

# MITERI IN NEPAL: FICTIVE KIN TIES THAT BIND

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## *Abstract*

The *miteri* is a form of fictive kinship widely encountered in the multifarious social setting of the Himalayas. It is contracted between individuals and sometimes, by extension, between kin groups, for both instrumental and affective reasons. This paper reviews the literature and presents field data on *miteri* and some closely related systems involving caste and ethnic groups in Nepal and neighboring northern India. It is argued that *miteri* serves to cement social interaction between levels of caste in a complex hierarchical system that otherwise separates the members of these endogamous groups, and in a difficult physical environment that forces people to interact closely for resource exchange. Nepal's caste oriented society normally restricts kinship to the horizontal ties of consanguinity and affinity. The *miteri* allows the alternative of forming fictive kinship ties between members of otherwise endogamous groups and allows bonds of association to flourish vertically, between all levels.

Systems of fictive or ritual kinship and ceremonial or bonded friendship have long held a certain fascination for anthropologists as students of social organization. Such systems of relationship are often modelled on real kin ties and tend to link individuals, networks of individuals, and larger solidary groups together for both affective and instrumental reasons

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(Wolf 1966). They are often found at the forefront of social change movements, serving in some instances to buffer individuals from change, and in other instances to enhance social mobility and ease adaptation to change (Davila 1971). Close, non-kin bonds of interpersonal association are particularly prominent in tribal and peasant societies, and in bounded social units like villages, castes, or barrios in complex social systems (Keesing 1975: 129). They are also found in modern industrial society where they are assumed to exist in relatively attenuated form but where, for the most part, they have been neglected by anthropologists (Graburn 1971: 381).

This study focuses on forms of fictive kinship and close bonded friendship which exist among peasants of Hindu caste and ethnic identity in the Himalayan state of Nepal. Several interpersonal and intergroup associations, formal and informal, have been recorded and described for Nepal that tend to tie members of castes and ethnic groups together through bonds of friendship, close association, and mutual aid.<sup>1</sup>

This paper deals primarily with the pan-Nepalese institution of *miteri* (literally "friendship"; Skt. *mitratā*), a form of ritual or fictive bonded kinship. Men who form fictive kin bonds are called *mit*; the female friend (of another woman only) is called *mitini*. The generic *miteri* is simply defined as an individualistic form of fictive or ritual kinship common among Hindu castes and hill-and mountain-dwelling ethnic groups of Nepal. Although *miteri* exists in various forms throughout the central Himalayas, data from regions outside of Nepal are limited.

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1. For examples of other forms of indigenous mutual and cooperation associations in Nepal see Messerschmidt 1972, 1978, 1981a.

*The Nepalese Context*

The social and environmental context in which *miteri* flourishes in Nepal is, in a word, multifarious. The variety of ethnic and caste groups is large and interaction between peoples of varying status, cultural expression, language, religion, economy, and place is complex. The underlying principle of Nepalese social organization is hierarchy. A sense of ranked order and status permeates virtually all interpersonal and intergroup relations -- social, economic, political, and religious.

This nation of 15 million people covers an area of 141,000 km<sup>2</sup> (54,440 mi<sup>2</sup>). The people fall into two broad scientifically distinct social categories: Hindu caste, and ethnic; and into two broad linguistic categories: those (primarily Hindu caste) that are linguistically Indo-European, and those (ethnic) that are linguistically Tibeto-Burman (Sino-Tibetan). Within each of these categories there are scores of sub-groups and a large array of dialects and language groups. The common language of trade, education, and government is Nepali, a Sanskritic Indo-European language closely related to the contemporary languages of north India. The common frame of reference for social intercourse is the caste hierarchy, for Hindu caste groups and ethnic groups alike. It is elaborated below.

Besides linguistic and caste/ethnic distinctions, a third factor, the physical geography, has important effects that contribute to the complexity of life and interpersonal interaction. Nepal is a highly mountainous country with a difficult terrain and a climatological environment ranging from sub-tropical to alpine and nival. Geographically, there are three well delineated zones: the *terai* lowlands at the south, the Himalayan highlands at the north, and the middle hills between them.

*The lowlands.* The *terai* and inner-*terai* lowlands lie below 600 m. (2,000 ft.) and are rich agricultural regions. This zone

borders on north India and comprises the northern fringe of the Gangetic plain. The *terai* is home to such indigenous ethnic groups as the Tharu, Dari, Danuwar, and Majhi, as well as to various caste groups such as Maithili Brahmin, Rajput, Dom, and Chamar, and to a small population of Muslims. Little is known about the practice of *miteri* in this zone. The bulk of the discussion deals with fictive kinship as practiced in the highlands and middle hills.

*The highlands.* The northern Himalayan mountain and valley zone exists along the NW-SE axis of the Great Himalayan Massif. Habitation here ranges from 1,800 m. (6,000 ft.), at the upper limit of rice agriculture, to as high as 4,500 m. (15,000 ft.) in the northern arid region. This zone borders the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China and in its northernmost parts it shares the Tibetan plateau's environmental characteristics. High altitude farming, yak and sheep pastoralism, and long-distance trade are the dominant economic strategies of people living here, and they depend greatly on their neighbors in the lower elevations for certain resources. The people of this high zone are called Bhotia; they have strong Tibetan cultural affinities, practice the Tibetan religions of Buddhism and Bon, and speak local dialects of the Tibetan language.

*The middle hills.* Between the extreme lowlands and the northern highlands is the middle hills zone. This zone ranges from 600 m. (2,000 ft.) to 1,800 m. (6,000 ft.) and hosts the bulk of the Nepalese population. Most inhabitants of the middle hills are valley and hillside farmers, and their laboriously constructed terraced fields create a patch-quilt pattern on the landscape. This is home to both indigenous ethnic (tribal) and Hindu caste populations. The ethnic groups include the Gurung, Tamang, Magar, and Kiranti (to name a few). Their languages are generally classified as Tibeto-Burman and are rather more distantly related to Tibetan than those of the highland Bhotia

at their north. The Lepcha of neighboring Sikkim are a related ethnic group. The ethnic populations predate the arrival of the Hindu caste groups, some of whose ancestors migrated from northern and northwestern India only since the 12th century A.D. Three of the traditional categories of Hindu caste are represented in the middle hills: Brahmin (Bahun), Kshatriya (Chhetri and Thakuri), and Blacksmiths, Cobblers, and Tailors (Kami, Sarki, and Damai), most of whom are engaged in farming.

The distinction between Hindu caste and indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal blurs a fundamental point, that for purposes of analysis as in real life, the ethnic groups form an integral part of the Nepalese caste system (or systems, for caste is itself a variable and highly localized phenomenon). Individuals of caste and ethnic identity interact locally within certain hierarchical principles, sometimes flexibly, but more often under considerable restriction. The hierarchical ranking and caste rules are spelled out in the *Muluki Ain* (literally "country law," or civil code) of 1854 A.D. (and in subsequent revisions). This document provides the written rules of social interaction protocol, especially regarding interpersonal contact, commensality, sexual relations, and marriage.<sup>2</sup>

The basic structure of Nepalese society can be reduced to a simple dichotomy of pure and impure categories of people. These are in turn divided into five gradations, or levels, three of which are pure and two impure, into which all castes and ethnic groups -- in fact *all* social groups known to the

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2. The *Muluki Ain*, in fact, covers a much larger array of topics, but the concern here and in the most recent analyses of it by Nepalese and Western scholars is with those parts of the code that affect or reflect the social system. The most detailed analysis of the code is by Höfer 1979; see also MacDonald 1975, and Sharma 1977. Note that untouchability is, today, illegal in Nepal.

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Nepalese (including Muslim as Musulman, and European as Mlechh) are ranked. The five ranked caste groupings are these (from Höfer 1979: 45-46):

Pure or "water-acceptable" (*Pāni chalnyā*) castes (*jāt*)

1. Twice-born *tāgādhāri* ("wearers of the holy cord"): Brahmin (including Newar Brahmin), Chhetri, Thakuri, and others.
2. Non-enslavable *matwāli* ("alcohol-drinkers"): Gurung, Magar, some Newar, and others.<sup>3</sup>
3. Enslavable *matwāli*: Bhotia, Tamang, Gharti (freed slaves), some Newar, and others.

Impure or "water-unacceptable" (*pāni nachalnyā*) castes

4. Touchable: some occupational castes such as Kasai, Kusle, Dhobi, and Kulu, as well as Musulman and Mlecch.
5. Untouchable: occupational castes such as Kami, Sarki, Damai, Gaine, Badi, Pore, and Chyame.

Some groups have their own internal status distinctions ranging from the elaborate caste system of the Newars of Kathmandu Valley, to simple dichotomies of relative purity or pollution such as the Gurung Char Jat/Sora Jat moiety system which is discussed later.

While the *Muluki Ain* formally generalizes and fixes rules by which people and groups in Nepal are expected to interact, it also condones and encourages expression of local social custom,

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3. The term "enslavable" (*māsinyā*) refers here only to penal enslavability from which the two highest caste categories are (were) excluded. Otherwise, "members of all caste groups can be reduced to slavery by sale or become bond-servants" (Höfer 1979: 126). Slavery in Nepal was outlawed in 1926.

especially that of the ethnic groups (Höfer 1979, Messerschmidt 1981b). *Miteri* is one such local custom, practiced by both caste and ethnic people. On *miteri* the code has virtually nothing to say, but the law does provide a framework flexible enough to allow inter-ethnic/caste *miteri* bonds to be formed and to function.

A predominant impression in Nepal is that many caste and ethnic groups intermix rather freely and with a certain tolerance for differences in language and religious expression (encompassing variations of Hinduism, Buddhism, Bon, shamanism, and Islam), but social interaction in the forms of commensality and contact and in sexual relations, for example, are strictly regulated and severely limited. Furthermore, the physical geography itself restricts social intercourse, by creating small isolated pockets whose inhabitants often have very narrowly circumscribed world views. It has only been very recent that any sense of a Nepalese national entity, incorporating the tremendous variety of peoples, has been strongly felt (Bista 1972: xii).

In addition to its social complexity, Nepal's broad altitudinal and climatic variation has encouraged some groups to inhabit and dominate very narrow economic and ecological niches. As a further consequence, each group, large or small, relies upon one or more other groups for exchange of vital resources. The high altitude Bhotia people, for example, have for centuries traded the products of their unique agro-pastoral industry (animal hides, yak wool, and butter, for examples) for lowland staples (e.g., foodgrains, such as rice and corn) and manufactured goods (such as cloth and cigarettes). Highland Gurungs and other ethnics of the northern middle hills zone have long filled an economic niche inaccessible to lower valley dwellers (caste groups, mainly) by herding sheep, cattle, and water

buffalo, and by processing and trading their by-products (such as woollen blankets and ghee) (Messerschmidt 1976a). Some ethnic groups regularly perform as middlemen in long-distance trans-Himalayan trade. One example is the Newars of Kathmandu Valley who are historically known for their role in Tibetan-Indian trade (Bista 1978). Another example is the Thakali of the upper Kali Gandaki River Valley. The Thakali and some neighboring Gurung are especially well known for their part in the Tibetan salt trade which influenced the economic and social life of west-central Nepal earlier this century (Messerschmidt and Gurung 1974). The Newar and Thakali trade flourished along the well travelled north-south trade routes and in regional bazaars and trading entrepots, such as Kathmandu and Pokhara (Fürier-Haimendorf 1975).<sup>4</sup> The result of this long-distance commercial activity, as well as of small-scale, local forms of barter and exchange, has been a continuous intermixing of people and ideas, and a mutual respect and tolerance between many categories of caste and ethnic people. It is in the context of intense economic and related social and ideological exchange that *miteri* has flourished in the Himalayas.

*Early Reference to Miteri*

The earliest references to fictive kinship in Nepal and vicinity appear as brief remarks in the literature well before Nepal was open to modern scholarly research in the 1950s. Vansittart (1896) was one of the first to comment on "mith friendship" and "fictitious brotherhood." Northey and Morris (1928) also made passing reference to the "*mit* relationship," meaning "friend" or "blood brotherhood." They observed it in

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4. Regional and local trade has expanded greatly in recent years, especially with the building of cross-country roads. For an example of such expansion along one trade corridor in west-central Nepal see Messerschmidt 1980.



the context of the British Gurkha military establishment which has employed thousands of Nepal's hillsmen (primarily from the Chhetri and Thakuri castes and from the non-enslavable *matwāli* groups). Turner (1931: 508a) defined *mit* (fem. *mitini*) as "friend," and "*mit lāunu*" as the action "to form a friendship with (by a partic. ceremony in which the two concerned exchange money, embrace, and are friends for life, one mourning the other's death as a relation's)."

Adam (1936) elaborated on *mit* (and other aspects of the social organization and customary law of Nepal) described to him by Nepalese Gurkha soldiers overseas. He called *mit* an "artificial brotherhood" and *mitni* (*mitini*) an "artificial sisterhood" (1936: 541). He indicates a key factor about *miteri*, that by means of a formal ceremony two unrelated people of the same sex are bound together socially as if they were real kin, as brother to brother or sister to sister, and that thereafter the two individuals involved must observe all obligations of consanguines (1936: 540-544). Pant (1936) describes *mitra* (the equivalent of *mit*) among the Bhotia of Almora district, north India (bordering Nepal on the northwest). *Mitra* is an instrumental form of friendship denoting "a privileged trade correspondent" (Pant 1936: 217n.). A brief comment about "brothers in blood" among Nepalese Gurkha soldiers also appears in Bishop (1952: 70). From 1960 onwards, many of the dissertations that deal with one or another form of Nepalese social organization, or which describe one or another caste or ethnic group, deal briefly with the *miteri* custom.

The first empirical study of *miteri* in Nepal was conducted by Okada (1957). His study provides a well researched baseline against which to examine all other accounts. Another detailed and more recent study was done by Shrestha in Karnali Zone of northwest Nepal (1971/72, in Nepali). Shrestha describes several forms such as *dharma iṣṭa*, *saingī mit*, and *sāini mit*. Each

is marked by progressively more formalized exchange of gifts and each variously functions to incorporate a *mit* into one's own kinship group (Shrestha 1971/72: 68-77, in Campbell 1978: 182).

More recent accounts of *miteri* appear in Hitchcock's description of the Hinduized Magars of west-central Nepal (1966: 66-68), in Prindle's analysis of caste and fictive kinship in a village of the eastern hills (1975), in Höfer's study of the Kami (Blacksmith) caste and the ethnic Tamangs of west-central Nepal (1976: 353), and in Börgstrom's account of interpersonal relations in a mixed caste/ethnic village in Kathmandu Valley (1976: 13, 51-52). Campbell also mentions the closely related *iṣṭa sambandh* (literally "friend relative") practiced by Brahmins (Jyulyal), Chhetris (Pabai), and Bhotias of Jumla in NW Nepal. This form of friendship is often formalized through rituals of fictive kinship, thereafter forming a *miteri* bond of "ritual 'siblinghood'" (Campbell 1978: 181-182).

Several other accounts describe *miteri*-like relationships among the ethnic groups. They are known by local terms, such as the *rosya* (fem.) and *leng* (mas.) among the Tamang (Adam 1936), the *ingzong* of the Lepcha of Sikkim (Gorer 1938), the *thowu* among the Sherpa (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975), the *ganye*, *tsok*, and *kidu* among Tibetans (Miller 1956, Aziz 1978a, 1978b, Messerschmidt 1976), and the *ngyelsyo* (fem.) and *ngyela* (mas.) bonds among the Gurung (Messerschmidt 1976b). A prevailing notion about most of these is that they are simply variations on, or in some instances derivations of, the standard form of *miteri* found in Nepali-speaking caste society. I return to them briefly, later in the discussion.

#### *Organizing Principles of Miteri*

Five categories or principles of purpose and organization of *miteri* are used as guides to understand, describe, and analyze the data. They are: (1) membership criteria, (2) reasons for

joining, (3) obligations and responsibilities, (4) ceremony and ritual, and (5) strength and duration of the bond. Each is described in detail.

*Membership criteria.* This includes the identity of participants by age, sex, and social status (class, caste, ethnicity), as well as number of participants and various terminology used in association with *miteri*.

By most accounts, two rules of *miteri* membership prevail: first, that the bond is made (*mit lāunu*) with someone outside one's own clan or caste, and second, that it is only made between persons of the same sex.<sup>5</sup>

As might be expected, there are exceptions to the rules. Northey and Morris tell us, for example, that the *miteri* relationship "can be contracted... between people who are already related to one another" (1928: 102), but the precise nature of relationship allowed is not specified by them. (Given all else we know about *miteri*, this early interpretation of *miteri* between relatives seems incorrect.) Okada (1957: 218) reports a Limbu man who took *miteri* in a formal ritual with a married couple simultaneously, thereafter calling the woman his *mitini-jiu* (-*jiu* is a highly respectful form). Likewise, Adam (1936: 542-543) reports that the Murmi Lama (Tamang) take *miteri* (or *leng*, in Tamang) between a single man and a married couple.

Among the ethnic Magars, Hitchcock describes a possible exception to the sex bar in his distinction between ritual

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5. Observers almost exclusively describe *mit*, the masculine form of *miteri*. Little is said of *mitini*, between two females, beyond acknowledging its existence and indicating its relative impermanence. Hitchcock (1966) has presented the most information on *mitini* so far (among Magars). This is an area demanding considerably more and concentrated attention in the future.

brothers or sisters (1966: 66-68). This exception, however, is readily explained within the rule. The Magar ritual friend, on the one hand, "unvaryingly belongs to a caste other than one's own, and only persons of the same sex perform the ritual that establishes such a relationship" (66). The link between ritual brothers or sisters, on the other hand, is "between members of the same caste [i.e. Magar] and is formed between persons of the opposite sex" (66). Both ritual friend and ritual brothers or sisters are, apparently, called *mit* by the Magars. Hitchcock documents only one ritual brother-sister relationship involving the widow Jag Maya. Her father appears to have taken *mit* with a younger man who, upon the elder *mit*'s death, extended the bond and its attendant obligations to the deceased's daughter, Jag Maya (68). This case is not, then, an example of actually contracting *miteri* between a man and a woman, but only of the fairly commonplace extension of *miteri* to immediate kin.<sup>6</sup> Inclusion of close kin in *miteri* relationships is also common among the ethnic Gurungs (Messerschmidt 1976b: 46-49). The case of Jag Maya was the only one that Hitchcock documented between two Magars; all other cases in his account were between a Magar and a non-Magar, for example with a Brahmin, Gurung, or member of the Tailor or Blacksmith caste.

Taking *mit* with someone outside one's own caste seems to be a strong tendency among some caste Hindus (Okada 1957: 219), while among others the restriction is reduced to taking no *mit* between persons of the same clan (Prindle 1975: 878). In contrast, individuals of the same ethnic group tend to take *mit* quite readily; Okada (1957: 219) documented Newar-Newar and

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6. Höfer interprets Hitchcock's account slightly different: "It seems that the younger man assumed a step brother role in continuation of his ritual son role [vis-a-vis the widow, Jag Maya]... In the latter role, no *miteri* seems to be involved" (personal communication 1981).

Limbu-Limbu *miteri*. Elsewhere I have described Gurung-Gurung examples (1976b: 46-49), although Gurung *mit*-brothers are always from clans representing each of the endogamous moieties of Gurung society. Extra-village *miteri* also seems to be a common tendency in some instances, as among the Brahmins and Bhujels of Prindle's sample (1975), but it is not a hard and fast rule (Okada 1957).

*Miteri* is usually established between two persons of the same or nearly the same age. Okada indicates that most ritual brotherhoods among young men "at approximately the same age level" are formed "between two young men who have grown up together in the same village or have known each other for several years" (1957: 214-215). Nonetheless, cases of *miteri* are known between people of disparate age and between people who have met in adulthood. Stone notes that *miteri* bonds are sometimes arranged by parents for their children, much as marriages are arranged. The reason she gives is purely instrumental: "to insure a non-family source of support for their child" (1977: 172-173).

It is usual for men to take *mit* with others of the same relative socio-economic rank, with some notable exceptions. Okada documents examples where:

situations in which personal advantage plays a stronger role. Usually these involve a high caste and/or rich man, who initiates the action, on one side, and a low caste and/or poor man on the other. (1957: 214)

Prindle cautions, however, that "although the idea that one should become *mit* with [someone in] a much wealthier household is often expressed, in reality it rarely occurs" (1975: 880). As noted below, some bonds of *miteri* are deliberately established between people of unequal socio-economic and/or caste status for the express purpose of neutralizing the effects of a bad horoscope.

As for the number of *miteri* friendships an individual may take, there is no consensus, although there are practical limits. Okada feels that "for a man to have four or five simultaneously is considered to be about the maximum" (1957: 215). On the other hand, I knew a prestigious Newar merchant-trader in Lamjung District who claimed to have over a dozen *mit* brothers scattered throughout the region in which he maintained his long-distance business obligations. Even when only two individuals are involved, the number of interested parties may be much greater, extending to the self-interest of an entire household (Prindle 1975: 880), or to lineage, clan, or moiety (Messerschmidt 1976: 46-49).

Once a *miteri* bond is established, its participants no longer call each other by name, but simply as *mit* or *mitini*. This:

corresponds to the custom existing among natural born brothers calling themselves "daju" (elder brother) or "bhai" (younger brother), or, as a rule, only by their number, as "jetha," "mainla," "sainla," "kanchha," etc., which means "first," "second," "third," and so on. (Adam 1936: 542)

Similarly, the brother of one's *mit* or *mitini* is thereafter called *mit-dāju* or *mit-bhāi*, and a *mit*'s parents are called *mit-āmā* (*mit*'s mother) and *mit-bā* (*mit*'s father); a *mit*'s daughter and son are called *mit-chori* and *mit-chora*, respectively, et cetera. This terminology does not automatically imply a close *mit*-like relationship with these more distant fictive kin; relative closeness to a *mit*'s immediate kinspeople varies case by case.

*Amit*'s or *mitini*'s children may also address a parent's *mit* or *mitini* by the fictitious kin terms, as *mit-bā* and *mit-āmā*. Höfer points out that among western Tamang "this practice of 'imitating' the children's terms of address is frequent in the realm of 'real' kinship, too" (personal communication 1981).

What has been described so far is the true form of that which is formally contracted and widely recognized in Nepalese society. In some instances less formal *miteri* is also found, as in the "drinking kin" among Bhujels and Brahmins of east Nepal (Prindle 1975: 879)<sup>7</sup> and the "mouth *mit*" (*mukh mit*, Nep.; *ngyel sū*, Gur.) noted among the Gurung (Messerschmidt 1976b: 48). The Gurungs call true *miteri* by the term *bāh jorera mit lāunu* ("taking *mit* by joining arms"), implying the formal sealing of the bond by a ritual act which includes exchanging *tikā* (a spot applied to one another's forehead). "Mouth *mit*," on the other hand, is a casual friend, usually acquired with no ceremony, but distinguished by villagers as someone more than a mere passing acquaintance or ordinary friend (*sāthi*). The generic term for non-ritual friends and relatives is *iṣṭa-mitra*. Certain informal cooperative work associations among individuals were explained by my Gurung informants as types of "mouth *mit*."

*Reasons for taking miteri.* There are two general reasons why the Nepalese initiate and participate in ties of fictive kinship. They are affective and instrumental.

On the one hand, affective, emotive, or expressive reasons stand out. As Eric Wolf (1966) tells us from his study of Latin American fictive kinship, the association has both psychological and sociological aspects:

[It is] a relation between ego and an alter in which each satisfies some emotional need in his opposite number... We should, I think, expect to find emotional friendships primarily in social situations where the

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7. It is unclear from Prindle's account what the "drinking kin" actually drink. It is unlikely that Brahmins (as *tāgādhāri*, and therefore non-drinking caste) engage in drinking alcohol with their *mit*. Bhujels, however, as former slaves were ranked in the *Muluki Ain* as an enslavable *matwāli* (drinking) caste.

individual is strongly embedded in solidary groupings like communities and lineages, and where the set of social structure inhibits social and geographical mobility. In such situations, ego's access to resources -- natural and social -- is largely provided by the solidary units; and friendship can at best provide emotional release and catharsis from the strains and pressures of role playing. (Wolf 1966: 10-11)

These observations fit closely the Nepalese situation, as well, where the solidary groupings of caste and ethnicity prevail, where social mobility is severely limited by the strictures of ascribed social position, and where physical mobility is inhibited by the mountainous geography.

Emotion is one of the strongest motivations for *miteri*. In Nepal, mutual affection is a commonly stated reason for forming these dyadic relationships within both ethnic and caste groups (Okada 1957, Prindle 1975, Hitchcock 1965, Messerschmidt 1976b). Prindle notes, however, that *miteri* "based on nothing more tangible than mutual affection... tend to lapse quickly" (1975: 880).

On the other hand, many fictive kin ties in Nepal are made for instrumental or practical reasons. Wolf comments, again from his Latin American studies, on this common rationale:

Instrumental friendship may not have been entered into for the purpose of attaining access to resources -- natural and social -- but the striving for such access becomes vital in it. In contrast to emotional friendship, which restricts the relation to the dyad involved, in instrumental friendship each member of the dyad acts as a potential connecting link to other persons outside the dyad. Each participant is a sponsor for the other. In contrast to emotional friendship, which is associated with closure of the social circle, instrumental friendship reaches beyond the boundaries of existing sets, and seeks to establish beachheads in new sets. (Wolf 1966: 12)

From Adam's (1936) perspective, *miteri* in Nepal is *entirely* instrumental. That seems to be an overstatement, but it can be



said that many *mit* and *mitini* bonds are predominantly instrumental. In some cases, however, both instrumental and emotional reasons for taking *miteri* are clear. Campbell (1978: 183) found that *mit* is often sought by business partners (instrumental) between whom there is a "deep affection" (emotive), thus satisfying both reasons. Often the participants in *miteri* seek very specific ends: better trade relations (Gorer 1938, Fürer-Haimendorf 1975), social advantage (Borgström 1976), or mutual aid of various sorts (Okada 1957, Messerschmidt 1976b). One Gurung informant told me that members of some castes and ethnic groups establish *miteri* bonds along instrumental lines "only for selfish purposes." A less cynical assessment is expressed about Gurung *miteri* by Doherty, who writes:

An alliance beyond ordinary friendship is formalized in this way to promote smooth social relations, and to state formally that the two *mit* "brothers" stand in positions of equality and complete reciprocity with each other. One looks for a *mit* on entering a new place to live, in establishing regular relations with another ethnic group, and so on. (1975: 114-115)

Even countering a bad horoscope is a possible reason for taking *mit*. Shrestha describes formally ritualized friendships that occur between high castes and untouchables in instances where "if after birth an astrologer determines that an evil influence by one of the planets can only be neutralized by such a relationship" (Campbell 1978: 182n., paraphrasing Shrestha 1971/72: 70-72).

Similarly, Okada writes that:

When misfortune and evil are predicted by his horoscope, an individual, especially a rich man, will form a ritual brotherhood with a low caste person, even at times an untouchable, to whom the predicted bad fortune can, at least partially, be shifted. He might pick the sweeper who works for him although the tendency is to select someone he will meet but seldom in the normal course

of events. An astrologer confirms whether his choice is suitable and sets a date for the ceremony. (1957: 214)

Hitchcock found many examples of *mitini* among Magar women formed for the express purpose of countering bad horoscopes. He writes that:

of the twenty-seven women who discussed their ritual friendships, something over one fifth said they had acquired the friend because the astrologer had advised them to obtain one belonging to a lower caste than theirs. The belief is that sickness or bad luck results from a poor configuration of controlling stars. This configuration often can be improved through ritual friendship with persons of a lower caste. (1966: 66-67)

In contrast, only one male *mit* out of twenty Magar men interviewed entered into the relationship to improve his stars (Hitchcock 1966: 66).<sup>8/9</sup>

Whatever the instrumental or pragmatic rationale for establishing fictive kin bonds, "a minimum element of affect remains an important ingredient of the relation. If it is not present, it must be feigned" (Wolf 1966: 13).

*Obligations and responsibilities.* One of the basic principles of voluntary associations, including fictive kinship, is a sense of shared commitment. In all forms of *miteri* in Nepal the commitment is reciprocal and has both social and ritual, and sometimes economic, aspects.

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8. It is unclear why so many more women than men among the Magars form *miteri* bonds to improve their horoscopes. Linda Stone informs me that she observed a similar tendency among Brahmin and Chhetri women in village of central Nepal (personal communication 1981).

9. These cases of *miteri* documented between persons of both high and low castes negates Adam's allegation that people of the lower castes (*sāno jāt*) cannot participate (1936: 543).

First of all, because the relationship establishes a kin-like bond with another person, most obligations reflect or overtly duplicate those which true consanguineal kinspeople must uphold vis-a-vis each other. They include mutual aid and assistance as needed, open and generous hospitality, and the observances of prescribed duties at life crisis events. The assistance of a *mit* or *mitini* may be specifically requested, or it may be offered and accepted without asking. It may come in the form of help with a construction project, agricultural fieldwork, a personal crisis, or in the form of financial or social or political support. Hospitality is especially important, whether between *mit* or *mitini* who are near neighbors or those who live at some distance from one another. It is especially useful for merchants who have instrumental *mit* brothers situated along distant routes of trade or travel. Arriving at the distant village of a *mit*, a trader is assured of a warm welcome, and meals and lodging.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most important responsibility of an individual as *mit* or *mitini* is the performance of the requisite social and ritual acts attending the funeral of one's *miteri* partner, or of a collateral fictive relative such as a *mit's* or *mitini's* parent or child. The obligations at such occasions vary according to the social identifiers such as sex, class, and caste which tend to regulate the ritual and social status identity of one partner vis-a-vis the other. For example, when a *mit* brother dies, the

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10. Travellers of all kinds rely on their *mit* and *mit's* (or *mitini's*) relatives and friends for support under all sorts of circumstances. In 1972, while travelling in the remote alpine region (*lekh*) of Lamjung Himal, in west-central Nepal, my Gurung research assistant encountered his MoBr's *mit* in one of the high sheep camps. That man's hospitality and generosity toward my assistant as his *mit's* nephew was unforgetably immense. Reciprocity was not immediately expected or possible, but would occur at another place and time in roughly equal measure.

alter *mit* may perform the ritual acts normally reserved for a real brother at the funeral. He also observes the requisite period of mourning and its attendant food prohibitions and sexual abstentions, according to the custom of the caste(s) or ethnic group(s) involved. On the one hand, for example, Okada (1957: 217) reports that among castes, the *mit* "must observe thirteen days' mourning (as with any close relative) when his *mit* dies, wearing old cloths and cloth shoes, refraining from shaving and abstaining from salt during this period." By comparison, among the ethnic Gurungs of my observation, mourning for one's *mit* brother is limited to two or three days, only.

A wedding provides another example of a life crisis occasion at which *mit* and *mitini* have special social and ritual duties to perform as if real consanguine relatives.

One reason given for the low incidence of *miteri* between ethnic and high caste Hindu people is that the status differential between them puts a considerable restraint on the otherwise expected close interpersonal relationship. It is especially apparent that a high caste *mit* would consider his lower status ethnic *mit* to be ritually impure vis-a-vis himself and his collaterals. This severely limits the ability of partners in *miteri* to carry out their requisite obligations at funeral or wedding events. Adam (1936: 543) alludes directly to the problem in the case of a "partner who belongs to the higher caste... [who is] forbidden to have his meals with his *mit*; that is to say, he cannot have any food which was made in the house or by one of the relatives of his partner."

As noted earlier, *miteri* partners address one another not by name but as *mit* or *mitini*, and their close kinfolk as *mit-bā*, *mit-āmā*, *mit-chora*, and *mit-chori* (*mit's* father, mother, son, and daughter, respectively). But beyond normal terms of address, two *mit* or *mitini* friends honor one another in an especially

respectful manner by using such honorifics as *hajur* (term of respectful address, "sir" or "m'am"), the respectful post-position *-jiu*, and the *tapāi* (you, honorific) form of address.

Höfer sums up this expectation (and others) of privileged treatment in this observation from his study of *miteri* among the western Tamang:

A *mit*-ship implies mutual help and consideration of a *mit*'s need of privileged treatment. In my observation, however, factual cooperation tends to be less intense and less taboo-sanctioned as that between the agnates (*dajyubhai*) within a major lineage segment or between "wife-givers" and "wife-takers." A *mit*-ship is rather a matter of politeness, friendliness finding its expression (between *mits*) mainly (not exclusively) in things like: the use of the honorific language, the liberty of a person to stay as long as he/she likes in his/her *mit*'s/*mitini*'s house as a guest, the obligation to invite a *mit/mitini* to every life-cycle ceremony or the duty to sell him/her a certain good somewhat cheaper, etc. (Personal communication 1980).

It should be noted that it is not the friendliness so much as the expected politeness between *miteri* friends that the honorific language expresses. Under other circumstances, outside of *miteri*, the honorific *tapāi* form implies distance, respect, and formality, while friendliness is more appropriately expressed by using the *timi* (you, familiar) form of address.

In addition to respectful terms, ritual brothers and sisters also practice certain rules of avoidance, and are particularly cognizant of the incest barrier which the *miteri* bond creates. The definition of incest and rules of avoidance vary according to the caste or ethnic identity of the *miteri* partner. Okada, whose data primarily reflect the situation among the castes, notes for example that "the wife of a ritual brother is avoided. She stays in seclusion if her husband's *mit* comes visiting and he is not allowed to see her nor her ritual sister, should she have

one" (1957: 218).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a caste woman and the husband of her *mitini* are untouchable and practice avoidance, although they may see each other (Linda Stone, personal communication 1981). Among the ethnic Gurungs, on the other hand, avoidance behavior is much more relaxed. A Gurung *mit* is not restricted from seeing his *mit's* wife; he is only prohibited from touching her.

The incest barrier is an important component of *miteri*. Universally, *mit* and *mitini* are considered as consanguines of their *miteri* partners, just as are their closest collaterals and descendents. This fictive consanguinity may last for several generations beyond the taking of the *miteri* bond. A *mit* cannot marry his alter *mit's* sister, nor can their sons and daughters intermarry. Among the Lepcha of Sikkim, the incest barrier is said to exist for nine generations (Gorer 1938: 119). Among western Tamang, it lasts only for three generations (Höfer, personal communication 1980). Among the Gurungs, Doherty speculates that the unique marriage prescriptions and prohibitions described for the four clans of the endogamous Char Jat division (moiety) of the society may have derived from an incest barrier based on ancient *miteri* alliances between groups (1975: 114-115; cf. Pignède 1962, 1966, Messerschmidt 1976b: 45-65).

Consanguineal expectations break down quite clearly in the case of such jural obligations as inheritance of property. *Mit* and *mitini* do not inherit from their *miteri* partners. Nonetheless, they are obliged to support one another financially (especially between *mit*, not so much between *mitini*) in times of need. Thus, according to Okada:

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11. Okada's observations seem to be of a very strict avoidance practice. Linda Stone points out that it more likely that the woman in question might just slightly veil herself, just as she would in the presence of her husband's father or her husband's elder brother (personal communication 1981).

while it may not be a legal obligation, there is nevertheless a real obligation to come to the aid of a ritual brother, especially in financial matters. Financial assistance in the form of money freely loaned at no interest is apparently the chief obligation and a strong factor in adding to an individual's sense of security in a *mit* relationship. A man may contribute food, clothing, and money when his *mit* gets married and, if from another village, will provide food and shelter for a *mit* traveling through. He may help arrange the marriage of his partner's children and look after them in the best of his ability should their father die. Ritual brothers are very definitely obligated to help each other voluntarily in every way they can, particularly in times of crisis, danger, or financial stress.<sup>12</sup> (1957: 217)

Prindle (1975: 881) states to the contrary, however, that within fictive kinship in east Nepal, *mit* relations "do not generally serve as an important source for loans." And Höfer, in considering this question, writes that "among Tamangs and Kamis (Blacksmiths), *miteri* is not used as an important source for loans because it would be embarrassing to harass a *mit* in case of insolvency which frequently occurs and entails mortgage. The reason might be the same everywhere in Nepal" (personal communication 1981).

In the final analysis, regardless of how strictly *miteri* relations are perceived and how serious and how deep one's obligations as a *mit* or *mitini* are expected to be performed in the social and ritual spheres, there exists an overriding ideal of complementary and balanced reciprocity. And although a partner in *miteri* may not keep accurate track of favors received from, or bestowed upon, one's alter, the close relationship which *miteri* implies between individuals assures a mutual and generous reciprocity flowing in both directions.

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12. In recent years, American Peace Corps Volunteers and other foreigners in Nepal have occasionally contracted *mit* or *mitini* bonds. Not fully understanding the sorts of obligations implied by *miteri*, some have found themselves in uncomfortable situations regarding requests for money or for schooling abroad for the partner's children.

*Ceremony and ritual.* There is considerable variation in the amount of ceremony and ritual observed in the formation of *miteri* bonds. Some initiations are quite elaborate, some quite simple. The principle difference between them is the requisite presence or absence of an officiating ritualist -- a Brahmin priest, Buddhist lama, shaman, or astrologer.

One kind of elaborate initiation ceremony is described by Okada. It incorporates rich symbolism and requires the presence of a Hindu priest:

The two principals, after removing their shoes and heavy curved knives (*khukuri*), faced each other across a sacred fire of special woods in which rice, clarified butter (*ghi*), and honey are burned. They greet each other with the Hindu salutation (*dhok dinu*), each bringing his hands, palms pressed together and fingers pointing up, in front of his face. Money -- one to five rupees in silver -- is exchanged through the *purohit* [priest] and usually such personal positions as caps, scarves, or rings. Blades of *dubo* grass<sup>13</sup> may be sprinkled over the two men's heads and sometimes they may garland each other with flowers. Often a dab of rice grains and curd (*tikā*) is put on their foreheads. The *purohit* gives a talk referring to an incident in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in which Ram, searching for his abducted wife, meets Surgriva who becomes his ritual brother and assists his. He announces that the two men in front of him are brothers from this day on and adjures them to help and protect each other, but adds certain strictures prohibiting them to sit together on the same bed or chair or to touch each other; though they are permitted to meet every day, if they wish, they can talk only at a distance.<sup>14</sup> (Okada 1957: 215-216)

13. *Dubo* grass (*Cynodon dactylon*), also called Bermuda grass, is used in Hindu sacrifice, especially in the worship of Ganesh (Turner 1931: 315a; Nepal 1970: 148).

14. The reference to individuals who take *miteri* vows in relation to the story of Ram is reminiscent of the system of "ritual brother and sisters" (*gurubhai* and *gurubahin*, respectively) in the Malwa region of India. There the young people who "hear Ram's name" together under the tutelage of a guru become fictive kin in a somewhat elaborate ceremony performed annually on the full moon day of Asarh (mid-June to mid-July). This system typically links boys and girls of various castes together in the bond (Mayer 1960: 138ff.).



Adam (1936: 541) details a similarly elaborate ceremony officiated by a priest, in which the two initiates sit together in front of a ritual platform (*jagge*) made of cowdung, sprinkled with Ganges River water and flour arranged to symbolize the sun and the moon and other sacred figures.

A less elaborate ceremony is described by both Prindle and Höfer from two separate regions of Nepal, among distinctly different caste and ethnic groups. It lasts only a few minutes. In it, a cloth curtain is draped between the two individuals, and a priest announces their *miteri* bond, followed by a gift exchange between them. Each is then given a *ṭikā* mark on the forehead by the officiating priest. A feast is spread and friends of each *mit* are invited to join in (Prindle 1975).

In Höfer's account, the two candidates of the Tamang ethnic group sit together, likewise separated by a curtain. In front of them there is:

a *thal* [plate or dish] with some husked rice (symbol of prosperity and purity), a *bhatti* [lamp] and some *raksi* [liquor]. Then, the curtain is lifted and the two exchange 3 times a few rupees notes... Finally, both persons put on their *ṭopi* [hat] (male) or kerchief [*majetro*] (female) and make 3 times *dhok* [bow] to each other.

A simple form of initiation occurs among the Gurungs:

Two Gurung friends who wish to initiate a fictive kin bond simply call a few close friends and relatives together to witness the formal pact and share a small feast. An astrologer may be asked to select an auspicious day and a lama or shaman may be present to give his blessing, but neither of these ritualists is essential. The two initiates join arms (*bāh jorera mit lāunu*) and give each other *ṭikā* (or *āshik*), a daub of rice on the forehead as a blessing to solemnize the occasion. Thereafter, other persons present may give them each small gifts of a rupee or two and a white turban cloth (*kregi*). (Messerschmidt 1976b: 47)

Hitchcock describes a ceremony which represents what is, perhaps, the most casual form of initiation. His example is of two Magar girls becoming *mitini*:

One night when they and other young people had gathered to sing together, they decided to recognize the [*mitini*] relationship formally. They merely sat opposite each other and each placed a silver rupee and a *pice* [1/100th of a rupee] on a piece of banana leaf and set it before their friend. After picking up the coins, the girls completed the ceremony by rising and bowing to one another. (1966: 67)

Early on, Adam (1936: 541) suggested that *miteri* "has evidently a religious base, for the presence of a Brahman, or 'bahun' is required for the initial ceremony." Adam's understanding of this institution, however, was flawed by poor and inadequate data. In light of more and better understanding now available, his suggestion simply does not stand up.

It is true, of course, that the ritual-religious element, and particularly a Hindu element, is a dominant theme in the formalization of many *miteri* bonds involving caste partners. But religiosity varies greatly and is often quite weakly expressed or virtually ignored. It is also the case that non-Hindus participate quite freely in *miteri* and that occasionally individuals of different religions (e.g., Buddhist with Hindu) form *miteri* alliances.

It might be argued that the caste Hindus have used elaborate ritual in initiating *miteri* bonds in order to impress Hindu ideals on the non-Hindu populations they encountered when they arrived in Nepal centuries ago. Manipulation of distinctly Hindu symbols in the initiation ceremony varies according to the degree to which a particular individual or ethnic group has been Hinduized. But religiosity in *miteri* is not limited to Hinduism, and many non-Hindus who practice *miteri* call upon Buddhist lamas or

shamans to preside at the initiation ceremonies. Some people merely ask the resident astrologer for the most auspicious time to make the bond. And some types of *miteri* initiation, as we have seen, require no special officiant whatsoever. Thus, although religion may be a dominant theme in some instances, there is little evidence to suggest that it is the basis or even a necessary accouterment of *miteri*.

*Strength or duration of the miteri bond.* The formal *miteri* bond (that is, excluding the loose forms of "mouth *mit*" and "drinking kin" described above) are lifetime relationships. "As a rule," Hitchcock observes (1966: 66), "ritual friendships reach a peak of intensity right after they are formed and then tend to lapse." They are generally strongest between the two individuals involved, and weaker among any extended kin who may be drawn into the relationship secondarily. Shrestha (1971/72: 73) recorded the following saying which implies that a *mit* relationship is double the strength of a patrilineal (*sāk*) one:

*pātankā pālo patti / bhedile bhyā garyo*  
*hitta milyo chitta milyo / jātle ke garyo*

There are seven relationships (generations) among the *sāk*, and there are fourteen among the *mit*. (Quoted and translated in Campbell 1978: 183)

It appears that *miteri* established for instrumental reasons (e.g., trade partnerships) are stronger than those taken merely for affective reasons. It would seem to follow that *mit* is usually stronger than *mitini*. But there has been so little study of the female (*mitini*) form that it is difficult to adequately support or refute this assumption. Linda Stone feels that from her experience studying caste women in central Nepal, the situation is sometimes more complex regarding *mitini*. "For example," she writes:

it is not uncommon for a woman to arrange *miteri* with another woman with whom she suspects her

husband would like to have an affair. After [becoming *mitini*], of course, her husband and this woman are untouchable. In addition, a man might encourage his wife to do *mitini* with the wife of another man from whom he seeks political favor, etc. (Personal communication 1981)

In such cases, the strength and importance of *miteri* is deliberately used to effect a specific purpose.

#### *Ethnic Variations on Miteri*

Earlier in this paper, several variations on the *miteri* concept were mentioned by name -- Tamang *leng*, Lepcha *ingzong*, Sherpa *thowu*, Gurung *ngyela/ngyelsyo*, and others. These alternative forms, prevalent among the ethnic and Bhotia groups, need further elaboration, in order to highlight one of the primary functions of fictive kinship within the multi-ethnic/caste society of the Himalayas.

The *ingzong* is found among the Lepchas of Sikkim, a tiny Himalayan state in India bordering Nepal at the east. Gorer (1938: 118) describes it as an exogamous relationship through which a Lepcha man secures trade relations or partnerships "with all foreigners who had goods which he did not possess," particularly with neighboring Sikkimese and Tibetans. In comparison, the *thowu* is a form of "ceremonial friendship" found among the neighboring Sherpas of the Mount Everest region of northeastern Nepal" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975: 295-298).<sup>15</sup> The latter is "known as *mit* in Nepali" (296) and Fürer-Haimendorf describes it as more like the *miteri* practiced among caste Nepalese than like any other interpersonal associations known in Bhotia and Tibetan society, such as the bonds of *ganye*, *kidu*, or *tsok* (Aziz 1978a, 1978b, Miller 1956, Messerschmidt 1976c). The instrumental *miteri*-like relationship established in *thowu* is interpreted as enhancing the Sherpa's entrepreneurial

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15. *Thowu* is probably a derivative of *thoqo* or *thogpo*, meaning "friend" in Tibetan (Melvyn C. Goldstein, personal communication, 1980).

opportunities with their non-Sherpa trade associates elsewhere in Nepal. Given this, it is quite likely that a Buddhist Sherpa may take *mit* with a Hindu person (see Okada 1957: 220). Unlike the Lepcha *ingzong*, however, Sherpas may take *thowwu* with co-villagers as well as with non-Sherpas. Fürer-Haimendorf also alludes (without elaboration) to other such friendship bonds between Bhotia traders in other parts of Nepal (1975: 212-213, 265).

In my own initial discussion of Gurung fictive kinship (Messerschmidt 1976b: 46-49), I have described the strictly Gurung form, hereafter called *ngyel chyāb* (to make a ritual friend, Gur.), interpreting it rather uncritically at that time as a simple variation on pan-Nepalese *miteri*. But whereas in *miteri* the relationship is essentially dyadic, between two individuals and only loosely involving their respective lineagemates, the Gurung *ngyel chāb* is clearly generalized outward from the dyad at the center to include their widest set of lineagemates, ultimately linking the two endogamous moieties (*jāt*) of Gurung society.

My research was among the northern Gurungs of Lamjung District of west-central Nepal, in Ghaisu (pseudonym), a village of 123 households, 621 population. Approximately two-thirds of the population was of the Sora Jat moiety (83 hh., 514 pop.), one-third was Char Jat (40 hh., 206 pop.) (1976b: 39, Table 3). My research assistant was a Char Jat man from a village a half day walk away. Practically speaking, when *ngyel chyāb* bonds are traced outward to the moiety level, they are loosely conceived and bounded by the outer limits of the village society. When my Char Jat assistant arrived to begin work in Ghaisu, however, the local Sora Jat members considered him to be their generalized *ngyela (mit-bhāi)*, in the same way that the local Char Jat considered him to be their putative "real" brother (*dāju-bhāi*).

The Gurung, then, like the Sherpas and the Magars, practice two forms of fictive kinship, one between individuals from other ethnic or caste groups, and one within their own ethnic community. Each form reflects distinctly different social structural relationships and each exists for different purposes. The Gurungs engage, on the one hand, in the pan-Nepalese *miteri* to bond themselves, *as individuals*, to non-Gurung individuals outside of the Gurung community. A Gurung may initiate *miteri* for instrumental and/or affective reasons. *Miteri* is important, for example, in trade relations between Gurung men and outsiders of a wide range of caste and ethnic identity. Or, it may be contracted on straight forward emotional grounds of mutual affection felt by two individuals who have met in school, in the military, or during travels away from home.

The Gurung ethnic *ngyel chyāb*, on the other hand, serves to partially bridge the central cleavage that exists between the endogamous and hierarchical moieties of the society. These two moieties, the Char Jat (reputedly higher status) and the Sora Jat (reputedly lower status), reflect differential access to scarce resources such as political power (Char Jat men are village chiefs), prestige (Char Jat claim higher social and ritual position), food (reflected in unequal land holdings between the moieties), and cloth or clothing (reflecting unequal purchasing power). The exchange of some of these resources and commodities, principally food and clothing, is accomplished through the built-in reciprocal obligations of *ngyel chyāb* at life crisis events such as weddings or funerals affecting one's *ngyela* (m.) or *ngyelsyo* (f.) and his or her relatives. The critical importance of *ngyel chyāb* in bonding the otherwise socially and ritually distant Gurung moieties was no more graphically demonstrated than the time in Ghaisu village when in the heat of a factional dispute, Sora Jat leaders banned all social intercourse between their kinsmen and the Char Jat. This

action led to the temporary breakdown of the fictive kinship system and caused great economic havoc and person stress in the society (Messerschmidt 1976b: 123-124).

*Discussion: Why Miteri?*

Fictive kinship is a kind of voluntary association, one which is contracted or otherwise fixed with more or less formality, between two individuals and in some instances by extension between wider categories of kin. In an essay on voluntary associations, Lon Fuller describes human associations as the "furniture of society"; concern with the principles of association, he says, is a concern "with the glue that holds [the furniture] together" (1969: 6). In a caste-oriented society like Nepal, however, the furniture is already well built and firmly glued together through the principle of hierarchy, and all the more so through the codification of rules about interpersonal and intergroup interaction in the *Muluki Ain*. And although the old *Ain* of 1854 that codified social interaction has since been abrogated by newer, more modern laws, the structures of caste and the norms of the hierarchical order are still firmly encoded in the lifeways of the traditional society. Any association that circumvents the prevailing and traditional social structure, as *miteri* does, deserves special consideration, for by examining the alternative structure that it provides, important points about the normal or regular structure may be highlighted and better understood.

*Miteri* provides a certain freedom of expression which is not condoned in normal social intercourse. It provides a measure of relief from the highly restrictive and hierarchical expectations of both caste and kinship. The hierarchical principle underlies virtually all social relations, but while it tends to draw people close together horizontally within each

caste or ethnic group, it leaves a formidable gap between endogamous groups on the vertical axis. The institution of *miteri* fills the gap and provides an alternative structure.

If Nepalese society were not so complex, if it had less social variety and less cause for economic interaction in the form of resource exchange between inhabitants of geographically isolated and ecologically distinct zones, then the existing hierarchically ranked social system might be sufficient. But economic and social interaction between individuals and groups, as strangers, is necessary, and it is necessary that they can trust each other implicitly. Ways to circumvent the separation caused by the geographical severity of the Himalayas and the strictures of the Hindu social system, whose origins are found in the more uniform conditions of sub-Himalayan north India, are naturally sought or invented.

The most important observation in conclusion is the social bridge that *miteri* and like forms of association make across an otherwise high variegated society. *Miteri* both mimics kinship and rigidifies the kin-like obligations it fosters. In correspondence on this point, Andras Höfer has commented that *miteri* is an alternative to kinship in that:

it allows for more personal affection than kinship with its fixed rules (and latent quarrels), it individualizes more than kinship, for a purely personal choice, as *miteri* is, is not possible in it: you are born and arranged into a kinship network (by birth or marriage), whereas you are free to follow your personal feelings and interest as a *mit*. (Personal communication 1981)

But *miteri* embodies strict regulations and obligations of its own, as well as the personal freedom and choice noted above. Linda Stone emphasizes this point in a comment based on her study of central Nepal Brahmins:



In one sense, *mit* is very much like caste and kinship. Like these, it serves to strictly categorize and define human interaction. To be sure, the institution of *mit* allows people to create, or cement, affective ties of a kind that caste and kinship do not encourage. At the time, *mit* ritually contains affection: it spells out how people involved *must* interact. (1977: 174)

It is clear that fictive kinship in Nepal deviates from the regular strictures and structures of social interaction and brings people together who are otherwise socially, ritually, and often economically far apart. This is a reflection of a well known fact that institutionalized deviation is common in complex social systems. *Miteri* allows a certain flexibility in interpersonal choice and intergroup relations. But it is well contained and controlled with its own protocol and expectations. Its existence not only provides an alternative to the impregnable hierarchical principles of caste and kinship, but it allows the existing systems of caste and kinship to continue strong and undiluted on their own. *Miteri*, in effect, fosters a measure of personal freedom and expression of need in its own little world, compartmentalized and set apart from some of the principle considerations of the regular status system. It gives strength and security to that other, overarching, dominant system and to the involuntary (ascribed) status set that each individual and group carries through life, by allowing voluntary expression of human association to solve some of the basic challenges of life.

*Acknowledgements*

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