

Notes on Some Studies of Himalayan Households.

Review Article by Ben Campbell

The new edition of Thomas Fricke's *Himalayan Households*, and the recent appearance of John Gray's *The Householder's World* offer a timely opportunity for reflecting on studies of households in the Himalayan region. I shall concentrate to start with on Fricke's work, and raise questions about his conceptual approach in relation to a substantial body of research, including my own, on households in the Tamang hinterland of Central Nepal. I shall then discuss some of these issues in relation to Gray's approach to Bahun-Chetri households in the Kathmandu Valley.

Fricke's new edition of *Himalayan Households* is published with an epilogue containing some reflections on the author's research subsequent to the original publication in 1984. His work on Tamang demography amounts to a very considerable body of data and analysis, in which studies of population growth among Tamangs living in a remote corner of Nepal's Dhading district have now been comparatively contextualised by additional studies of Tamangs living on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley.

Tamang speakers are the majority population of the mostly dry-crop producing slopes and ridges of central Nepal. The argument of the book relies on a dual focus on population and adaptive process. Natural fertility conditions combine with a relatively late age of marriage, and a valuation of children that stems from the contemporary concern for diversification of the household economy beyond traditional agro-pastoral subsistence into wage labour. Fricke's study shows the village of Timling's demographic growth rate to be 1.2% per annum rather than 2.1% for Nepal as a whole. The substantive contribution of *Himalayan Households* lies in its core of data on the reproductive histories of 152 women, and reveals the highest recorded rate of infant mortality for Nepal, of 204 deaths in the first year per thousand.

Now, I claim no expertise in the specialisation of demography, but having worked myself among Tamang speakers of an adjacent district on the topic of 'households', and given his stress on the linkages

between population and organisation of economy, I am obliged to register some major points of disagreement with Fricke. His stated aim is to offer a processual approach, and to link population dynamics with changing environmental and economic conditions. His theoretical underpinning is a version of Marshall Sahlins' Domestic Mode of Production which posits autonomous households as the primary units of production and consumption. The applicability of Sahlins' model is not demonstrated but assumed. The facts are merely ordered as convenient into the conceptual mould of discrete domestic facades.

Phrases such as "the logic of the domestic economy" pepper this book. We are told that "Each household can be thought of as an economic unit defined by the need to produce food for the hearth" (1994:73), and that "work is for the common good of those who share the hearth" (ibid:130). The problem is that if you take the trouble to observe, over a whole year, a Tamang household in its social composition and productive activities, rather than infer social behaviour from survey responses, a different picture emerges. Tamang households are very fluid as to who they are composed of. Close relatives come, stay a while, and make substantial contributions to domestic life. Adolescents, even young married couples, and unmarried older people are formally adopted as co-resident *gothalo* ('herder'). Widowed people spend time with different children, and first-born children often live separately with their grandparents. If the task of the anthropologist is to understand a people in terms of "the processes that have meaning to them" (ibid. :129), allowance must be made for the fact that the Tamang word for 'house' (*tim*) is also a way of talking about 'lineage'. This greater-domestic reality needs to be given its place in conceptualising 'the household', as people indeed depend significantly on this and other more inclusive versions of domestic incorporation.

The particular relations by which Tamang households interact, and reproduce themselves in marriage and exchange, are virtually ignored by the restricted focus of the household survey approach. The irony is that if one looks closely at Sahlins' work which Fricke relies on so much, it becomes clear that the Tamang correspond more or less to a type of society Sahlins identifies as characterised by intense inter-domestic labour exchanges of balanced reciprocity, representing departures in economy and social structure from the main run of those

societies he generalises as being conditioned by the Domestic Mode of Production (Sahlins 1974: 224).

It is unfortunate that Fricke's vast array of data was not re-thought in theoretically more challenging ways than his original offering of a few modifications of Chayanov's model of peasant economy. The material is certainly there in his more recent publications for an historically and culturally grounded theory of Tamang domestic life that would make far more sense than the framework of a decade ago.

Tamang Households Revisited

Fricke comments that "[h]ardly an anthropologist who has worked in Nepal has failed to notice the special place of the household in village life" (1994:129). But what is this "special place"? In my view the two anthropologists whose works are most insightful to the processes that define the sociological realities of Tamang households are Kathryn March and Graham Clarke. The regrettable fact is that in both cases their original research has not been published. Their theses do not appear in Fricke's bibliography. Both studies discuss the complex social terrains of identity, gender, exchange, ritual, and property in which idioms of house and kinship find expression. March focuses on the social intensity of Nuwakot Tamang community life which she compares to the solitary nature of Solu-Khumbu Sherpas' atomistic households. While Clarke contrasts the 'tribal' Dravidian kinship of Tamang communities with the ordered ritual hierarchies of Lama households organised around the Tibetan Buddhist temple in Helambu.

Both these works identify distinctive processes and forms of Tamang domestic organisation that are recognisably different from those encountered in Bahun-Chetri society on one hand and in more Tibetan communities on the other. March's concentration on women's marriage and residence strategies aptly demonstrates the dense overlays of kinship and affinity relatedness which produce Tamang households, such that people spend almost as much time visiting other houses as they spend in their own. She says women see the danger in marrying into another house, and so maintain particularly close ties with brothers. They perpetuate these links by marrying daughters into brothers' households. This means women frequently have an affectionate maternal

uncle as father-in-law, and their mother-in-law will be of their same moiety if not the same clan. Thus, a husband may even be in a weaker position than his wife until a new household is established (March 1979: 200 ff). How altogether different this is from the quality of relationships reported for Bahun-Chetri households, especially the "dangerous wives" syndrome. Holmberg, whose work complements March's, states that "Women after marriage are far from subsumed in the household of their husbands" (Holmberg 1989: 81).

March suggests that the ritual corollary of Tamang communities' dense sociality is the shaman's particularistic attention to interactional tensions in the management of relations within households, lineage segments and residential clusters. "Both the cosmology and ritual strategies of the shaman confront the interpersonal difficulties which individuals face as members of small social groupings" (ibid: 123). This she contrasts with Sherpas' rationalising Buddhism that focuses on individuals within distinctly autonomous households, without the Tamangs' intervening webs of kinship and residence.

It is precisely the effects of a more propertied and literate Tibetan Buddhist organisation on kinship and household structures, that lies at the heart of Clarke's study of the Tamang-Lama interface in Helambu. Clarke demonstrates dynamic shifts in forms of association, hierarchical tendencies, and their relation to economic processes of *guthi*-landowning and trade. The Tibetan idiom of indivisible household (*trongba*) entails a metamorphosis of relationships in the ascendancy of concepts of non-partible village citizenship (*talpa*, tax-payer) mediated by the temple, over the familiar Tamang principles of agnatic filiation and affinity. "Here kinship is a secondary institution that is subsidiary to the household and village" (1980: 265). Clarke analyses, in effect, how the principles of kinship and affinity which structure enduring relationships and exchange between Tamang villagers can become superseded by the redistributive institution of the temple as an alternative mode of interaction. He ingeniously describes as "religious capitalism" the integrative mechanism of exchange whereby the circulation of goods between households via the temple adds value to them in the form of merit and blessing (ibid:156ff). The household becomes the principle reference for kinship terminology, emphasising the household obligations to the village collective via the temple, rather

than the genealogical relationships between the people who live in the household. In this way servants or affines can be sons or daughters of the house. Supplementing this house-based logic is the flexible category of consanguineal family (*memi*): "its use can best be understood by pointing out that those who habitually refer to each other as 'family', are also those who regularly and informally help each other and exchange hospitality". It is "a flexible category to group with, rather than a group" (ibid:279).

Clarke's regional understanding of inflections of terminologies according to context illustrates how fluid category meanings are. Thus, whereas in Helambu *talpa* refers to a supporter of the temple in contradistinction to *dagare* (a person without a land grant, or who carries a basket¹ he notes that in the Tamang village of Yangri *talpa* simply means a person with a house in the village who gives some rice once a year to the temple. In Melemchi on the other hand there are three kinds of *talpa*, that include *dagare*. These variations can be linked to Clarke's overall paradigm, whereby in times of economic stress communities have moved downhill to cultivate productive land, and in the process become more 'Tamang', but with wealth they move uphill to produce a differentiation of priests and clients marked by more Tibetan forms of household and association (321ff).

The major implication for the study of the Tamang household that I want to take up from Clarke's work is that there is a dynamism to categories of domestic association. Different models for mutual inter-household relationships can co-exist, that are all too often over-looked in generalising theories of the household. The categories are inherently unstable as evidenced by their variable meaning over space, and by their use over time as tactics for social mobility in alliances of power and status.

Tamang Households at Work

It was to test models of household economy such as Fricke's that I went to Tengu village, Rasuwa District in 1989 for two years fieldwork. I wanted to see to what extent the household could indeed be spoken of as the primary unity of production, and to examine what effects increasing

¹ I have discussed the association of Tamangs with portering in Campbell (forthcoming)

market integration were having on the social organisation of agricultural labour. March (1979), Hall (1982), Toffin (1986), Holmberg (1989) had all reported on the phenomenon of large cooperative groups (*nang* or *nangba*) undertaking much of the substantial agricultural workload at the busiest times of year in Tamang communities. Were these groups based on the mobilisation of kin with social relations of lineage solidarity to the fore, or were they possibly of a different order of exchange calculation? Did they represent merely an extension of domestic productive organisation, or a transformation of it?

It became clear before too long that any idea of households being empirically identifiable with a certain set of members, was not going to do justice to the multiple allegiances people had to a number of residential and property owning groupings in which they could claim to be "of one house" (*tim ghi la*) with others. Rather it was in particular activity contexts and relational discourses that different versions of house belonging became highlighted. Sometimes interests in common productive enterprise would present an image of effective, practical, domestic collectivity. Livestock, land and labour would be managed by a group of people as a combined cross-generational day to day unity, and yet the image of domestic substantiality would not last long. The people would reform in differently configured collectivities. This was in part because of the demands of residential nomadism in the agro-pastoral economy, but also because the same people might be separated out as of distinct "houses" for labour tribute, or for donations of money at funerary ceremonials. It was impossible to isolate out a 'genuine' household from metaphorical extensions.

Obviously the Tamangs' classificatory kinship terminology and their practice of divorce and remarriage contributes to their sense of multiple domestic allegiances. Any one person has numerous "fathers" and "mothers". Step-fathers are simply "father's younger brother" (*ahu*). At the same time, how these categories can translate into residential belonging depends on further conditions of domestic labour contribution. The flexible use of kinship and house terminology is such that all manner of relationships may be represented in the language of legitimate domestic belonging if productive labour contributions can be thereby **accommodated**. It is the labour value of domestic relations

which figure prominently in the Tamangs' own discourse of rightful claim to share in the life of a household. I heard a man speak to his son from a previous marriage saying that the boy could live with his half-siblings as long as he earned his right to do so, "Work and you shall eat" (*ghet sojim ken tsau*).

The constitutive processes which give Tamang households their form and content consist in the interplay of several factors: nucleated village architecture, dispersed agro-pastoral enterprise, classificatory kinship, cross-cousin marriage, and considerable village endogamy. All these dimensions generate particular contextual understandings of household. The architectural reference gives the roof ridge-pole (*thuri*, Nep. *dhuri*) synechdochically as the unit of corvée labour tribute. The mobile animal shelters (*god* Nep. *goth*) constitute the effective domestic units of agro-pastoralism. The equivalence of "house" (*tim*) and "hearth tripod" (*godap*) with "lineage" provides apical unitary identities of common domestic origin. Marriage with cross-cousins produces intergenerational reciprocal exchange alliances between households of different "bone" (*nakhrit*) and "milk" (*nye*) or "flesh" (*shya*). And the continued village residence of women after marriage generates ongoing hospitality and productive exchange between clan women (*busing*) and clan men (*pamyung*), especially connected to gifts of dowry.

In all these permutations of domestic focus I wanted to resolve the matter of "the special place of the household", to borrow Fricke's phrasing, in the organisation of agricultural labour. To summarise the findings reported in Campbell (1993, 1994), my research into the agricultural activity of nine selected households over one year revealed that **on average more than half the work done on their fields was not by household members alone**. Fricke's model of household economy derived from Chayanov via Sahlins, that households are autonomous labour units and kinship relations the important relations of production, simply did not apply. Something far more interesting was happening.

When it came to the busier periods of cultivation, transplanting (finger millet and paddy), and to a lesser extent harvesting, the cooperative groups of *nangba* exchanged their labour, day-for-day, between participating households. The work of men and women, young

and old, was calculated as equal and substitutable in this flat-rate currency of labour. In this balanced reciprocity between domestic units people who might in many other contexts consider themselves to be of the same house defined themselves as separate for the purpose of production. Even people who might sleep and eat under the same roof could be represented as being of different households, as in the case of adolescents not yet resident in marital homes, but already working for in-laws. Kinship relations were not the relations of production. Rather, delimited domestic interests superseded the relations of classificatory kinship. In so doing, however, the hierarchies normal to internal domestic relations were overshadowed by an acephalous equality of common participation among the representatives of the different domestic units in the *nangba*. The membership of these groups was based more on friendship and choice than ascription, contradicting Fricke's statement that "reliance on kin permeates all other adaptive strategies in Timling, and the relationship among space, cooperation at work, and kinship distance is so integrated that one can be used to predict the other" (Fricke 1994: 189). In Tengu the composition of *nangba* followed no obvious lines of kinship, nor did they in Toffin's study (1986). It should also be mentioned that *nangba* were the primary means of recruiting wage labour. A person in a group could sell their day to receive workers to someone needing labour, allowing the transformation of this type of reciprocity into commodity.

Nangba is not the only form of collective work group. There is also *gohar*, a less specific reciprocity in which food and drink for workers can be expected but the labour itself sometimes not, especially when the work is of a more tributary nature for village headmen or the rich (*baru*). It is in the reciprocal distinction between *nangba* and *gohar* that different versions of domestic idiomatic elaboration occur with implications for village political economy. In *nangba* people stand clearly as equal and short-term exchangers of like for like. In *gohar*, on the other hand, there is uncertainty in mutual relation, but affinal asymmetries are clearly expressed, and the likelihood of return is indeterminate. Rather, the idiom of extended domestic familiarity is conveyed by the feeding of cooked meals (*ken pimba*), which can mask relations of inequality by shared commensality. It was precisely the villagers' recent experience of freeing themselves from indebtedness to powerful rich families, obliging them to attend *gohar* for no return, that

they emphasised to me. It meant they had more time to organise the use of their own labour. Contrast this situation with Sahlins' dismissive comment: "Cooperation remains for the most part a technical fact, without independent social realisation on the level of economic control" (1974:78).

In labour, then, and in other activity and ceremonial contexts, different versions of domestic definition come into play. In broad terms, **delimited** definitions emphasise a community (*namsaba*) of equally participating households (as in *nangba*, in donations to funeral expenses, and in the distribution of rice-dough *tormo* (Tib. *torma*) in shamanic or Buddhist ritual), whereas **extensive** definitions emphasise asymmetrical incorporation into greater domestic entities (as in *gohar*, in lineage land and livestock holding, in brideservice, and the collective identities of exogamous clans).

In contrast to Fricke's version of the Tamang household as a substantial empirical entity with a special place in village life, adapting to land pressure by economically diversifying its natural labour pool into migrant wage labour, I would suggest that changes in political and economic conditions entail people reformulating their definitions of domestic association. The household occupies different places. People group strategically under a variety of domestic idioms and contexts, and articulate their interests in terms of particular forms of inter-domestic exchange. At any time what appears as a household is a perspective from within a community in which the importance of domestic identities is their active plasticity. With increased access to market exchange, commodity-commensurate forms of reciprocity favoured delimited inter-household exchange relationships over more diffuse and extensive forms.

A Nation of Householders?

It would be hard to find an argument more opposed to the one I have been developing for Tamang households than that of John Gray in his book on Kathmandu Valley Bahun-Chetris *The Householder's World: Purity, Power and Dominance in a Nepali Village*. Following on from his edited volume *Society from the Inside Out*, Gray is a domestic reductionist. Even caste, for him, can be simply explained as a matter of relations between households before anything else. Gray criticises Seely

(1988) and Fricke for not adequately explaining why the household has been taken as the primary unit for understanding Nepali society. He advocates a "'holistic apperception' of the household as a discrete sociological and experiential entity" (Gray 1995:21), as "an ontological institution" sustained by Hindu *grihastha dharma*, producing a "fundamental mode of being in the everyday world" (ibid:23). He eschews approaches which privilege concerns of membership, of kinship, and cooperative activities to insist there is a "structure of consciousness" in the first place which determines these as domestic (ibid:25).

Not being a specialist on Bahun-Chetris, my comments on Gray's work are necessarily limited, but the aspect which seems most difficult to comprehend concerns Gray's taking at face value the Hindu patriarchal attitude to women. They become part of a *pariwar* "through marriage as a means for men to fulfill their *dharma*...Men are associated with the goal of moral action in the world...Women are the means and accordingly they are subordinated to their husbands" (ibid:49). All this is stated without problematisation, or analysis as to why this should be the case. Being more familiar with the Tamang world it is exactly the different position of women in the two respective societies which is striking. It will be recalled that I drew on March's work on women's domestic intermediacy to help define the character of relations in Tamang households. Cross-cousin marriage, significant village endogamy, and wife-giver status superiority, are all reversed in the Bahun-Chetri universe. Surely, contrary to Gray's insistence on the primacy of domestic ontology, the logic for high-caste women's subordination is the concern of the men to maintain perceptions of *jat* morality and status, which prefigures what goes on in any one household? In effect the importation of wives into communities of strangers produces an immediate appropriation of women to their marital households.

My own research has brought me to look at Tamang households primarily from the perspective of how communities structure their productive relationships as domestic. In looking further afield at ethnographies of mixed caste communities I have found the issue of inter-household reciprocal labour to be particularly revealing as an indicator of class, caste and gender in any given case. In fact Sagant

anticipated my observations in writing about labour groups in east Nepal: "Si le principe des groupes est simple, dans le détail leurs caractères sont complexes. Ils sont très représentatifs des particularités sociologiques de chaque hameau, de chaque village" (1976:253). For the most part in Nepal these groups are called *parma* or *pareli*. Why these groups can be so revealing is that they make visible contradictions between hierarchies of status and gender on one hand, and the fact of being subsistence producers on the other hand. Participation in *parma* can be an economic leveller of caste distinction, though not without particular angst for Bahuns (Prindle 1983:39-41, Miller 1990:77-78).

What does Gray have to say about the Bahun-Chetris' extra-domestic productive relations? His analysis of *parma* is that these relations replicate the domestic *santan* as a brotherhood of neighbours. (In fact it is mostly women who work, and one woman's daily labour is considered half the value of a man's). Gray mentions the Silwal Chetris' equation of the balanced symmetry of *parma* reciprocity with exchanges between households of brothers, as contrasted to the asymmetry of wage labour (*jyala*) contracted between households of different *jat*. He then points out that many *jyala* labourers were in fact Silwal women (1995:177). Now if his commentary on this is correct, that though the relations technically were waged, they were "rendered as essentially *parma* relations of equivalence between brothers and thus did not have the status implications normally entailed by *jyala* relations" (ibid:178), I fail to see how this could be construed as anything but indicating the primacy of the collective status interests of the landowning class, over a structure of consciousness that Gray supposes to be about being a householder first and foremost. The hierarchy as an ongoing product of history frames what householders then do, not the other way round. Of course people's first experience and understanding of hierarchy is importantly in domestic contexts (Toren 1990), but this does not explain the structures that sustain the hierarchy societally.

Beyond the Domestic Facade

Limits of space prevent here further elaboration of possible new ways of looking at Himalayan household issues. Theoretical developments from other regions need to be evaluated. Gudeman and Rivera (1990) is a well argued case for the European folk origins of much of the

sociological theory of the domestic domain, much of which has found an (unwelcome?) accommodation in the Himalayan region. They claim that in terms of models for organising the economy in Latin America, the house provides the basic structure for orders of magnitude as far as the hacienda, but is then superceded by the ever-expandable corporation. Not only the Durbar might be considered in this respect, but also the Tibetan gomba. Descriptions of Ladakhi society reveal a striking parallel between the hierarchical relationship of village "big houses" and their "small houses" on one hand (Dollfus 1989, Phylactou 1989), and the relationship between the male gomba and the female ani-gomba on the other hand (Grimshaw 1992). Can we talk of thematic variations of one or several 'house societies' for the Himalaya as recently explored elsewhere by Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995)? I borrow as final words of caution for this endeavour an observation from Toffin "Les maisons ne sont ni des plantes ni des animaux. Elles constituent des ensembles fluides, elles s'écartent du modèle commun et se métamorphosent au moindre souffle nouveau" (1987:275).

Postscript : Could I suggest that *EBHR* allow space for notes, comments, and queries, reports on research etc on the Himalayan House from whoever would like to contribute, if the interest is there? Dare I say it, a sort of 'home page'?

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