Chumik friend sang to her:

"Handsome as they may be  
A person has no need  
For boots he does not fancy  
Handsome as they may be  
A person has no need  
For books that do not fit  
Child of the gods though he may be  
A woman has no need  
For a man she does not like." (p. 16)

Thus we are introduced to the society of Chumik and its women, and the exploration of why so many of these women do not marry. Schuler's account is not all poetry. There are plenty of meaty demographic data, both in tabular and anecdotal form. The work includes well written case reports and relevant theoretical comparisons.

I quote the passages above to give you something of the intimate flavour of Schuler's presentation, a taste of the rich, colorful resources she so skillfully draws together. I want to make this a short review because I hope readers will get this book and read the whole thing themselves. It is an excellent book.

Rereading Schuler for the purpose of this review, I am reminded why I wanted to write about. I still think it is by far the more essential of the two studies. Anyone interested in demography must read it. *The Other Side Of Polyandry* is published by the now well established Westview Press, only 196 pages, yet costs more than US \$ 20.

This book throws new light on the dynamics of Tibet-speaking cultures by focusing not on why and how polyandry works, but on a

related feature of this culture- the high incidence of non-married women. These are divorced or separated or widowed women as well as nuns and women who never married. Even with a lower polyandry rate than that observed by Goldstein in Limi (CNS 1977, 4:2) the Chumik people of Schuler's study have a higher rate of non-marriage. Closely examining her data on polyandry and other features of this social system, the author found polyandry alone cannot account for the high incidence of women living unmarried. All Tibetan populations experience this, in sharp contrast with Hindu peoples where the marriage rate is almost 100%. (see table 3.2 p. 49). These Nepalese women of Chumik have a non-marriage rate of 22-23% for women aged 35 and over and 28% for women aged 45 and over. By any standard this is extremely high, and I think the author is right to look for explanations not in South Asia, but at what was called the 'European system': Europeans had a lower marriage rate in the first half of this century and the 19th century. The work of demographer J. Hajnal (1965 "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective" in *Population in History*: eds. Glass and Eversley, Chicago: Aldine) is a major theoretical starting point for Schuler. Hajnal looks at production figures, labor needs, the influence of the industrial revolution and conscious attempts to limit family size in Europe.

Keeping her attention focused on women, this researcher notes their input into the labor force and listens to people who constantly cite the importance of a daughter's labor. She also notes the low status of women in general in Tibetan society (a fact I too observed but which few commentators on this society will acknowledge). The association between a women's low status here and her lack of access to inheritable property is taken account by Schuler. She also notes status differences among villages of different 'gyudpa', another feature usually denied by general observers of Tibetan society (but which Levine, below, also describes in some detail). These are not insignificant factors. And Schuler's conclusions based on their coincidence are convincing. She demonstrates (chapter 5) how normal access to property through marriage works to keep women's status low. 'Inmarriage', she shows, functions as a means of preserving social and economic inequalities. She also illustrates how women lowest in status here are left unmarried, a process which reinforces social inequality at the systemic level. The practices of polyandry, primogeniture and non-marriage become the traditional means by which families avoid division of land but also "enable them to hold on to the labor of grown children and siblings. The nonentitled and unmarried provide an important source of labor for the landed as permanent, low status family members, semi-independents in separate households or as hired laborers.... the labor of unmarried women becomes particularly important at certain phases in the family's cycle...."

These are the kinds of issues Schuler considers when she asks the question "what is it about Tibetan societies that produce:

marriage pattern more akin to those of preindustrial Western Europe than contemporary South Asia?"

Nowadays, most travellers to the Himalaya are aware of the economic success by Tibetan peoples in Nepal. Their rise to economic heights through their flourishing carpet industry is a source of envy and perhaps jealousy as well. In Tibetans' traditional environments in the dry Tibetan plateau and in the harsh, low-yield regions of the northwest, one wonders at how they survive and seem to prosper. Reading Schuler's book, a new question arises: Is this success based on the management of unmarried women's labor, first Tibetan women and now Tamang women? Is it based on their strategies to retain status differences among themselves? Sidney Schuler, with this more honest view of Tibetan society, backed by hard statistical data, taking account of women in the system, opens up a range of new thoughts and questions for consideration.

Nancy Levine's the second book under review here, is best summarized by its subtitle, *Kinship, Domesticity and Population on the Tibetan Border*. Hers is a study of community and kinship in the British tradition of anthropology in which Levine was trained. It is a thoroughly researched work, one of the few monographs about distant Humla, and she offers us a wealth of demographic material presented in statistical form, with plenty of household counts, age tables and observations from 2 periods of fieldwork, 1973 and 1984. With such rapid changes occurring across Nepal, the inclusion of 1984 data is particularly useful. Professor Levine also gives us numerous, although briefer than Dr. Schuler's cases of individual experiences.

Noting her abundance of demographic tables and numerous short case examples it appears Levine left no person unaccounted, no story untold. These kinds of detailed household and family reports are valuable for the complexity they reveal about a society. We who live in cities are highly conscious of the multiple layers of issues and the changes enmeshing us. But we often gaze at those mountain village silhouettes and reflect on the simplicity of those farmers' lives. Any such romantic view we may hold about the Humla people dissolves when we read Levine's report about these four Humla villages. (The same applies to the Chumik people described by Schuler.) We are struck by the complexities of those women's and men's lives. They have such a range of rules guiding everyday behavior; they express layers of historical adjustments; they embody compromises and defences.

Levine builds up a sociological picture of this complexity by beginning with a broad view of Humla social life, and moving in closer and more deeply as she proceeds to describe the dynamics of human relations. She reviews clan identities and the ranking system among freedmen and *trongba* (landholding) villagers, and adjunct villagers. She devotes considerable attention to these

different ranks with their interdependences and she refers back to this in her later analysis of household economy with its polyandrous arrangements.

As in so many Tibetan societies, the economy is labor-intensive yet labor remains in short supply. Even ex-slaves in Humla seem to continue their dependency relations with former owners; they still supply the labor needs of wealthier households.

Later chapters focus on household arrangements in view of rules of polyandry. Polyandry is normal among the majority of houses in this Humla study. But houses are constantly partitioning and moving through other changes. Adjustments are required to accomodate those breaks and still maintain desirable village population levels, to foster economic co-operation, and assure a labor supply. Levine's book is primarily about how people maintain their communities and economic levels in the face of the particular arrangements defined by polyandrous marriages and the factors moving people towards partition. The society she describes is, like the Chumik of Muktinath, a most dynamic social system.

Both authors refer repeatedly to several articles on population dynamics by their fellow American anthropologist Melvin Goldstein and his work ought to be read by anyone pursuing the subject. Readers may also take note of a wide-circulation publication of Goldstein's that appeared in 1987. It is a general discussion of polyandry, "When Brothers Share a Wife" in *Natural History Magazine* (March 1987). Goldstein draws data from a wide range but the accompanying photos by Tom Kelly are from Humla.

Essentially, all these scholars agree on the basis of this uniquely Tibetan system. Polyandry is a cultural ideal and it brings prestige and dignity to a household. It also serves the economic interests of a household as the corporate economic unit and as means of succession in this society. My earlier work led me to the same conclusions as these three authors so all of us are in general agreement about why Tibetans persist with this way of living. We have yet not eliminated the mystry from polyandry; and governments (China, Tibet and India and Europe/USA) whose social systems are different and who somehow find this repelling, will continue to discourage it. In the meantime we see how these new books, particularly Schuler's, bring yet another level of refinement to the study of human dynamics.

I want to commnet, finally, on the cost, availability and writing standard of these books. The Chigaco University Press product by Levine is cheaper although a hundred pages thicker. It will also be more readily available in Nepal. Yet, The Westview publication by Schuler, at more than \$20. and less well advertised, is by far the better written book. Although printed in a kind of lithographed typescript rather than the more professional

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hardtype that makes Levine's book so handsome to look at, Schuler's command of language is better and so her book is the more readable. She is less repetitious than Levine, her tabular records seem more efficient, and she recounts conversations and people with more color and feel.

It is curious that Westview, not the prestigious Chicago University Press, produced what I feel is the higher standard book.

- Barbara Nimri Aziz