

# **AGENCY, AUTONOMY AND THE SHARED SEXUALITY: GENDER RELATIONS IN POLYANDRY IN NEPAL HIMALAYA**

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## **Introduction**

Polyandry is a system of a single woman sharing multiple men as husbands at a time. In fraternal polyandry, all the brothers in one generation share a common wife. In non-fraternal polyandry, a group of like-minded men from different households get married with a single woman.<sup>1</sup> 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 categorically highlights mainly three sets of explanation that account – collectively or individually – for the emergence/persistence of polyandry.

The first set of arguments claims that polyandry is a cultural response to a prolonged absence of males in the family - a phenomenon observed commonly in all polyandrous societies (Gough 1959, Prince Peter 1955). Polyandry is perceived, therefore, as a security measure for the rest of the family members because it keeps multiple males in the family so that at least one could stay at home (Berreman 1962, Kapadia 1955). Partly, polyandry is also perceived as a way of getting rid of the pressure of the “heavy bride price” (Majumdar 1955). As a practice of group marriage polyandry also keeps number of marriage to a minimum, thereby helps avoid the burden of bride price. Since multiple marriages mean diverse economic interests (which usually pose threats to the unity of the household), polyandry is also interpreted as a practice of keeping households away from the risks of friction and fission (Leach 1955).

The second set of arguments takes demographic reasons into account and looks at polyandry as a result of an originally higher sex ratio (Aiyappan

1935, Prakash 1964, Westermarck 1922). Rivers (1924, cited in Peters and Hunt 1975) argued that in the early days the practice of female infanticide resulted in the practice of 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). The third set of arguments persuasively describes polyandry as a social response to extremely adverse economic conditions (Goldstein 1971, Westermarck 1922). It figures out polyandry as a survival strategy of the poor (Nakane 1966); a strategy of keeping the household property and estate consolidated (Majumdar 1962, Tambiah 1966); and a way of maintaining a pool of labour force together that would help cope with the persistent economic hardships (Kapadia 1955).

However, none of these scholars conceives polyandry as a complete social institution on its own right. The anthropological literature, for instance, is inclined more in seeking a pattern of progression from promiscuity to monogamy. Its common focus has been the structure and function of polyandry: how and why do people follow polyandry, how and why it continues to exist in some cultural groups, etc. Anthropological literature does not explain the internal dynamics of polyandry, nor does it look at polyandry from the vantage point of women.<sup>2</sup> It assumes 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 inequalities, such as gender.

Feminism, which has been critical to those unitary interpretations of anthropology, offers a new set of explanations in understanding the gendered terrain of power relations within a household. However, most of the feminists – except very few ones who deal with polygamy in African societies – appear to be unaware on matters of gender relations in households other than monogamous.<sup>3</sup> Some prominent feminist anthropologists such as MacCormack and Strathern (1980), Mitchell and Oakley (1986), Moore (1988), Nicholson (1990), Ortner and Whitehead (1981), Reiter (1975), Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974), and Thorne and Yalom (1982), for instance, do not even touch upon the case of polyandry in their discussions of gender in marriage, kinship and the family.

Hence, feminist discourse on gender and sexuality appears to have been confined on monogamy (which the Western feminism has successfully highlighted). The Western feminism inherently essentializes that an understanding of gender relations in monogamy mirrors gender relations of

all types, including polyandrous. Therefore, it does not recognize that women's subordination has multiple forms. In polyandry, for instance, a single "patriarch," one as perceived in monogamy, does not exist. The present paper challenges those essentialist positions and ventures into polyandry to see how power is gendered in it. This paper begins by arguing that gender relation in polyandry is structurally different than that in monogamy, primarily because a centrally located single male figure does not exist there. To be specific, it attempts to explore whether polyandrous women have equal power, agency and autonomy like men with respect to sexuality and access to resources.

This paper primarily derives from a previous research I had conducted among the Nyinba (see Luintel 1998). I stayed in Nyinba Gaon for about one month (September 1997) to collect household ethnographic information followed by one and a half month (mid-May to June 2000) for observation and verification. During both these periods, I was able to interact with 19 (of 23) Nyinba women and 14 (of 56) men who were in polyandrous union at the time. For the sake of comparison, I interviewed with some other randomly selected men and women as well who were not in polyandrous union. To get a deeper insight into the issues some key-informant interviews were accomplished and some case studies compiled. I had two Nyinba interpreters (one male, another female) to assist my work in the field.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The existing literature on polyandry is too general and theoretically less informed insofar as the "gendered regime of power"<sup>4</sup> is concerned. In order to develop a working framework of analysis, an attempt has been made to examine the concepts of marriage, property, power and sexuality. This critical analysis has been based mainly on the debates going around two schools of thought, viz. the socialist feminism, and the postmodern feminism.

#### *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 common phrase socialist feminists often use is "capitalist patriarchy." "Socialist feminism develops a portrait of social organization 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 the 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 lies to his postulation of an earlier stage of a "sex egalitarian" society that inspired some feminists very much.

Engels' main argument is that whatever status women had in the past times, it was derived primarily 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. This shift led to an entirely new source of wealth for the groups. As a result, not only the value of women's work and her production decreased, more importantly, the status of women in society shrank too. Hence Engelian explanation identifies social organization of production as largely responsible for women's subordination. The emergence of private property and the shift of inheritance from matrilineal to patrilineal lines, for example, 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 in the sense that the later too gives an exclusive importance to women's economic self-reliance.

#### *Postmodern Feminism and the Issues of Power and Sexuality*

Postmodernism is a critical approach to philosophy and meta-narratives of human history. It refers to a range of overlapping positions, which does not have one fixed meaning (Weedon 1987).<sup>5</sup> In this section, I attempt to know how and to what extent are postmodern conceptions of power and sexuality helpful to understand the dynamics of power between women and men in general and gender relations in polyandry in particular.

To Foucault power 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 power a certain strength we are endowed with. Nor is it something that is acquired,

seized or shared; or one holds on to or allows slipping away (Foucault 1980:94). Then, what power is all about? 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.” Power has a multiple, unstable, contested, precarious and relational nature, which, as Foucault assumes, permeates every social relation.

In the Foucauldian conceptualization 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.

For the purpose of this paper, power has been operationalized as a manifestation of agency and autonomy of women and men within a household. Agency has been defined as the capacity of individuals to ultimately decide what action to take. Autonomy refers to the ability to obtain information and use it as a basis of making decisions about one’s private

concerns and that of one's intimates (Dyson and Moore 1983). In agrarian societies such as Nyinba Gaon, individual autonomy (female autonomy in particular) depends largely on the degree of constraints imposed by kinship and marriage relationship as well as on the ability to inherit or otherwise acquire, retain and dispose of property, and some independent control of one's own 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 patterns which construct erotic possibilities (Jackson and Scott 1996). Essentialists and biological determinists argue that women's sexual (i. e., biological) difference from men is the main cause of women's oppression (Rubin 1984). But feminist constructivists counter-argue that it is not biology but oppression that produces sexual difference (see Wieringa, forthcoming). As the later argue, sexuality is a social construction produced historically and varies cross-culturally. They do not consider sexual behaviour as fixed, but fluid and variable. 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).

In postmodern debates on sexuality, Foucault's work has been the main impetus that problematizes the "regulatory mechanism which circumscribes the sexualized body" (McNay 1992:11). Sexuality is a site that shapes, reproduces, articulates and transforms gender relations. Issue of sexuality is, 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 accommodates with multiple co-husbands.) 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 he calls "the discursive constitution of the body" (Foucault 1980). Hence, the constructivist conceptualization of sexuality offers a potentially creative and flexible analytical perspective in understanding power relationships between women and men.

To conclude, with this review, I find postmodern feminism as a suitable framework of analysis with respect to the issues of power and sexuality. Nevertheless, its overemphasis on gender and body leaves out some equally important notions, such as marriage, property and the gender division of labour. I, therefore, complement it by drawing some insights from socialist

feminism and applying Engels' notions of material conditions of life in understanding the dynamics of gender relations in polyandry.

### **Locating Gender in the Working of Polyandry**

#### *Polyandry in Nyinba Gaon*

Nyinba polyandry is fraternal. Usually, a woman goes through a marriage ceremony with one of the several brothers;<sup>6</sup> others could join her as co-husbands later. If one of the brothers decides not to join her, no one can force him. If he gets into another marriage, usually he is expelled from the home whether or not he had joined the common wife at any time before. In such a case, he has no customary rights to claim over the household property and estate.

Located in the remote and inaccessible northwest border of Nepal adjacent to Tibet, 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 center of the district. 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 exclusive concentration in four villages, called Bargaon, Buraunse, Limatang and Todpa.<sup>7</sup>

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 Hindu (Levine 1988:24) ranks the Nyinba lower in the caste hierarchy.

Nyinba legends also reveal many facets of the past economic and demographic life in Humla and their relations with the neighbouring Hindus. One popular Nyinba legend says: *Aáth aálo Thihál, chaubis aálo Barkháng* (lit. means "there were [just] eight households in Thehe, in Bargaon there were 24"). Thehe is a nearest hamlet next to Bargaon (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, however, the total number of households in Thehe was well over 300 while that of Bargaon was only 48. If we compare the population of these two villages over the course of time, it may appear that the population growth in polyandrous society is much lower than that of the monogamous society.

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

### *The Nyinba Kinship*

In polyandry, the female figure is at the center of the kinship relations within the family. She is surrounded by her multiple husbands. She addresses each of the husbands by a common term *khimjang*. The children from these alliances would recognize the group of brothers as the group of fathers. They address all of them as *aaya* (using suffix if the fathers are too many). In a similar way, irrespective of paternity, all brothers treat all of the children equally and use the common term to address them: *puja* for son and *pu(n)* for daughter (see Appendix 1 for kinship terminology).

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 and addressed by the same term (*aaya*),<sup>8</sup> 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 (i. e., father and mother’s sides), and merge one of them (here, father’s brothers) with the lineal kin (i.e., father, again), it is called “bifurcate merging” (see Lowie 1950 for an elaboration on the notion of bifurcate merging).

Bifurcate merging is important for the Nyinba in two senses. First, it locates all fathers on an equal footing (as reflected in the use of a common term). The Nyinba do not have an individualizing term to single out the *pater* from the group of fathers. Since any one of mother’s co-husbands could be a real father (“genitor”), all brothers in father’s generation are, therefore, equally recognised as “likely fathers.” Second, the system of bifurcate merging has multiple implications on kinship relations at secondary and tertiary levels regarding property and sexuality. So far as a Nyinba marriage is concerned, bifurcate merging implies much, as it separates an ego’s mother’s brother (*aajang*) from the group of father’s brothers (*aaya*), thereby



allowing the ego to marry with the *aajang*'s children. The result is the practice of cross-cousin marriage, a practice the Nyinba preferred customarily.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the collateral sides, the Nyinba use different terms for brother 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 1). But a sister's children are addressed by distinct terms. An ego calls *chhou* for sister's son and *chhou(n)* for sister's daughter. Once again, different terms used to denote the children of equal collateral distance can be understood in the context of social organization of polyandry. In Nyinba polyandry, a brother's children might mean one's own children if the ego is under co-husbandship, 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 ideas regarding how property inheritance should be managed. Its underlying system is obviously embedded in kinship relations. 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* ("flesh"). For Nyinba, it is "bone" that matters more than "flesh." Consequently, men inherit property and women receive "proper maintenance" relative to it. Hence, as in other societies, gender inequality and the corresponding power relations between women and men is justified at a symbolic level.

Although the eldest brother acts as the "social father" for all the children begotten by a marriage, in the daily life, the Nyinba tend to identify the "genitor" also. The main responsibility of designating paternity is that of the wife. It is through this responsibility that women's autonomy within the household is partially established. Designation of paternity to one against other co-husbands is a matter of politics through which she could tactfully share a sense of marital belongingness to many co-husbands. She could even play "tricks" in designating paternity to the particular husband who has grievances of being sexually neglected within polyandrous complexities. By Nyinba perception, assigning paternity is also an "excuse" for women's illegitimate and extra-marital liaisons, if any. By designating paternity she could "legitimize" it. This is one of the privileges for the Nyinba women to strengthen her position within the power hierarchy of the household.

In a very few cases, paternity is also designated in the 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 a very rare case.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Fraternal Solidarity and the Female-Head*

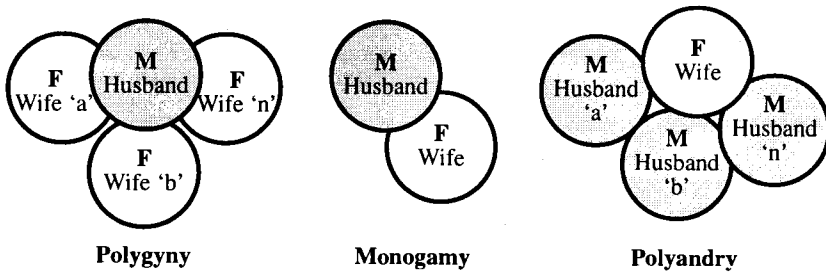
Levine (1980) argues that an ideological emphasis on the equality of the brothers is central to the Nyinba perception of polyandrous marriage and is evidenced in interpersonal relationships. It is considered wrong for any brother to try to gain a monopoly over the woman's attention and services (Levine 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 provides legal recognition to 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. It has two direct benefits to him: first, he can have regular physical and emotional intimacy with the wife for most of the time. Second, staying at home and looking after the estate is not only relatively an easier job but it is also a source of authority both inside and outside the household. Although some *dag-pas* take advantage of monopolizing this authority, there are others who pay much attention to the comfort and convenience of younger brother(s).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the *dag-pa* has no absolute rights: neither sexual (such as, regarding access to the wife), nor reproductive (such as, over the children) or otherwise (over estate and property, for example). It seems that Nyinba polyandry is a system of power balance and operates in mutual trust where individuals (both male and female) 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. Instead, if the eldest brother is not "smart," another clever one may emerge as the de facto *dag-pa*. Since the *dag-paship* is not a position, but a set of expected roles and duties, the role of *dag-mo* in Nyinba household, is much more vital for the Nyinba social life.

Polyandry without fraternal solidarity can neither sustain, nor make any sense. It is a system of fragile balance maintained within contests and negotiations of power that largely depends on the extent of mutual trust and

co-operation. At the center of this lies *dag-mo*, the female-head, as the pivot. Due to her centripetal role, Nyinba males consider each woman as a potential nucleus for a separate property (thereby, separate family). Presence of more than one woman in the family therefore logically transforms the direction of power towards centrifugal character. In order to avoid family break ups (and thereby minimizing the potential partition of labour power and property), they prefer to adhere to the customary practice of “one marriage for one generation.” Thus, because of the presence of a single woman amidst many men, she is positioned at the center of kinship within the family (see Figure 1).

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



In a Nyinba household, if there is any one having extensive information and knowledge on domestic affairs, it is *dag-mo*. She is the locus of communication and medium of contact for all the co-husbands. Regarding property, the *dag-mo* has access to, if not ownership of, all production frontiers: trade, transhumance and agriculture. She can have control over every economic activity throughout the year. Despite the fact that the *dag-pa* (male-head) has recognised authority in all the decisions, in practice, the *dag-mo* has pragmatic power to influence such decisions. Field observation clearly reveals that very rarely *dag-pa* undertakes the risks of taking decisions without consultation to *dag-mo*. Thus it appears that the *dag-pa* is a titular head vis-à-vis the *dag-mo*, as some Nyinba maintain it.

### **The Gendered Terrain of Nyinba Property System**

Property is not just a matter of subsistence, but an effective force of social relations. There are shifting, dynamic and plural relations between women and men that involve economic co-operation and support as well as

accommodation, resistance and contest. When we look at the economic aspect of gender relations from the Foucauldian perspective, we see a clear connection between power and property. Historically, property system has been the underlying mechanism of social organization. Any shift in source and direction of economic activities has brought corresponding changes in the patterns of sexuality. Likewise, property has been the basis of Nyinba polyandry where women's economic interests are either ignored or marginalized for the sake of the so-called fraternal solidarity.

In search of the material basis of gender relations in polyandry, I would attempt to explore the gender division of labour. The gender division of labour is not simply a division of productive and reproductive activities by sex. More comprehensively, it is the totality of social relations between men and women together in a production system (Leibowitz 1986). It seems that a particular form of social organization produces specific form of gender division of labour which, in turn, reproduces a corresponding form of socially mandated gender relations.

In Nyinba society, power permeates in property in the form of gender inequality. What matters is the way economic relations between women and men are shaped. In the present study very simple questions were posed: How is property shared within a household and how is it handed over to the next generation? Are there any regulating functions of kinship regarding all these processes? How gender relations are shaped due to differential access to property and different gender roles? What linkages are there between the domains of property and sexuality? These are some of the questions that pave the way to establish a link between power, property and gender relations.

#### *An Overview on Property System*

The Nyinba evaluate a household's wealth primarily through the size of its land-holdings and the size of herds and cattle. Ownership of valuables, comprised of money, gold, ornaments, turquoise, coral beads, brass utensils, carpets, silk and ceremonial clothing, etc. follows next (Levine 1988:233). Agriculture, transhumance and trade are the three main pursuits of subsistence in Nyinba Gaon. Each of these needs a full-time labour. Agriculture is vulnerable due to the high elevation, steep slope, poor soil fertility and low levels of rainfall, etc. Although better than other Humli villages in terms of agricultural productivity, Nyinba Gaon is still not self-sufficient in food supply. An important source of cash is transhumance, called *pakhar* (breeding and selling animals). The Nyinba domesticate a

relatively larger number of cattle and herds than their Hindu neighbours. Sheep remains the single most important animal the Nyinba keep. Of the total livestock (2352 in 1997), sheep and goats occupied 83 percent, followed by horses and *jhuma* (female yak) (8 percent), and cows (4.5 percent).

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

#### *Sex Roles and Gender Stereotyping*

Two decades ago, a multi-community study in Nepal examined the gender division of labour and the time spent on work in rural households. The study revealed that in *conventional economic activities* (animal husbandry, manufacturing, and paid employment) the actual level of women's contribution was 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.) were added, women were found to be working 3.5 hrs. more than men (per day 11 hrs. for female and 8.5 hrs. for male) (Acharya and Bennett 1981:159). In a similar way, an adult Nyinba woman 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 their income. They contribute far more time in agricultural tasks than do men. By contrast, men specialize 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 home for months.

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 works throughout the year except during the yawning winter season (December to March), when the ground is covered by 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.

#### *Prosperity and the Rhythm of Movement*

The Nyinba require deploying labour activity widely and in different frontiers simultaneously. Involvement in a single sector means impoverishment, which the Nyinba would never accept. One person 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). Thus, every year Nyinba men spend a considerable length of time away from their homes.

### Case One

Sonam, a resident of Nyinba Gaon, has five members in his family. He had two grandfathers: Nagder and Tashi. 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, Nagder and Tashi had no more than 40 each. Sonam had three fathers: Namgela, Tundup and Chhawang. 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, Chhawang got a job in Nepal Police; Tundup used to engage in *pakhar*, while Namgela, the elder brother, was looking after the household and agriculture. Tundup became successful to increase the number of sheep up to 300. Around 1978, the number of sheep reached 400 and jhopa (yak oxen) 25. In his fathers' generation Sonam's household became famous as one of the rich Nyinba households in Nyinba Gaon. Sonam himself had four brothers. Of them, the eldest died. So Sonam had to take responsibility of *pakhar*, so far Tundup (one of his fathers) was undertaking. Unfortunately, Norbu, his elder brother, appeared slanderous. He began to loiter in India, engaged in gambling, prostitution and other addictions. To meet the expenses, he began to sell the sheep. It is estimated that of the herd of 400 sheep, he sold at least half. (By that time each sheep used to be sold at approximately US\$ 40.) In 1990, Namgela, one of Sonam's fathers, died. After it, the family disintegrated: Sonam got married monogamously, Norbu and Chhiring, however, managed to stay in polyandry. (Consequently, the whole property including land, herd and cattle was to be divided.) After this, Sonam could not maintain the entire businesses alone. He sold 50 sheep of his part. Norbu and Chhiring too sold at least 150 sheep of their common share. Process of selling continued successively in both sides. During 1997 Sonam owned just 12 sheep, while Norbu and Chhiring had even not a single. For Nyinba it has become a reference case to show how Nyinba prosperity is gained and ruined because of different marriage systems.

Male mobility fulfills many requirements. First, it eliminates the possibility of sex jealousy among brothers. Second, it reduces the number of family members depending on the limited domestic subsistence production. Third, outside involvement maximizes total output. It is one of the means of economic prosperity that makes it possible for Nyinba to maintain the "pride

of polyandry.” Otherwise, they would remain as poor as their Hindu neighbours.<sup>12</sup> The gender implication of all this is that men are widely informed; they maintain extensive outside contacts and are proud of being engaged in such networks and trust groups. They also glamorize their activity of trade. Women, on the contrary, are confined to housework and the farms, which the Nyinba give less value.

#### *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” resources. Movable properties are not considered important so far as maintaining *trongbat* status is concerned.<sup>13</sup> The logic is that such property can be easily sold or even given away in daughter's dowry. 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 obviously 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 partner in the household. It is unconditional (Levine 1988). In polygynous polyandry,<sup>14</sup> as in Chumik (another polyandrous society in Mustang District, see Schuler, 1987), a Nyinba daughter from the first wife would get “an unusually good dowry.” (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 reserves rights to property. A divorcee woman gets nothing from her husband(s) 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 horses, female yaks, sheep, etc.<sup>15</sup>



Of the 19 polyandrous women (of the 23 in total), 10 did not get a dowry of any sort. It might be attributed to the higher rates of "love marriage" than "arranged" ones. One partial explanation for the higher rate of love marriage is to avoid burdens of dowry and other ritual expenses. Of the 19 female respondents, five reported that their dowry had already been merged 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 women replied negatively. 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, acknowledged that dowry amount mattered at the time of a daughter's marriage, when mothers would be willing to add to a daughter's dowry on her own behalf.

In conclusion, land followed by possession of herds, cattle and other valuables constitute the form of property in Nyinba Gaon. Although land is a valued property, what attracts more now is trade and transaction (*Chhalam-chhongdo*). Nyinba women devote more time and energy in agricultural tasks that are tedious, slow and economically less rewarding. Nyinba men, on the other hand, apt more in a rhythm-based cycle of trade and transaction. Those are charming, outward-oriented and profit making enterprises. Nyinba women have more or less equal access to property with their male counterparts. So far control and inheritance of property is concerned, conventionally males (especially the elder ones) enjoy exclusive rights. Nonetheless, polyandrous Nyinba women do not feel the sense of economic insecurity as much as their monogamous Hindu neighbours, partly because property is owned and inherited collectively.

### **Diverse Sexuality, Wider Choices: Power-Pleasure Spiral in Polyandry**

Locating agency and autonomy in sexuality is a complex issue. Foucault 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 practiced in the society. In this paper I argue that power in Nyinba sexuality is more productive than repressive. A Nyinba perception of sexuality is that it is not only for reproduction but for pleasure as well, as reflected in their multiple forms of sexuality. Nyinba sexuality is open, flexible and multiple.

It does not have sexual taboos as much as the Hindu neighbours have. For both men and women there is enough scope for sexual choice, negotiation 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 choice and taking decisions.

### *Marriage Rules and Mate Selection*

The Nyinba have a multiple forms of marriage. There are some cases where the family has only one son, thus the question of being polyandrous is not an issue. In other cases, a clear understanding is developed that the entire group of brothers would share a wife right from the moment marriage takes place. Still in some other cases, one of the brothers (not necessarily the eldest) leads the marriage rituals (with or without consultation or presence of the others) and "brings the wife," whom the others could share if they wish. Hence, some marriages are monogamous originally, later leading to polyandry; others are polyandrous right from the beginning. There might be some cases currently monogamous, but were polyandrous by origin. In such cases one of the co-husbands expires. There are many cases where brothers sharing a wife split off and (re)marry monogamously. In such a case, polyandry breaks up due to fraternal dislike or mistrust. 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 marriage. 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 (in 1997), only seven had cross-cousin spouse.<sup>16</sup> A vast majority (84 per cent) of marriage was *samthache* (love marriage), followed by *paklen* (arranged) five per cent and the rest either *jari* (elopement), *dyakcha* (marriage by capture) or *syuna* (informal celebration).<sup>17</sup> One possible explanation for the high rate of love marriage, including elopement, is that the families involved could avoid the burden of dowry and other expenses such as lavish feasts, etc.<sup>18</sup> A love marriage offers a short-cut and economic way of avoiding ritually tiring formalities of arranged marriage. Although, due to the traditional prestige issues, *paklen* marriage is preferred in principle, actually lesser and lesser number of people are actually following it.

*Marital Sexuality and Women's Autonomy*

Among the Nyinba, marriage is usually patrilocal and normally either monogamous or polyandrous, followed by a few cases of polygyny. Unlike the Tibetan practice, bi-generational polyandry (father and son sharing a spouse)<sup>19</sup> 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 valued but rarely followed in practice.

In Nyinba Gaon, 23 of the 73 current marriages recorded were polyandrous (Luintel 1998).<sup>20</sup> The 23 polyandrous marriages included 23 females and 56 males. This means each polyandrous marriage accommodated approximately 2.43 males. Two husbands sharing a wife was the most popular (16 cases) form of polyandry. 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.

The eldest brother usually sleeps on the main bed in the kitchen, called *mahang*. Customarily, he gets 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 usually sleep in other rooms. Younger brothers will have access to her but later, in order of seniority, if it is applicable. Sometimes, they might have to wait a long (couple of weeks) for their turn.

It is the Nyinba belief that no two siblings should sleep in a single bed at a time. It might bring "ill health, loss of herds, loss of profit in trade and such other harms." They could easily tolerate "sharing mouth"<sup>21</sup> or even intercourse (with common wife or girl friend), but never a bed. So, logically, each brother has to sleep separately.<sup>22</sup> Besides, for many reasons, access to wife is not a serious problem for them. First, every year almost all (except one) adult Nyinba male spend most of the months away from home. Thus, the possibility of confusion, conflict and jealousy regarding sex is apparently 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, the one who was at home goes to the village, usually after dinner, and would come back late at night. By that time the wife is expected to have been occupied by the arriving husband already.

Third, if there are two or more husbands staying at home for a longer period (say, for example, a couple of weeks), this is, of course, the most inconvenient time for them. In such a case, 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. Unfortunately, sometimes it happens that the junior co-husband is too aggressive and impatient to wait for his turn. In such a case, the wife has to "understand" him. The only option, she has, is to visit each husband by turn within a single night so long as she feels physically capable and psychologically strong.

In polyandry, a single rule for sexual arrangement does not work for 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 of fraternal trust and solidarity become disintegrated. Despite her "fair deal" with and sincerity to all the co-husbands, problems do arise (see case two). If there is perceived or real discrimination against particular husband(s), its repercussions appear in other ways. No brother complains directly that there has been an 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 caliber by "bringing a wife" of their own.

#### Case Two

Dolma, a resident of Nyinba Gaon, has a problem regarding "who (husband or wife) should approach first" for sex? During her marriage with Nurputashi she was told that she would have to accommodate two brothers (Nurputashi and Rabdan) as co-husbands. Dolma was first approached by Nurputashi, the elder husband. She hoped that Rabdan too would approach her, which he never did. Dolma thinks that it is husband who should approach first in matter of sexual relations. So she never thought of approaching first. Now the case has been complicated. She is 25 years already; her two co-husbands are 24 and 23 years, respectively. Since, Rabdan never tried to share her sexually during five years of their union, Dolma suspects that he might have an outside affair whom he wants to marry. She says, "I would never allow this home to be partitioned. If Rabdan intends to bring another wife, he should support her at his own dispense. I have been trying to receive him sexually and emotionally. It is he who never approached me." Unlike Dolma, Rabdan has different sort of complaint. He reacts, "How could I accept Dolma as my wife, so long as she never comes to me. She was formally married with Nurputashi, not with me. By the way if I approach her now, she would immediately publicize it and push me under

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 Nurputashi.”

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 this is too forward and let their husbands come to them (Levine 1988) as is the case of Dolma.<sup>23</sup> My female respondents expressed paradoxical claims. Some claimed initiating contacts, others maintained that they waited for their husbands to approach first. This ambivalence, however, provides Nyinba women a choice and space for negotiation, but sometimes also complication (such as the case of Dolma illustrates, see case two).

#### *Extra-Marital Sexuality and Women's Agency*

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 in 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 conditioned or institutional in the sense that it follows the rules of endogamy-exogamy effectively. I would demonstrate that multiple venues for sexuality offer a 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, let me categorize them into four main types:

**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 which avails them after-work entertainment and sexual socialization. During September-October, 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 in the area. This is also a time of getting together, sharing happiness and exchanging best wishes to each other.

Nyinba boys and girls agree in advance to get together at a fixed time at night. As a token of their commitments they exchange items of interest, a custom called *kau*. As an expected norm of *kau*, the boy tries to stretch a girl's scarf. If she is positive, she does not mind the boy taking it. Alternatively, she could also offer 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 more or less equivalent. The exchange items, however, are not considered for their economic value but for symbol that they reflect for love and affection. 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” between them. During the *kau*, they are not only in a close proximity, but also in a lonely place. Hence, they do not hesitate to “join cheeks,” a phrase used by Nyinba to refer to foreplay. Thus, while *kau* is an occasion to express a preliminary consent for *chaya*, it is also the right occasion for the girl to deny the request right from the beginning and say “no.” There is no argument if she refuses it.

Actually, *chaya* is performed the next evening. The boys 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 in a screaming voice, “*O s s rangi*.” 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 get parted in pairs and may involve in sexual relations if they wish.<sup>24</sup>

For the next morning, quite interestingly, all the boys and girls manage to come out of their own beds as if they had slept the whole night as usual. Getting up from one's own bed in the morning is a prerequisite that every Nyinba parent wants to be adhered to by their sons and/or daughters. Otherwise, parents might have to inquire where these boys/girls had been during the night. So there is a clear subterfuge on the part of parents on matters of *chaya*. One possible explanation for this subterfuge may be that Nyinba parents perceive *chaya* as a form of sexual socialization of their children and as part of Nyinba "youth culture." This is a time when boys and girls choose their prospective life-partners also. High rates of love marriage (and even elopement and *jari* marriages) attest to this observation.

**Khamdu-doya:** Of the several boys and girls participating in *chaya*, some may fall in deep affection to proceed for *khamdu-doya* relations, which literally means, "meet the friends." Under *khamdu-doya*, boys or men usually go to girl's (or women's) beds secretly at night (see case three). Their beds are mostly in the fixed room of the house.<sup>25</sup> Those are the parts of a Nyinba house where even a stranger can reach there without any obstruction.

### Case Three

Chhopal, 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 Pemayangjen, an 18 years old girl from a neighboring Nyinba village. 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. And Chhopal used to meet at her bed almost every night. After some time, Pemayangjen's two co-fathers came to know it. They tolerated it for some time. But since, the social and economic standings of Chhopal's household were 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 began to watch whether Chhopal was to come. As usual, Chhopal arrived during that night also. The moment he was to enter into the room where

Pemayangjen was sleeping, both of them captured him suddenly and beat severely in the dark. In the morning they came to see him and apologized pretending that they did not identify him during the night. They also expressed concerns over injuries in his body. Since Chhopal was not in a position to move, they kept him for a couple of days. Meanwhile, they told Chhopal that they did not have any objection if he was really willing to marry Pemayangjen. Otherwise they would not tolerate it. Chhopal, however, returned to his home without any reply and never dared to revisit Pemayangjen again.

If he finds her fast asleep, he softly strikes on her nose to wakening her. Once awakened, 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 great 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 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.

**Syarba-syarmu:** A third and still an 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).

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 institutionalized the *syarba-syarmu* liaisons are. At the beginning, the *syarba* sends confidentially some gifts as a proposal. To reciprocate it, she invites the *syarba* for a dinner in a suitable time. Again the *saitire* is the messenger there. On such an occasion, she usually offers *thutt*.<sup>26</sup> If she is rich and skillful, she will also feel delighted 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 an acknowledgement 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 for merrymaking and sexual intimacy. With this, they establish a kind of durable sexual relation without destroying their marital unions on either side.

#### Case Four

Nagder, now 70 years, has an affair with Pangjum, now 55, since the time they were unmarried. When Pangjum's father became heirless (a state of not having even a single son), Chhiringdorje was brought as resident son-in-law. Chhiringdorje knew it later that Pangjum has a long established liaison with Nagder, a man in the same village. In 1994 an incident happened to them. One day Chhiringdorje went out towards Chunwa Khola (a local river) to look after yaks left there for grazing. Taking the advantage of his absence Pangjum invited Nagder immediately. Nagder came with *jand-chindo*, very old therefore tasty liquor, as an informal ritual. The moment both of them were enjoying, Chhiringdorje appeared there all of a sudden. Chhiringdorje was in fact in a search of a proof to protest against wife for her indulgement in adultery. That night he had returned to his home deliberately after watching from outside whether Nagder was to come. Upon his arrival, naturally both Nagder and Pangjum became shocked. He scolded them badly and challenged Nagder that he would have taken its revenge had his daughter-in-law still alive. Nagder too replied that his liaison with Pangjum had been very old, more than at least Chhiringdorje joined the house as resident son-in-law. Chhiringdorje 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 Pangjum with Nagder. Both had a heavy cost for him, since he might loose the authority over the estate and other property Chhyangbuti had. Nagder and Pangjum are continuing their *syarba-syarmu* liaison even today, while Chhiringdorje has become just a patient onlooker.

It is not always (possible) that they meet at home. A young *syarba* from a distant village might have to go on a horse to see his *syarmu*, or bring her somewhere in a lonely place (usually at night). Upon completion of their business, the *syarba* might escort her back to home and come back. (As an expected Nyinba practice, he comes out from his bed in the morning as usual.) By Nyinba standard, a normal and expected age of *syarba-syarmu*

liaisons is 30 to 50 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.

One may ask what about the spouse of the person involved in *syarba-syarmu* affair. Does not he or she mind? Of course, the person minds it as the case of Chhiringdorje exemplifies it very clearly (see case four). But the issue is that he himself (or she herself) might have similar affair with other woman (or men). If this is the case the person may lose 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 a husband overtly protests against such affairs or vice versa. No doubt, one can protest, but cannot stop his wife (or her husband) if the person is really committed to continue the affair. I have a number of cases collected from Nyinba Gaon, which enable me to roughly estimate that the magnitude of *syarba-syarmu* liaisons is almost half of the formal marital unions.

**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. Therefore, such 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 to their monogamous Hindu neighbours. Boys and girls, "unmarried surplus women," and married men and women alike take part in *chhwa-jyagna*. *Syon-thicha*, popularly called *bhotey nach*, followed by *deuda nach* are some of the popular dances performed. During the dance, teasing, snatching and scuffling are not considered as "sexual harassment." Even unfamiliar persons are unhesitant in such occasion. Dance and associated physical intimacy are sort of pre-sex activities for the persons involved. It removes hesitation and builds up confidence. 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 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 nach* (dance of the village oracles). There is a break of three to four hours in the evening for dinner. Then begins 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 enthusiastically, 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 a lot of bushes are. They pass the entire night there.

Some of my key-informants at Simikot, who have observed *saune punni* for the last several years, told me that the fair has increased its charm once Nyinba boys and girls began to participate. They even estimate that about one quarter of the boys and girls who participate in this fair might 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.

To conclude, because of her virtually central location in the family, *dagmo* can deploy different forms of sexual practices based on specific situation. Assignment of paternity based on wife's conscience is one of several Nyinba practices that reveal Nyinba women's relative autonomy so far as sexuality is concerned. Freedom of mate selection, possibility of divorce from either side, multiple forms of marital and extra-marital sexuality are some of the issues which reveal that power in polyandry is neither male-centered nor monolithic.

The Nyinba "marital sexuality" clearly reveals how Nyinba women manage their sexual relations with their multiple husbands. Likewise, their "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 they are Tibetan (as some would tend to argue), but more so because they practice polyandrous marriage. 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 universalizing and homogenising concepts such

as “patriarchy” and the radical feminists’ claims that (hetero)sexuality is oppressive to the women cross-culturally.

### **Concluding Remarks**

#### *Summary and Conclusions*

The thematic focus of this paper is power as it is revealed in agency and autonomy and produced, shaped and exercised in polyandrous form of sexuality and the corresponding social organization of property. Polyandry differs from monogamy 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. Despite that the male-head (*dag-pa*) holds the authority in principle; his authority is far less effective due to other socio-economic and agro-ecological dynamics. Thus, in practice, it is female-head (*dag-mo*) who is strong in her agency due to her virtual central location in the household. It means, there are multiple centres of power, and it flows not in a top-down but in a horizontal fashion.

Since there is not a single (male) authority in the polyandrous households, power in polyandry is fluid and multiple. The multiple forms of Nyinba sexuality and its manifestations in aspects of gender relations make gender inequality more flexible and implicit. Resistance and contest in gender relations within the household have as much space in Nyinba society as cooperation and compromise have. On the whole, it appears that Nyinba women are not just subservient “housewives,” they are also active agents in exercising power and agency with their male counterparts.

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 household 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. First, in case, one husband dies, another will be there as her partner. So multiple husbands give them a sense of security, thereby it avoids the pity and stigma associated with widowhood (as it has to be faced by their monogamous Nyinba or neighbouring Hindu sisters). Second, polyandry makes the household economically prosperous (due to the nonpartition of the property and pooling of the labour power) (see case one).

For the Nyinba, children are important for two reasons: first, as labourers and second, as heirs. Since children are socially recognized as belonging to the family and not to an individual father, it matters but little who is the *pater* of a particular child. As a consequence, polyandrous women appear to be relatively autonomous so far as their body and sexuality is concerned. A similar argument has also been found in the case of polyandrous women of Chumik village (in Mustang District) (Schuler 1987:67). Menon (1996) argues that sexual restrictions are relaxed in those societies where identification of individual fatherhood does not matter. Furthermore, as the diverse forms of Nyinba sexuality itself reveals, sex is not only a matter of reproduction but also of pleasure. This pleasure aspect of sexuality gives Nyinba women enough space to negotiate at the household level. Considerably higher sexual freedom for both genders in selecting sexual partner(s) or spouse (or conversely, seeking divorce) gives the female as much power and agency as to their male counterparts.

This finding is widely supported by the case of other polyandrous society. 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 in 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). Relative to their monogamous sisters in the plain in India, a similar case has also been observed in *Pahari* polyandry (Majumdar 1962).

### *Theoretical Implications*

Women's subordination is a complex issues that cross-cuts the debates over property, sexuality, kinship and gender. Unlike anthropological literature that tends to explore the “genesis of polyandry” instead of its existing dynamics, this paper focuses on the internal, gendered dynamics of polyandry. Challenging the large body of conventional literature that perceived polyandry as an exotic culture (the “Other”), the present paper considers polyandry as a normal cultural practice in its own right. 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 facts from polyandry.

In this context, 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 jealousy 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 jealousy is reduced structurally as well as psychologically. It is structurally reduced in the sense that all co-husbands do not stay at home simultaneously.<sup>27</sup> 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 argue 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).<sup>28</sup>

Second, in contrast to the gendered power relations in sexuality, Nyinba property system explicitly excludes women and favours men. The gender relations regarding property are, therefore, obviously not egalitarian. Nyinba kinship upholds the discriminatory ideal of the so-called "flesh vs. bone" dichotomy that overtly undervalues women and feminism. Furthermore, the field observation reveals that the tendency of an excessive dependence of Nyinba economy on trade and transhumance and less on 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 gender division of labour that exists among them very much attests to this distinction.

Nonetheless, Nyinba women are not marginalized to the extent of their monogamous counterparts. In polyandry, practically it does not matter so much regarding who owns property and who inherits it, to the extent 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 organization of production (and organization of property). To reiterate again, since property inheritance is patrilineal, yet owned and used collectively, polyandrous Nyinba women do not suffer from a sense of economic dependence to the extent their monogamous sisters do.

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." This grossly generalized observation does not pay attention to the issues of 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 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,<sup>29</sup> a point that Prince Peter has missed out.

Fourth, there appear a number of similarities between polyandry and matriliney, despite that descent systems stemming 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 (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 low too, 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<sup>30</sup> (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 debates on matriliney and sexuality, and broadens our understanding of the gendered power relations in the family. It contributes to the gap of knowledge that exists sofar as understanding the roots of women's subordination is concerned. It reveals that women's subordination has not only an economic base as the liberal and the socialist feminists claim, but it also has a sexual and power base, a point they ignore. Following Foucault, this study too affirms that sexuality is a social construction that produces power and is manifested in gender relations shaped by agency and autonomy of women and men.

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### **Notes**

1. Most of the literature on polyandry including this paper deals with fraternal polyandry. See Unni (1958) for the non-fraternal polyandry (practised in southern Malabar of South India).
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 center 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. 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).
4. By the phrase "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.
5. Originally, postmodernism is represented in the works of Derrida (1973), followed by Lacan (1977), Kristeva (1982) and developed by Foucault (1980).
6. Of 19 polyandrous women I interviewed, 10 reported that they were married with the elder and the other 9 with younger male among the co-husbands.
7. The present study is based on one of these hamlets, in this paper pseudo-named as "Nyinba Gaon." There were a total of 379 men and women during 1997. The average household size in Nyinba Gaon was considerably larger (7.4 members per household) than the national average of Nepal (5.6 members in 1991). 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).



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8. In case father's brothers are too many, a 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.
9. One possible explanation for using a separate term to mother's brother might be that under cross-cousin marriage, the ego becomes closer as affinal kin. It is one example that shows the functional utility of kinship in regulating Nyinba sexuality and constructing gender identity.
10. Such a custom has also been reported in the case of *Pahari* polyandry (Berreman 1962).
11. 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.
12. The economic gaps between the Nyinba and their Hindu neighbours were clearly revealed in 1998 famine when more than 300 Humli reportedly 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.
13. 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 to continue the household (Levine 1988:187).
14. Polygynous polyandry is a marital situation when many co-husbands share many wives at a time, 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.)
15. 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.
16. Of these seven women, four were groom's mother's brother's daughters while the remaining three were father's sister's daughters.
17. *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 it is ritually formalized with a payment of some nominal penalty to the family of the girl. *Syuna* is an informal and short celebration of marriage once groom is brought in with her voluntary consent.
18. Practice of bride price as reported by Majumdar (1955) in India has not been found among Nyinba.
19. In Tibet, a widower used to remarry with another woman to whom his son (from the diseased wife) too could be sexually accommodated.

20. Out of 73, two households consisted of unmarried children with widow female-heads.
21. "Sharing mouth," means sharing the same dishes. 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-time. The social ideology is either share sex or mouth, not both.
22. It was perhaps one of social taboos the Nyinba developed to maintain sexual privacy. It could ease wife's discomfort at approaching one of several co-husbands.
23. In this strategy, the problem is 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 particular husband beforehand.
24. 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 losing any moral ground in prohibiting their sons and daughters.
25. 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.
26. The *thutt* is a kind of sweet-cake made up of flour, sugar and yak butter. One piece of *thutt* usually weighs one kg. Offering *thutt* as one of the items in dinner is a symbolic consent on behalf of the woman.
27. For instance, during the entire period of my stay in Nyinba Gaon in 1997, I could find just two households where two co-husbands were simultaneously at home.
28. 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 grow up and choose a common wife for all. Both of these phenomena, I argue, are highly and emotionally unimaginable for the monogamous Hindu society in the immediate neighbourhood of the Nyinba.
29. Nyinba consider casual sexual liaisons in fairs such as these as "deviant" due to their normlessness as it is experienced in Raling festival or *saune punni*, for instance.
30. An empirical remnant of matrilineal society was found in Tibet during 1960s (Prince Peter 1965). As in Tibet, Nyinba too practise both uxorilocal (husband moving to wife's location) and virilocal (wife moving to husband's location) marriages (see Levine 1988, Luintel 1998, Schuler 1987). I found three cases of uxorilocal marriage in Nyinba Gaon. There were also a couple of cases of unmarried women begetting children. (Such children are called *nhelu* and have to face stigma throughout their life.) When a Nyinba couple becomes "heirless" (that means, when there is no son), one of the popular options to continue the *trongbat* is to bring a resident son-in-law. Prince Peter (1965) argues that it is a typical cultural trait found among the matrilineal society. Nancy E. Levine says

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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). For Stein (1972) such cultural zones were the "Kingdoms of Women" where some sort of matrilineal system prevailed.

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**Appendix 1**

**Nyinba Kinship Terminology\***

**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)

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\* Source: Luintel (1998), op. cit.

**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 son	: Chhou
For father's sister's son	: Aajang
Husband's brother's wife	: ?
Husband's sister	



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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