KURMA, KOLA, AND KURI
AS COMMUNITY CONCEPTS
Patrilineage, Deities, and Inside-Outside
Dichotomy among the Rana Tharus[1]

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As is the case with the Tharus in general, the Rana Tharus have been very little studied, and knowledge about them is scarce.[2] Thus, in addition to being an interesting field for anthropological studies, research on the Rana Tharus, can break new ground for policymakers as well as on the developing ethnic identities. Most important of all, we see our own work as a much needed basis for further research on the Rana Tharus.

This paper which focuses on the Rana Tharus in Kailali and Kanchanpur districts in the southwestern corner of Nepal[3], elucidates the role of patrilineage in their social system, the relationship between the people there and their deities, explicates the significance of inside and outside dichotomy, and explains their marriage system in terms of their lineage hierarchy.

The area of field work is a part of the Terai, with its flat stretches of agricultural land and patches of forest[4]. The Rana Tharus are now settled farmers, but were earlier described as shifting cultivators. Today, they grow paddy, wheat, and a variety of lentils and vegetables. They also raise cattle, goats, sheep, chickens, and geese. In addition, fishing is an important part of women's work after the monsoon. Few Rana Tharus are wage-laborers.

KURMA PATRILINEAL SYSTEM

The Rana Tharus live in patrilineal extended households. Brothers often live together in one household with their wives, unmarried children, and married sons with their own families. Thus, the household is a segment of a patrilineal descent group. There may be several houses around a courtyard and sometimes more than fifty people, but as long as they "eat from one kitchen", as our informants put it, they are seen as one household. Another term used for this social unit is a *ghar*, which also means house. When one talks about,

for example, *Surmeha ghar* or *Pipariya ghar*, one refers to 'the house' (i.e., the household/patrilineage) which moved here from Surmeha village or Pipariya village. The household runs the farm together and the brothers of the patrilineage own land jointly. When a household splits, whether as a matter of convenience or due to family trouble, and a new household is established, a new branch of *kurma* (patrilineage) is also created.

Usually, all members of a *kurma* who live in one village build their houses close to each other in the same village quarter. This group is the first to be approached for help when a household is in trouble, but one also counts on more distant *kurmas* on such occasions. The *kurma* also plays a role in providing a taboo-group when it comes to marriage. This applies to the whole *kurma*, whether close or distant. The *kurma* also worships the same lineage deities, which are represented by small circular or square bumps made of cowdung/mud or by a wooden peg[5]. These are located just outside the entrance to the kitchen (a low platform) and inside the deity-room (*kola*) next to the kitchen. By noticing the size, shape, and number of lineage-deities represented outside a house, Rana Tharus can, at least theoretically, recognize members of a certain *kurma* (patrilineage). We will come back to the lineage deities in more detail below.

In addition to the household's patrilineage (*kurma*), the village itself is a socially important unit in this society. Although Rana Tharu villages, like all villages in the country, are organized according to Nepali laws on local organization, they also have their own social and religious leaders. This system of traditional leadership has survived the Panchayat rule, and is still working in the new political environment after the 1990 motvement.

The village leader is called a *bhalemansa*. He is elected by the *kitcheri*, a village meeting, where each house (household) is represented by one male member. If the villagers are not satisfied with the services of the *bhalemansa*, or if he rejects re-election, they elect a new one. Some *bhalemansas* have been continuously in charge of their villages for many years, and in some villages the son of a former *bhalemansa* has been elected. However, the seat of a *bhalemansa* is open to anyone who commands the respect and confidence of the villagers. The *bhalemansa* has the last word on village matters, but problems are discussed in the *kitcheri* (the village meeting) before a final decision is made.

A village *choukidar* is elected on the same principles as the *bhalemansa*. He is the messenger of the village, and is responsible for implementing the decisions and plans of the *bhalemansa* and the *kitcheri*, such as organizing road maintenance and other village work.

The *choukidar* is also trained by the *gauthehara* (village shaman/priest) in performing village rituals in his absence, and is responsible for preparing the rituals, i.e., collecting or buying what is needed for the *pooja*. In at least two of the villages we visited, the *choukidar* was a Dangora Tharu. It was obviously not seen as a problem that he worshipped Rana Tharu deities on behalf of the Rana Tharu villagers, although he worshipped his own Dangora Tharu deities at home.

In a Rana Tharu village there may be many *bharras*, or local healers, while there is only one *gauthehara*, i.e., main village shaman/priest[6]. The *gauthehara* is chosen by the village meeting, *kitcheri*, because of his good reputation as a shaman/priest and can be replaced if his services are not considered satisfactory.

In big *poojas*, where more than one ritual official is needed, the local *bharras* may assist the *choukidar*. However, the *bharras* do not usually have anything to do with village level worship. They are healers rather than priests, and are approached by the villagers individually when somebody is ill. Rana Tharu *bharras* are sometimes used by other ethnic groups, and Rana Tharus also use Dangora Tharu or *pahari* healers.

KOLA COSMOLOGY: RELATION BETWEEN PEOPLE AND DEITIES

As we have mentioned in the introduction, the relationship between the Rana Tharus and their deities is what they consider extremely important. We will describe some aspects and areas of life where this can be seen quite clearly.

Firstly, the relationship to the deities is important with regard to the house and the lineage. In fact, what constitutes a Rana Tharu house as such is the location of a certain set of deities. This is in congruence with McDonaugh's observation among the Dangora Tharus. He writes: "... the presence of these deities identifies a house as such. Without them, the building is not a proper house at all for the Tharus" (McDonaugh in Barnes/de Coppet/Parkin 1985: 184). We have mentioned that a household may well consist of more than one building, but it is nevertheless called 'one house' (*ghar*). Now, the building which contains the household's deity room (*kola*) and kitchen (*rosaiya*) is also called a 'house' (*ghar*). As we see it, this is the house; the other buildings are called *pal*. It is this house which is built according to cosmological principles, with the two purest and most important rooms, the *kola* and the kitchen (*rosaiya*), to the north. The north is cosmologically important because it is known as 'the abode of the gods'. This notion is shared between the Rana Tharus and the Dangora Tharus (cf. Krauskopff 1987) and Hindu societies in general[6].

When setting up a new building, whether *ghar* (with deity-room) or *pal*, the first pillar is offered a *pooja* before the building can start. Thus, the deities are included in the building of the house from the start. When a new *ghar* is built, the ritual is more elaborate, since the lineage deities (*kurma deuta*) have to 'move into the house' before the people themselves can start cooking or living there. In other words, the deities have to be installed in a house before the house is seen as fit for human beings. Some of the *kurma* deities have their seats in the *kola*, while others are placed just outside the northern entrance. All of them are freshly made (of mud/cowdung) when a new house is built, and they receive a *pooja* at the *bhoura khane* ritual, which can be taken as a 'house warming' ritual. On this occasion, family and neighbors are also given a meal. Only after this ritual is performed, and one has done one's duty to the deities and co-villagers, can the family move in.

The lineage as such also has a special relationship to a certain set of deities, and the members of a patrilineal descent group (*kurma*) worship the same *kurma* deities. This means that all households in the *kurma* have the same gods and goddesses in the *kola* and outside the door (e.g., *Parvati, Niradhar, Nagarihai, Durga, Bishahar*, and *Kariya*), and that they worship them according to the same rules. Each *kurma* gives specific offerings to their various deities on specific occasions, such as festivals and life-cycle rituals. All the deities do not 'eat' the same thing; rather they receive *pooja* according to their individual need. The ritual official in each household (the eldest man or woman) propitiates the deities on behalf of the household. In this way, one can see that the relationship to a certain constellation of deities is that which unites members of the same *kurma*. This is the way in which Rana Tharus talk about *kurma* membership, for example, with regard to marriage. A girl would not say that "I cannot marry him because he is my cousin", but rather "I cannot marry him because we have the same deities".

Secondly, the relationship to the deities is important on the village level as well. Just as each *kurma* has its own constellation of deities, so does each Rana Tharu village have its own deities, with their representations in the village shrine (*bhuiya*). The shrine plays an important role in village life, and we will describe it in some detail.

Although the villages may vary in shape and size, they all have a village shrine to the south of the village settlement, usually close to a *peepal* tree. There is no building; only an open flat square plastered with cowdung/mud and sometimes with a wooden or tile-roofing. This shrine contains representations of deities which are worshipped by all villagers, regardless of *kurma* membership. The deities are represented by small circular or square bumps of cowdung/mud, much like the

ones outside each house, or by a wooden peg. *Bhuiya* is the name of the shrine, but *bhuiya* itself is also considered a female deity, sometimes explained as having a male counterpart.

Some of the deities in the *bhuiya* are the same as the *kurma* – specific deities (such as *Parvati* and *Nagarihai*), while others (such as *Saat Bhawani*, *Mari*, *Patchaua*, and *Langura*) are only found in the *bhuiya*. In addition to the deities, people deify local shamans (*bharras*). Other local heroes are also worshipped in the *bhuiya*. In a few cases, *poojas* are performed just outside the bhuiya area, and we were told that these *poojas* are for certain *bhuts* (spirits) rather than deities.

It is interesting to note that village deities no longer receive blood sacrifice. The villagers claimed that the deities did not mind this, as long as they were asked beforehand whether they would accept the 'substitutes'. The reason for this change in worship practice, according to some of our informants, was that animal sacrifice had become too expensive. It is tempting to see this as an adaption to caste Hindu customs. We will come back to this issue at the end of the paper.

The importance of the *bhuiya* stems from the fact that it is seen as necessary for the well-being of the people and the protection of the village. One informant described it as 'the foremost place', i.e., the foundation place of the village, which had to be established before people could settle in the area. Another informant claimed that the Rana Tharus could definitely not have been semi-nomadic earlier, simply because "once a *bhuiya* is established, it cannot be moved". When referring to the *bhuiya* in the way, the Rana Tharus are, of course, not referring to the *bhuiya* as an area, but to the deities which are seen as inhabiting this area. Establishing a *bhuiya* means giving the deities a place to stay in the village. Without the deities, the village area is not protected and cannot be inhabited by people. One informant emphasized that the villagers would die, if there was no *bhuiya* in a village.

This is similar to what Krauskopff (in *L'Ethnographie* 1987: 131) describes among the Dangora Tharus of Dang, where she notes that the creation of a village shrine is a way of "... setting bounds to the wandering spirits of the site within the limits of the dwelling-area". She describes the boundaries of the village as "symbols of a power-struggle between men, represented by the priest, and the spirits of the area" (ibid 131). This, we believe, also holds true for the Rana Tharu village shrine, although there are differences in Dangora and Rana Tharu religion and cosmology.

The maintenance of a good relationship with the protective village deities is considered so important in Rana Tharu society that a special person is given the responsibility of doing this on behalf of the villagers. We have described earlier how this responsibility is shared between the *gauthehara* and the *choukidar*. Thus, one might say, the deities are given a place in the social structure of each Rana Tharu village, in that their propitiation is seen as a part of the responsibility of the village leaders. Further, the functioning of the village organization secures proper performance of village rituals, and thus the best possible relationship to the deities, in that the ritual officiant can be replaced if his work is not considered good enough.

If there is a lot of trouble in a village (quarrels, fightings, illness, epidemics, etc.), this is often seen as a sign that the village deities are not 'satisfied' for some reason. In one of the villages we visited, the *bhalemansa* told us that the deities in the *bhuiya* (village shrine) are bigger than the ones people have in their house, and that when the *gauthehara* comes to the village in order to recreate peace and order in times of trouble, he will only worry about the 'mood' of the village deities, not the various *kurma* deities. "If the deities get angry, there will be trouble (*badmas*) in the village!" This may happen when the proscribed village rituals are performed, and the *gauthehara* may suggest yet another *pooja* in order to recreate a balanced relationship between the people and the deities who protect them.

Thirdly, the importance of the relationship with the deities becomes apparent in some of the wedding rituals. We will give a few examples:

As a part of the preparatory rites, in the morning on the day before the wedding, the father of the bride and the father of the groom perform the *Banaspati pooja*, each in their respective villages. This is a *pooja* given to *Banaspati*, the goddess of the forest. It is performed close to the village, under a *sal* tree. Accompanied by seven (in the groom's case) or five (in the bride's case) male members of the *Kurma*, the officiant offers ghee (clarified butter), sweets, and cloves on a ritual fire (*aghiari*) under the tree, sprinkles water around it, and does *namaskara*. Cotton thread, colored yellow with turmeric powder, is tied five or seven times around the tree toward the right. *Ghee* and sweets are later distributed as *prasad*. After the worship, some wood is cut, and with this wood one lights the fire for cooking *puri* (wheat breads fired in *ghee*) for the wedding.

Here, the participation by the deities is needed for the wedding to be successful. No food is cooked for the wedding before *Banaspati* has received offerings, seen as a right due to her as one of the deities of the area inhabited by the Rana Tharus. As we interpret it, she then "answers" by giving (symbolically) the fuel needed for the preparation of food for the wedding.

A *pooja* also has to be done in the house, where the *kurma* deities receive some of the *puris*, i.e., the first food made for the wedding. Then the deities in the village shrine (*bhuiya*) also receive a *pooja*. In the afternoon, on the day before the wedding, the mothers of *pooja*. In the afternoon, on the day before the wedding, the mothers of the bride and the groom, in their respective villages, go with the village *choukidar* (or other ritual officiant) to do this *pooja* at the village shrine to the south of the village. All the deities represented there have their *sthan* ('seat', i.e., their representation) plastered with fresh cowdung before receiving the offering of *puris*, together with *ghee*, spices, *sharbat* (sweet water), etc.

This is the last of the preparatory rites before wedding. Now all deities have received offerings, and will protect people and participate in wedding. At the *bhuiya*, even 'unknown' *bhuts* (sprits) receive offerings[10]. Thus, no supernatural beings in the vicinity are left out on this occasion.

INSIDE-OUTSIDE   DICHOTOMY

The Rana Tharus themselves do not refer to the 'inside'/'outside' dichotomy explicitly, so this should not be seen as an ethnic term. However, we see this dichotomy present in many situations in regard to various aspects of social and religious life. We will try to show how it is made relevant at the cosmological level, in the household and wedding rituals. The dichotomy is manifest where one state is considered in many ways better, purer, safer or more proper than the other.

On the village level, this dichotomy becomes evident when we look at the relationship between the villagers and the people. Since the village is seen as an area protected by its deities, the outside of the village is, obviously, less safe than the inside. Or, in other words, one's own village is seen as the safest. One has established a relationship with the deities inside the village, and can count on their protection. If one wanders around too much 'outside' (*bahira*), said a Rana Tharu, it would not be surprising if one gets ill. The illness may well be caused by the *bhut* of the 'outside'.

The same is reflected in the term used for the *bhuiya* by one of our informants. He mentioned it as 'the entering point' of the village. As we understood it, this has nothing to do with where people enter the village, but refers to the fact that evil spirits are believed to enter the village from the south. Thus, they will encounter the deities in the village from the south. Thus, they will encounter the deities in the *bhuiya*, which is always situated to the south of the village settlement, and, hopefully, be stopped by them. The evil sprits of the 'outside' are stopped from entering 'inside' by the deities, who are part of the village 'insiders'.

As we have already mentioned, there is a deity-room (*kola*) in every 'house' (*ghar*). In contrast to the world outside, this room is the innermost space of the house. Only *kurma* members, whom we chose to call 'insiders' here, can enter this room. All others, i.e., non-members of the *kurma* and thus 'outsiders', would pollute the room and make the deities angry if they ever enter this area. The term 'insider' includes all male members of the patrilineage and their unmarried daughters. In Rana Tharu society, it also includes the unmarried women. Those, who are allowed inside the *kola*, either have the same lineage or have the same identification to the lineage deities. The custom under which the in-married women are allowed into the *kola* and to participate in rituals for the *kurma* deities is not common among the Dangora Tharus. This practice shows the special status of Rana Tharu women compared to the women of many other groups on the subcontinent. We will come back to this in our section on the marriage system.

The inside/outside dichotomy is also relevant on many occasions during the wedding rites. When the *bharra* has been to the house of the bride a few days before the wedding in order to 'see the deities' (*deuta dekhan*), and has found everything to be OK, the girl is not allowed outside her house until the wedding day. This was explained to us as a sign of shyness: "If she walks around outside, she is not shy. But, then people will talk behind her back". However, we were also told that she could not risk the trouble from the 'spirits of the outside'. Here, we see the inside/outside dichotomy reflected once again. The inside of the house is seen as a protected area; and especially with such a big event as a wedding coming up, the girl must be cautious.

The food needed for the wedding party[11] has to be brought from the outside of the house, and it must be the *kurma's* own production. Samples of all the foodstuff have to be blessed by one of the local *bharras* before these can be used for cooking. This, we were told by the *bharra* as he was blowing his *mantras* (protective spells) on the various items, is done in order to guard off the spirits which might have been imbibed in the food. Only after the spirits from the outside are driven away for sure, are these items considered fit for wedding dinner.

The notion of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is also relevant with regard to the groom's arrival at the bride's house on the wedding day. He and his party are 'outsiders', and although they are welcome as honored guests after a while, at the outset they are 'stopped' symbolically from entering the courtyard of the bride's house. This is usually done three times; first by the *choukidar* (village watchman/

messenger), who is hired for fetching water, etc. at the wedding; then by the *karbariyha* (women from the village who help with cooking, cleaning pots, etc. at the wedding); and then by the younger sisters of the bride. As we see it, these people are all representing the 'inside' – either the village or the patrilineage of the bride's father[12]. They ask for a small sum of money before they let the groom and his party pass in. In this way, the difference between the 'inside' and the 'outside', as well as the bringing together of two lineages at marriage, is symbolically referred to.

The groom is stopped again when he is on his way into the *kola* (deity-room) in his own house on the day after the wedding ritual (in the girl's house). His sisters stop him this time, and they will not let him pass with his new wife "until they are given a cow". (Usually, however, they give up after being promised a small amount of money.) This time it is he who brings someone from the 'outside', i.e., the girl, who was, until the wedding ceremony, a member of her own father's lineage.

The fact that the bride, after this ritual, is actually allowed into the deity-room of her new house signifies that she is accepted 'inside'. Not only is she accepted, but it will be her duty from now on to respect the deities of her husband's lineage. Before anything else, she has to bow to these *kurma* deities, both outside and inside, and only then can the rest of the rituals in the groom's house start. In her parents' house, she has now become an 'outsider'. When the main wedding ritual is finished, she has been 'transferred' to her husband's *kurma* (lineage), and cannot enter her previous *kurma's kola* (deity-room) again.

When the groom arrives in his own village together with the bride and the wedding party, a *pooja* has to be performed at the village border before they are let in. This *pooja*, we were told, is for the *bhut* (spirits) rather than for the deities. The spirits of the outside could follow the wedding party inside the village, if they are not warded off by this *pooja*[13].

The first aspect, i.e., the importance of the relationship between the people and their deities can lead to or be responsible for the second aspect, namely, the significance of distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' connection of a person. That which is within the realm of the deities, either the *kurma* deities or the village deities, is seen as having some kind of added value.

MARRIAGE SYSTEM

In this part of the paper, we look closer at the marriage system of the Rana Tharus in terms of their lineage system.

Marriage "refers to a polythetic class of phenomena", according to Needham (1971b:5, cit. Comaroff). Anthropologists have had difficulties in finding a universally applicable definition of the term. This is so because "the cross-cultural variability in the social organization of gender relations and the existence of rare forms of marriages in specific societies render such definitions invalid" (Seymour-Smith/Macmillan 1986: 179). The term covers a great variation of different practices and ideas linked to the creation of a new bond between two persons and their respective families.

Fruzzetti (1990: xix) writes that "for Hindu society, marriage is central to the social order", and that "love-marriage unites two individuals, whereas a Hindu marriage unites the son and the daughter of two lines". In Asian societies in general, whether Hindu or not, a marriage relationship has greater importance for more people than it has in the West. Among the Rana Tharus, we would claim, in addition to the creation of good future for the couple and the creation of children, the most important aspect of marriage is to create a long lasting, mutually beneficial, and balanced relationship between the two families.

We see marriage customs as adapted to a specific social and religious reality, and, therefore, as important carriers of information about this reality. This view of marriage as a 'mirror' of important aspects of society is, of course, received wisdom in anthropology and not our invention. It also corresponds broadly to Bennett's view on marriage among the Brahmans/Chhetries of Narikot:

> ... marriage (also) reveals a great deal about the relative status of men and women, and about the structures of caste and kinship.
>
> (Bennett 1983: 71)

In Rana Tharu society, they have a betrothal system, *magani*[14], where children down to the age of four or five can be 'reserved' for marriage with a certain person when they reach the marriageable age[15]. The most common way of inaugurating a *magani* relationship is through the help of a *majpatiya*, i.e., a marriage broker. Both women and men can be *majpatiyas*, but people insist that they have to be respected persons who are on good terms with everybody. There is usually one *majpatiya* on the girl's side and another on the boy's side. Any friend, villager, or a family member can take the role of a mediator, but some persons are known to have been *majpatiyas* for many *magani* relations and to have good information about available boys and girls in the vicinity. Hasan (1993) mentions that such *majpatiyas* are approached by the parents of eligible boys and girls and are asked to propose a suitable match. "He is continuously in search of

girls who want to leave their husband for one reason or another (and) keeps a mental list of such girls" (ibid. 59).

The Rana Tharus do not use an astrologer for comparing the two parties before a marriage process can start. It is the responsibility of the *majpatiya* to see to it that the two families match, i.e., first of all, to ensure that the alliance is socially acceptable.

Traditionally, the Rana Tharus have been group-endogamous. Although they have been seen as 'backward' by others, they themselves claim to have a status superior to other groups, and have not allowed marriage outside the group. This rule of group-endogamy seems to be losing its grip though. There are now quite a few examples of Rana Tharus marrying Dangora Tharus and Paharis. Such marriages are usually 'love-marriages', i.e., they are entered into by the boy and girl without planning and arrangements made by their parents. These marriages are talked about in derogatory terms by some Rana Tharus, and may not be accepted in the beginning by the boy's or girl's families. However, it seems that the couple is accepted after some time, and there is no strong social stigmatization of such mixed marriages. As one informant put it: *Biha gare sakyo, bachha pani bhayo, ke game ta?* (They are already married, and have children as well; what could one now do about it?).

The Rana Tharus do not allow marriage between people of the same patrilineage (*kurma*), as we have already mentioned, i.e., people who "have the same deities". This goes back seven generations on the father's side and three on the mother's side. Hasan (1993) writes that a relationship between a boy and a girl of the same *kurma* is not at all possible to regularize, and that the couple would become outcasts for ever. This strict lineage-exogamy is still valid.

While being lineage-exogamous, the Rana Tharus are traditionally *kuri* – endogamous. The *kuris* are best explained by using an example.

Among the Rana Tharus, as well as among the Dangora Tharus, some houses are built in the reverse (*ultha*) order of the 'normal' design. These houses have their kitchen to the south instead of the north. McDonaugh claims that this is the practice of certain clans among the Dangora Tharus of Dang, and that these clans are not seen as socially inferior to other clans in this society (McDonaugh in Barnes/de Coppet/Parkin 1985: 186). In Rana Tharu society, however, they are definitely seen as socially inferior. This is reflected in statements like: "No other *kuri* would ever marry an *Ulthawa*."

This is where the term *kuri* becomes significant. We are not really sure that the *kuris* are clans. All Rana Tharu lineages seem to belong to certain *kuris*, but our informants never explained these

social units to us in terms of a common ancestry. The *kuris* create a social hierarchy, perhaps akin to the caste-system, since the single units seem to be classified after diet and other practices, indicating the degree of purity as the principle of classification. These conclusions, we have to admit, are drawn from a rather uncertain set of data. But, so far, this seems most intelligible to us.

It was interesting to note that some of the people we talked to denied that they belonged to any specific *kuri*. "We are all Rana Tharus", they said. However, when we mentioned this episode to some other people in the village, they smiled and said that "there is no wonder why they would not tell you their *kuri* name; they are shy", indicating that these people belonged to a low *kuri*. In denying membership to a low *kuri*, these people were trying to avoid stigmatization. Quigley describes the same phenomenon among diaspora Newars, where people of lower caste seem to 'forget' their ancestor's clan name. "There is little doubt that this obliteration of caste distinctions, producing greater fluidity in marriage alliances was, and remains, a common practice in diaspora Newar settlements", writes Quigley (1986: 78). Although not a common practice in Rana Tharu society, the development of such strategies may be a sign of changes to come.

Our informants were not sure of the number of *kuris*, nor did anyone list exactly the same names[16]. What they did emphasize was that one should, ideally, marry within one's own *kuri*. A few of the lower *kuris* are said to intermarry, but we will still describe the Rana Tharu marriage system as isogamous, i.e., they practise marriage between people of the same status. This *kuri* – endogamy is not rigid, however, but our informants claimed that it was more rigid earlier.

While dowry is common in most (Hindu) groups around them, the Rana Tharus have a bride-price system. There is a correlation between marriage payments and other features of social organization. Among the Rana Tharus, the fact that they are traditionally isogamous and the fact that women in this society are not seen having less (ritual) value than men have may account for the bride-price practice. The lineages of the bride and the groom are seen as socially equals (having the same *kuri*) and ritually equals (there is no difference between wife-givers and wife-takers). Thus, it can be seen as logical that the one who receives something (the groom's family receives a woman) should also give away something[17]. "These payments serve to legitimize marriage relationships at the same time as they signify or mark the transfer of rights in women and/or children" (Seymour-Smith/Macmillan 1986: 142).

The wedding payments do not only include a sum of money paid by the groom's family at the time of the wedding, but also sweets and other gifts given throughout the *magani* years. From the inauguration of the *magani* relationship until approximately a year before the wedding, the boy's family has to give certain prescribed varieties of sweets and other gifts at certain intervals[18]. This practice knits the two families together and the gifts are seen as a part of the marriage payment . This is reflected in the fact that a sum equaling the price of the sweets has to be paid back to the boy's family if the girl or her family breaks the relationship.

Rana Tharu women can break off a *magani*, but then she must find another man whom she can marry, and who is willing to pay back the *magani* price. She can also leave her husband for another man, without being socially stigmatized. Although the picture painted by some writers of the 'liberated' Rana Tharu women is not correct, it is a fact that they have a social and ritual status quite different from that of women in some of the other groups in the South Asian subcontinent. We will make a comparison with the Dangora Tharus again, who are, in many ways, their closest neighbors.

Krauskopff writes that in-married women have an ambiguous status among the Dangora Tharus of Dang, since they are marginal to their husband's patrilineal unit (in *L'Ethnographie* 1987: 154). The Dangora Tharus do not entertain the orthodox Hindu ideas about women who have been perceived as ritually unclean by the latter group because of their physiology[19]. This, claims Krauskopff, is the marginality to the husband's *kurma* which makes them ambiguous. This ambiguity makes them unfit for participation in *kurma* deity worship in her husband's *kurma*, and girls are also not allowed to participate in these rituals in their father's house before marriage.

In Rana Tharu society, the in-married women do take part in the worship of the *kurma* deities. In some lineages (namely those with a female main deity), the women are even responsible for doing *pooja* to the household deities. In these lineages, ritual knowledge is passed on from a woman to her eldest daughter-in-law. There is no rule for excluding unmarried girls from participating in the household rituals, as far as we could observe. The women also take part in certain rituals at the village shrine, although they only perform the rituals themselves in the *bhuiya pooja* before the wedding of their children.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this paper can stimulate further research on the issues taken up here. The first part of the paper, took up certain aspects of the social and religious life of the Rana Tharus which reflect implicit

notions and ideas in their society. These are, firstly, the notion of the deities as protectors of the people and village, and therefore the necessity of including them in all aspects of life. This makes the relationship between the people and their deities a basic one, both within each *kurma*, i.e., patrilineage, and at the village level. Secondly, the concept that the 'inside' is different from 'outside' is an underlying idea in this society. This goes for the inside/outside of the house as well as the village, and has connections to cosmology. This dichotomy also becomes relevant at a more abstract level, with regards to lineage membership.

In the context of explicating how these characteristics cut across the spheres of family live, village life, and cosmology, wedding rituals were used as a particular example. The Rana Tharus have elaborate wedding rituals which reflect, in many ways, the characteristics of their society mentioned above. In the last part of this paper, some aspects of the Rana Tharu marriage system were discussed, in the context of the *kurma* and *kuri* hierarchy and the status of Rana Tharu women. In that context, it was also obvious that while Rana Tharu women are definitely very different in some ways from other women in the area, their life is a far cry from the picture of the former princesses of Rajasthan pushing their husbands' plates with their feet.

NOTES

1.   This paper was presented at the Conference on "Nepal: Terai Cultures, Democracy and Development" (June 9-11, 1995) organized by the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs in Oslo.

2.   The Tharu population has been mentioned in various books from the last century, and studied by Srivastava, Mathur, Majumdar, and others in between the forties and sixties. In these early materials Tharus are seen as far more homogenous than has later been acknowledged. Recent literature on the Tharus (cf. Rajaure, McDohaugh, Krauskopff) has concentrated on the Dangora Tharus. The Rana Tharus are only explicitly dealt with in the works of Gurung and Skar, as well as by Hasan in his book "Affairs of an Indian Tribe" (1993). This book is the only monograph on the Rana Tharus. But it deals with the Rana population in Uttar Pradesh, India.

3.   Ganesh M. Gurung has done field work among the Tharus in 1989 and in 1993/95. His last field work was financed by the Norwegian Research Council. Tove C. Kittelsen is an MA student of social anthropology at the University of Oslo. Her field work in 1993/94 was financed by NIAS, The Norwegian Research Council, Statens Lånekasse for Utdanning, and The University of Oslo. Her field work in 1995 was financed by the Norwegian Research Council.

4.   The Rana Tharus live in the districts of Kailali and Kanchanpur in Nepal and in parts of Uttar Pradesh in India. The national border between the two countries runs through Rana Tharu community zone, but Rana Tharu culture is very similar on both sides of the border.

5.   The Rana Tharus have no images or figures to represent their deities. At both the house and village levels, the deities are represented by simple cowdung/mud bumps (or, in some cases, a small wooden peg). Often they have no representation at all. On many occasions, the offerings are simply

done at a spot on the floor/ground which is cleaned with water or cowdung/mud first.

6.   Despite the differences between them in status and practice, the *gauthehara* is often also called *bharra*.

7.   Only a few of our informants referred to the Hindu representations of the mountain Kailash as the 'abode of the gods'. However, the notion of the north as a location indicating an upward direction (cf. Krauskopff 1987) as the direction of the mountains, and a place which some of the deities visit when they 'go away' part of the year, was clearly present.

8.   Our informants distinguished these 'Seven Sisters' as *Durga. Kalimata, Gahibi, Hantula, Situla, Gonga,* and *Hulka.*

9.   The Rana Tharus have two wedding seasons. In the first wedding season (Dec./Jan.), the deities are offered *puris,* as are the wedding guests, while both the deities and the guests are offered *malida* (rice flour fried in *ghee*) in the second season (Feb./March).

10. This is done in the field next to the *bhuiya.* At the end, the rest of the offerings are thrown "in all directions" to *bhuts* with no names, we were told.

11. A group of people accompanying the groom to the bride's house.

12. Her younger sisters are unmarried, who thus still belong to their father's lineage.

13. The spirits receive alcohol, spices, water, *ghee,* etc., and at the end of the ritual, one of the wedding guests runs around the whole group of people gathered there ("while holding his breath") with an egg in his hand. This egg is then thrown away, together with two small figures made of dough (said to represent the bride and the groom).

14. The term refers both to the system of betrothal and to the male/female fiancé.

15. We were also told that some people would make an agreement even before the birth of their children that their children would be ritual friends (*gunj/mit*) if they are of the same sex, and *maganis* (fiancés) if they are of the opposite sex.

16. Some of the names of the *kuris* are: *Thakur, Bishiena, Batta, Kipta Batta, Badaiyak, Giri,* and *Dangra.*

17. This was seen as obvious to our informants, who did not see their own practice of bride-price as 'selling a daughter', as one hillman put it. On the contrary, a young educated Rana Tharu girl said that the dowry practice could be seen as 'buying a husband'.

18. That is, this pattern is followed in the proper/big *maganis* (*acchu magani*), while there is a possibility of doing less elaborate rituals (*chilam magani*) according to the economical status of the boy's family.

19. The Rana Tharus are similar to the Dangora Tharus in this respect.

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