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Cultural Models and the Dynamics of Social Structure

Nyinba are ethnic Tibetans whose ancestors entered the remote and rugged Himalayan borderlands of Northwestern Nepal centuries ago. The area they settled is enclosed by mountain chains to the north and cut by major river systems to the south, and the community has remained small and self-contained. In 1983, it included approximately 1,330 men and women living in four villages situated amidst farmlands on a series of gently sloping, south-facing valleys. While these villages may be distinctive in many ways, what seems most unusual about the Nyinba is their system of fraternal polyandry. Every man who has brothers—with the rarest of exceptions—marries polyandrously, and virtually all the brothers remain in intact, fraternally polyandrous marriages throughout their lives.

The management of sexual relationships in polyandry may be the focus of exotic preoccupations, although in practice it is relatively unproblematic. Far more profound are polyandry's effects on the domestic order and on closely articulated spheres of cultural and social life. Thus, as we might expect, the presence of more men than women in polyandrous marriages affects day-to-day interpersonal dynamics. What might be less obvious is the impact gender imbalances have on the management of the domestic economy. The solution among the Nyinba is for men to specialize in diverse subsistence activities, including long-distance trade, while their wives supervise agriculture in the village. This division of labor, in turn, refracts upon cultural constructions of gender.

As we also might expect, the linkage of brothers in marriage and their lifelong co-residence are associated with special systems of property inheritance and succession to positions of household authority. The presumption of lifelong fraternal unity also means that partition is restricted, and this produces households which are large and complex in composition. Be-

cause partition is rare, village size remains relatively stable and becomes a matter of collective concern and collective regulation. This, finally, has an impact on village growth.

This briefest of summaries only touches on a few of the cultural and social entailments of fraternally polyandrous marriage. Despite structural and systemic complexities, the subject of polyandry has tended to motivate narrowly conceived analytical treatments and single-cause explanations. Polyandry also has come to be understood primarily in terms of an analytical calculus of individual, or collective, economic, and demographic advantages. Certain of its consequences—constraining population growth and preventing land fragmentation in particular—have been read as its causes, just as the high sex ratios common in polyandrous systems once were seen as the force that induced men to band together in their marriages. In the Nyinba case, the predominance of men seems to be the outcome of gender preferences: parental concerns about the limited marital chances of daughters and associated patterns of differential child care. There also have been theorists who tried to explain polyandry in terms of affective relations between brothers, but this is far less commonly found.

The emphasis on explaining polyandry in itself seems the product of androcentric and exotic biases. As Berreman points out, we find little need for explanations of monogamy, which seems regarded “as expectable (even moral),” or of polygyny, which may be seen as “reasonable (even enviable),” while polyandry is, “perhaps especially to the male eye, problematic” (Berreman 1980:378). One might dismiss these views as relics from an earlier stage in the discipline’s development. Nevertheless, texts still in use refer to men’s natural “predispositions” for polygyny and their “deeply polygynous tendencies” (Lévi-Strauss 1969:38; Linton 1968:285).

Surely the features of polyandry characteristically seen as problematic tell more about our own cultural preoccupations than about the world of our subjects. For one example, polyandry is seen as requiring men to relinquish exclusive control over their wives’ sexual and childbearing capacities—which we presume is something men otherwise would wish and enforce. For a second example, polyandry is presumed to require a certain degree of sexual abnegation from men—this is purely on logical grounds, for we have absolutely no data on the subject. Conversely, polyandrously married women might be expected to benefit from a wealth of sexual attention, although this rarely is even mentioned. In addition, we see polyandry as limiting men’s reproductive opportunities, relative, that is, to their counterparts in monogamous and polygynous marriage and, more problematic, obligating them to rear children not their own. The assumption that men necessarily favor their own, over siblings’, children is a long-standing

one that also has influenced analyses of matrilineal systems—and merits closer, critical attention.

Behavioral ecologists find polyandry problematic for these reasons as well and also find it particularly intriguing because it is so rare—it occurs in a few human societies, in some species of birds, and in at most a few species of mammals—and because it challenges assumptions about the evolution of male and female reproductive strategies. It is true that polyandry involves sharing sexual access to one’s wife and thus is likely to reduce the number of children the average man can have. However, it is another matter whether fraternal polyandry practiced in a small population also reduces men’s net genetic representation in subsequent generations—a matter I leave for others to resolve.

Here my concern lies with the quality of polyandrous marital and familial relationships and with their consequences for sociocultural systems and village population. Before we can begin to understand polyandry’s consequences, we must consider its contexts, and this calls for a somewhat different way of looking at marriage, parenthood, family life, sexual relations, and gender than we may be accustomed to. It is simplest to begin with an illustration, and I have selected for this a household that displays the diversity and complexity of polyandrous arrangements. Members of this household have experienced the range of problems that beset polyandrous marriages, yet have managed to transcend them. The household remains unified and today exemplifies the domestic harmony that Nyinba individuals find so admirable and wish for themselves.

The Dynamics of a Polyandrous Marriage

In 1983, the largest Nyinba household numbered eighteen men and women of three generations. The most-senior generation included three polyandrously married brothers, who ranged in age from fifty-two to sixty, and their common wife, who was fifty-nine at the time. Living with them were five of their sons, aged twenty to forty, and their sons’ wife, who then was thirty-five. The other household members included one unmarried teen-aged daughter, three grandsons, and four granddaughters. These men had another son who had partitioned fifteen years earlier and three other daughters who were married and living with their husbands.

In Nyinba polyandrous households, the eldest brother holds a certain authority in domestic affairs and initially a certain precedence in marriage. This gives him the opportunity to father most of the children born in the marriage’s early years. Nor is this a trivial matter, for Nyinba try to determine the paternity of children produced in polyandrous unions, and men

place great value on having sons considered their own. In the case of the senior generation, the eldest brother was quite mild and good-natured and made little attempt to lead his family or monopolize the common wife. Nonetheless, he is supposed to have fathered the three older sons and also the youngest daughter. The second brother is held to have fathered the three younger sons and one of the daughters. Disparities in the circumstances of the youngest brother were marked, for he is believed to be the father of two daughters only. He viewed his lack of sons as a great disappointment and an issue for complaint, and this was a chronic source of tension in the family.

In 1983, however, the marriage of the sons' generation was considered a model of all such marriages can and should be. The eldest brother was hardworking, extraordinarily skilled at trade, and adept at local politics. Although still relatively young, he had assumed much of the responsibility for household leadership. And despite having—or so people said—the closest and most affectionate relationship with the common wife, he had ceded priority in sexual rights to his younger brothers many years previously. He usually spent the night alone or romancing village girl friends. While he was held to have fathered the family's eldest son and daughter, all subsequent children were attributed to his younger brothers.

This generation of brothers, however, has not been without its problems. It has undergone one partition and for a brief period became involved in a subsidiary, polygynous marriage that might eventually have led to another partition, had not a tragedy intervened.

Originally, all six brothers lived together. In 1966, however, they partitioned, only two years after they had jointly married. The partition was instigated by the second-eldest brother, Padma, who had declared himself unhappy with the common wife. Whatever marred their relationship or whatever other factors may have led Padma to decide to live apart from his brothers is uncertain. All I know is that Padma had trained to be a Buddhist lama, and the woman he wanted to marry was a former nun. His parents were adamantly opposed to the union, and all his relatives and neighbors tried to convince him to abandon the idea, but he persisted.

Things were at an impasse until Jampal, Padma's only surviving grandfather, intervened. Jampal himself was the youngest of three polyandrously married brothers. He too had been unhappy in his marriage, but had managed to secure his brothers' agreement to a second marriage, a sororally polygynous union with their common wife's sister. Subsidiary polygynous marriages of this kind, which I term "conjoint," are quite rare—they numbered less than 5 percent of marriages during my stay among the Nyinba. When they do occur, sisters are uniformly preferred as co-wives, because

they are believed to find it easier to cooperate than unrelated women. In this case, the bonds of sisterhood proved inadequate, and the family was riven by discord. The solution was for Jampal and the second wife to reside separately in an arrangement Nyinba call "living on the side." The rest of the family built them a small house, where they moved and spent the rest of their lives. There they had one son and one daughter. The son was encouraged to marry uxorilocally, to a woman without brothers in another village, and the daughter married three brothers from a well-to-do household in a different village, with great ceremony and at great expense. Jampal, despite his separate residence, continued to participate in the affairs of the larger household and guided household decisions until he died in 1975. And one of the things he did was to invite his grandson Padma and Padma's wife-to-be to move in with him. People say that he was especially sympathetic to Padma because he was his "real"—as they put it—grandfather. That is to say, Jampal is the man reputed to have fathered Padma's reputed father.

Unlike Jampal, however, Padma insisted on a final partition and a separate share of property. This amounted to only one-ninth of the family estate, because the Nyinba allocate property by per stirpes reckoning, and Padma happened to be one of three sons of a man who had three brothers. The consequence is that Padma is extremely poor, and his household is considered among the most marginal economically in the village.

In 1975, one of the remaining five brothers decided to bring another wife home, arguing that they were too many to share a single woman. There was relatively little parental opposition this time. Part of the reason was that the new wife, Yeshi, was by any standards an extraordinary woman. She was beautiful, devout, hardworking, and very bright: despite never having attended school, she had taught herself to read and write Nepali. Yeshi, furthermore, was a sister of the first wife, or, more precisely, the two were *pun*, what I call "household siblings," born of different mothers and fathers in a conjoint marriage. Yeshi and the senior co-wife managed to get along without major incident, and Yeshi rapidly integrated herself into the marriage and established sexual relationships with all her mature husbands. Then tragically she died, little more than a week after giving birth to a daughter. This was in 1976; the household was shaken by her loss, and the brothers vowed they would never marry again. To this day they have not established another conjoint marriage, and they probably will not, since their children now are grown, and their sons have begun their own polyandrous marriage.

Nyinba state that very large sibling groups are more likely to initiate conjoint marriages and more likely to partition, and this case confirms their

observations. Yet in spite of the number of brothers involved and the complex interpersonal relationships which we might expect to find among any five co-husbands, the marriage remains undivided and at present stands as the model of fraternal and polyandrous amity. The household has seen only one partition in the past three generations and one period when a brother chose to live apart from the others.

Nyinba marriage must be understood as a system embodying all these possibilities for conjugal groupings and as intersecting, multifaceted relationships which encompass both erotic and economic as well as hierarchical dimensions. Relations between the men can be reduced neither to selfless fraternal altruism and unbroken amity nor to calculative compromises and incalculable hardships from trying to share a single wife. In reality, we find brothers trying as best they can to accommodate to their shared and separate interests in their marriages and children. When problems arise, people attempt to find a solution, best if within the household, and at least within the community; very rarely do men abandon their families and kin in order to emigrate and begin a new life elsewhere.

I have said that this example is illustrative, for it demonstrates the possibilities and problems that can arise in polyandrous marriages. However it should not be taken as representative. The average Nyinba household includes not eighteen people, but seven and one-half. The average marriage includes less than two men because of the numbers of families in which only one son is born or survives to adulthood. The average polyandrous marriage includes fewer than three brothers; and less than 10 percent of marriages include five brothers or more. Polygyny, by contrast, is rare. It is acceptable when the first wife is infertile—which is the case in about 7 percent of present-day marriages—and occurs otherwise only in the most exceptional circumstances: mostly in large, complex households.

This household is equally unrepresentative—and equally illustrative—in features of its economy. It owns twice as much land as the average, and more pack animals than any other, Nyinba household. People describe a direct connection between wealth, household size, and polyandry. First, they say, wealth makes it easier for numbers of people to live together, while poverty creates discontent, exacerbates quarreling, and increases the likelihood of partition. Second, a large household finds it easier to sustain a high standard of living, because numbers of men provide the manpower for diverse economic ventures. This, however, is counteracted by the tendency of men in wealthy households to engage in “marital irresponsibility,” as Nyinba put it, referring to their more frequent involvements in subsidiary, conjoint marriages. Once brothers have two wives, they tend to find their conjugal and reproductive interests divided. This then undermines fraternal

unity in marriage and increases the risk of partition, which divides household property and alters the balance of village households.

Kinship and the Logic of Polyandry

On occasion I would ask Nyinba, sometimes individually and sometimes in small groups, why their society was polyandrous. A foolish question and always in vain, for it elicited nothing but the same, predictable response: that polyandry was an age-old custom that Nyinba ancestors brought from Tibet. People sometimes took this opportunity to rail against their fellow ethnic Tibetans elsewhere in Nepal who had abandoned polyandry, because, it was said, of their proximity to the capital and the pressures they faced from neighboring Hindu groups. On other occasions, I would ask individuals why they had married polyandrously, but I received answers no less predictable: that this was Nyinba custom, and besides, the marriage had been arranged by their parents. There were other times when people would volunteer observations about polyandry's advantages: how it prevented the dispersion of property and fragmentation of limited landholdings and how it supported a higher standard of living. I also heard men speak of their deep sense of obligation to brothers in polyandry and how they were all “the same.” I interpret this as meaning that brothers' interests in polyandry are equated, and that after their parents, men trust their brothers more than anyone else in the world. I overheard women say that having more than one husband gave them a sense of security, for if one died, the others would remain. These statements say little else than that custom is the cause of polyandry and that polyandry is a custom that confers myriad practical advantages. In one sense, they are no more than tautologies expressing a folk notion of cultural determinism, although they also offer a kind of truth.

It seems useless to speculate about origins and causes, and here my concerns lie elsewhere: with understanding the impact of polyandry on people's marriages and their domestic lives and its consequences for related kinship, economic, and political structures. Investigating what people themselves see as significant in intimate interpersonal relationships and their satisfactions and discontents is no easy matter; it is hardly one suited to sampling schemes and questionnaires. Instead I observed family life in as many homes as possible and listened when people began unexpectedly to talk about their lives. It was possible to ask some direct questions, but only of a select number of close friends. On balance, it proved far easier to obtain detailed information on marriages that had broken down, because matters normally private then become public in the search for resolutions.

And what I found was that people characteristically explained the successes and failures of marital and household relationships by the closeness of kin relationships between the persons involved.

For Nyinba, kinship is seen fundamentally as a matter of physical commonality and is understood in terms of a folk theory of human reproduction. Concepts of kin relatedness are given tangible expression in notions about the substance of bone, held to be transmitted from father to child, and that of blood, similarly transmitted from mother to child. Kinship, that is, is conceptualized in a natural idiom and is understood in genealogical terms. Closer kin are considered more similar in bone and blood, with bone seen as playing the greater role in determining character and physical traits. Thus precise genealogical identifications are most important where they would seem most elusive: paternity in polyandrous marriages. Common substance, moreover, validates the conduct of kin relationships and shapes the expectations kin have of one another. The result is that kinship proximity becomes important in securing the mutual commitments of co-husbands in polyandrous marriages and co-wives in polygynous marriages; it seems to be among the strongest motivations for cooperation in large Nyinba households.

In recent decades, kinship studies have been polarized by debates about how such concepts of kinship are best understood. A number of theorists continue to affirm the universality of genealogical notions in reckoning kin relationships. Others, by contrast, argue that such an approach risks superimposing our constructs on those of other societies and suggest that we would do better to examine each kinship system anew—and without presuming human reproduction as its point of reference. This debate has had far-reaching consequences: it has divided approaches to the study of kinship and generated ethnographic accounts markedly different in emphasis, mode of analysis, and the aspects of data described (Keesing 1974:86). Concurrently—and perhaps not adventitiously—the concerns of kinship studies have narrowed, with attention drawn away from kinship as social relationships which cross-cut and come into conflict with one another and which are moderated by other forces in social life. My approach here is deliberately eclectic and, I hope, synthetic, and my analyses have been guided by pragmatic considerations: to follow whatever best aids understanding Nyinba kinship notions and the patterning of their kin relationships.

For Nyinba, these notions about heredity and character also support practices of endogamy and a certain closure against the outside world. Concepts of bone figure in this too and serve as the idiom for a system of hierarchical clanship which is ancestor-based and conceptualized as a line of males over time. This system supports a division of the community into

two strata and two separate circles of kin: the higher-ranked descendants of village founders, who are full citizens and landholders, and the lower-ranked descendants of their former slaves. It also supports a closed kinship calculus, which has no place for outsiders and reinforces a stance of ethnic separateness. Ethnic separateness, finally, justifies local and stratum endogamy and restrictions placed upon migration.

Despite this, the community remains incompletely sealed off—there is some emigration, less immigration, and rare intermarriage with other Tibetan-speaking ethnic groups in the district and farther afield. When immigrants manage to enter the community, their incorporation necessitates a reformation of the kinship calculus, although this becomes a process spanning generations.

Culture and Contradiction

The analysis here reverses the order of traditional ethnography. The movement is from internal to external contexts, from cultural models to social structure, and from kinship and politics to economic organization and population. The purpose in this is to explore interactions between understandings of society, social arrangements, and exogenous factors which shape decisions about marriage and family life, which, in turn, contribute to an evolving social system. The arguments unfold through glimpses of social structure and environment as Nyinba themselves represent them, and analyses frequently begin or end with folk or cultural models. By this, I refer to Nyinba descriptions of and attempts to account for their society, their evaluations of people's behavior within it, and their assessments of contexts for action (Holy and Stuchlik 1981; Quinn and Holland 1987; Strathern 1981:296).

Some anthropologists speak of expressed models of this kind as guiding behavior; others argue that they are epiphenomenal and retrospective rationalizations of observable social realities.¹ Nor could the reality be easily ascertainable. Action in the world can influence understandings of the world, just as evaluations of behavior can have their own social consequences (see Quinn and Holland 1987:8–9). Folk models, moreover, are hardly all alike. Some have greater directive force and a greater likelihood

¹The most frequently cited instances of these sorts of arguments can be found in the writings of Lévi-Strauss (1967:273), who stated that conscious models serve not to explain, but rather to perpetuate sociocultural phenomena; in Marxist arguments about "false consciousness"; and in cultural materialism (see Quinn and Holland 1987:5; Strathern 1981:297–98). That similar views come from such different quarters surely reflects the more fundamental "mistrust of subjectivity" common in the social sciences (see Giddens 1979:38).

of shaping experience than others, and different models may frame interpretations and inform explanations of experience in differing ways. We can compare this with the great variability in observers' models. Certain models are meant to be generative, while others are primarily interpretive; some are oriented toward explaining a wide range of phenomena, while others have a much narrower scope. The fundamental problem with observers' models is that they are tested against an external logic and risk projecting their own culture's assessments onto the world being observed.

Actors' models, however, have their own flaws. For Nyinba, they characteristically founder in the tendency to a wholesale literalism which casts all linkages in metonymic terms and in the preferences for historical frameworks of explanation rather than sociological ones, that is, for diachronic understandings at the expense of synchronic ones. They also, unsurprisingly, tend to gloss over paradoxical features of the social system rather than encompassing contradictions: the incomplete community closure, periodic partitioning in the face of its restriction, inequities in a small community that prizes egalitarian sociality, the existence of a patronage system that exploits the powerless and divides the community, and a devaluation of women—who are few in number, yet so necessary to household prosperity.

Perhaps my concern with folk models derives from people's own elaboration of them. Nyinba have a number of types of formal narrative, each with a distinctive style and characteristic themes. Their recitation is the province of older people, who also are most likely to acquire proficiency in genealogical matters and associated village lore. I have heard elders discuss their interpretations with one another, in what might be described as an effort to amplify their knowledge and to develop more comprehensive models. Fortunately they were quite generous in sharing their insights with me and patient and sometimes even eloquent at it.

Perhaps Nyinba skills at cultural and social exegesis derive from their own cultural self-consciousness. They are a small, ethnically distinct population living on the very edge of the Indo-Tibetan culture-contact zone. As a Tibetan people in a predominantly Hindu nation, long subject to Hindu kingdoms and states, they are sensitive to their minority status. They are, moreover, middlemen in a complex system of ethnic and regional economic specializations. The extensive routes they travel during the year demand an ability to negotiate in various cultures along the way. Finally, their own society is internally differentiated between the numerically dominant citizen-landholders and the politically subordinate former slaves, or freedmen, and the differences are expressed through both cultural and social forms. The outcome of all this is not quite a cultural relativism, but rather

an appreciation of the variability of social and cultural systems and of their impact upon action.

The major division within Nyinba society raises questions about dual sets of models. Anthropologists tend to find themselves directed toward dominant groups and to be exposed primarily to their ideas. When they do gain access to other groups, this can create problems of how to accommodate sometimes overlapping, sometimes opposed, models of a single social and cultural world. In my case, the fact is that I was identified with the higher-ranking group and found my access to freedmen more limited; my analysis suffers from this. I did observe how relations of dominance and dependence affect social interactions on both sides, but rarely found out how it is interpreted by those subordinate. Gender differentiation was less problematic, since I had access to both men and women and was seen as partisan to neither. In any event, most of the models of significance here are shared by men and women, the exceptions involving understandings of sexual politics, domestic politics, and notions about the value of women's contributions to the household economy. Age is another point of differentiation. The younger, more "modern" men try to portray Nyinba ethnic identity as more Nepali than older men or women do and are more apt to describe clanship and village structure in terms of Nepali categories. However, younger men also defer to their elders in such matters, and those aiming for positions of authority in the community study traditional narratives and assimilate the interpretations of the latter, so that the elders' models dominate and probably will continue to do so in the future.

Another problem in utilizing folk or cultural models is the potential for oversystematization. Accounts one collects in the field are apt to be partial and indexical. To understand them presumes additional cultural knowledge, and to explain them requires filling in the gaps with knowledge which may be tacit, esoteric, or deliberately concealed. This means that each folk model must be supplemented with contexts and commentaries, and for this reason, analysts' renditions of folk accounts inevitably produce what are, no more and no less, models of models (Holy and Stuchlik 1981:23). A careful analysis should make this clear enough—and ideally the different levels and sources of explanation should be identifiable. Where the greater hazards lie, it seems, are in the possibilities for implying fuller integration or elaboration and a greater degree of consensus than actually exist and for merging models that ordinarily are dissociated.²

²As Keesing cautions: "Folk models may by their nature have a partial and situational ad hoc quality, a lack of global systematicity . . . what we take to be folk or cultural models may not exist until our strategies of questioning lead informants to create them; or worse yet, until their responses provide fragments out of which we create them" (1987:383).

For such models cannot be presumed to form a coherent, unified, or uniformly shared system. Some are complementary, others contradictory, reflecting sensitivity to, if incomplete assimilation of, paradoxical ideas, the complexities of social structure, and schisms of interest in the society. Also, some models dominate, reflecting interests or beliefs of those who are dominant; others are muted, reflecting notions of subordinate groups or categories of people. As one example, concepts of descent and alliance provide complementary paradigms for members of the most prestigious households, whereas descendants of recent immigrants and freedmen tend to stress respectable affinal ties over their descent lines. Another feature of Nyinba models is their variform treatment of change. It suffices no more to say that Nyinba see their society as a more-or-less-lasting structure than to say they see it as being in constant flux (cf. Holy and Stuchlik 1981:20). They see flux in stasis and points of stability in the course of change.

Here I differentiate between folk categories, theories, and models. The first are used more for specific concepts, the second for explanatory frameworks, and the third for analogical, heuristic representations of social structure. An example of the first is the construct of the corporate landholding household, known as *trongba*; of the second, various accounts of how villages evolved from a single founding household; and of the third, how village households are commonly described as "split from a single hearth," each depicted at its point of partition as nodes on the village genealogy and each with a relic of the household god's shrine, the appropriate number of degrees removed from the original. The theories and models chart key features of social relationships as they charter them, so that we can say they have both the "of" and "for" sense so elegantly described by Geertz (1965). Here the intrinsic dual resonance of folk models is doubly significant. This is because they serve as an index to sociocultural change, as they lay the foundations for it; that is to say, they channel new cultural and social patterns as they encode them.³

Structural Analysis

Implicit in this discussion is an analytical distinction between culture and social structure. Some theorists prefer to focus on culture as an autonomous sphere for study (Schneider 1976:202), while others suggest that disjunctions between culture and social system support functionalist dualisms (Sahlins 1976:114–15). The problem is that to consider either in isolation

³The distinction between representational and operational models made by Holy and Stuchlik dichotomizes too much, at the expense of reflexive interactions.

constricts the scope of ethnographic inquiry and sacrifices analytical flexibility. In addition, juxtaposing the two may bring into sharper relief structural incongruities that contribute to social change (Geertz 1957:33). For kinship studies, the distinction proves particularly useful for directing attention to the interplay between kinship constructs, kinship rules, and associated social processes (Strathern 1973:22).

The concept of domains also proves useful in countering monolithic views of culture and social structure and as a general counterweight to functionalist presumptions of systemic coherence and integration. As an analytical tool, however, this has occasioned criticisms—among them that domains are bounded arbitrarily, that they falsely divide up the seamless web of social life, and that they are not universally applicable, having little relevance in simple hunting-and-gathering societies. The latter is a legitimate criticism, for it is virtually impossible to extricate, for example, kinship from economic elements in the multiplex social relationships of such societies. By contrast, in tribal societies, and even more in the peasant societies within state systems that Nyinba typify, domestic, politico-jural, ritual, and economic relationships and activities are differentiated explicitly in the conduct of social relationships, although they overlap as well.⁴ I find the distinction useful in discovering points of contradiction in the exercise of social roles and in focusing attention on the intersections between the different subsystems of social life. At the same time, such differentiations also support models in which one subsystem is seen as more basic and as having a disproportionate effect on the others. This is an issue of relevance here, for much of the work on Tibet places primary emphasis upon environmental limitations and economic adaptations and cites these as explanations for marital and household systems.

Continuity and Change

Structuralist approaches in anthropology have been predicated upon an absolute distinction between synchronic and diachronic frameworks of explanation. Synchrony in analysis may be a simplification adopted for methodological purposes, but it has dominated structuralist studies and lies at the source of what Giddens (1979:3) describes as the general repression of time in social theory. While social anthropologists long have incorporated a temporal dimension in their analyses—concepts of fission and fusion in

⁴Such discriminations find recognition in folk models, although the boundaries and content of Western and other societies' domains may diverge. The Hindu term *dharma*, or enjoined religious conduct, suggests a very different partitioning of societal domains, although its closest Tibetan counterpart, *chos*, may stand closer to Western concepts of religion.

segmentary systems and cycles of domestic development being classic examples—these processes were always comprehended within a framework of structural continuity (Fortes 1969:81).

Few saw this as a major problem until recent decades. The resulting disciplinary shift to an emphasis on process and the dynamics of social transformations and the growing interest in historical analyses may have myriad sources, but surely one factor has been the increasing and increasingly dramatic pace of change evident to fieldworkers nowadays, even in the most isolated societies like that of Nyinba. To take my own example, my first visit to the Nyinba region in 1973 necessitated more than a week's walk from the bazaar town of Jumla, the zonal capital. The Jumla airstrip was little more than a decade old then, and had I wished to visit the region prior to its construction, I would have had to walk for more than three weeks from the nearest railhead on the Indian border. In 1982, I was able to fly directly to Simikot, the district capital, and walk less than three hours to my village residence. It was not until 1972 that tourists and scholars were first permitted regularly in the region. By 1982, there were a very few foreign-funded (and very small-scale) development projects, but still hardly any outside visitors.

In 1973, Nyinba wore and used clothing and items almost entirely of their own manufacture. By 1982, they were wearing Western clothing and using some imported goods. In 1973, no medical care was available, although people were being inoculated for smallpox; in the summer of 1974, a measles epidemic claimed many children's lives. By my second visit, there were several health posts in the district, and emergency visits made by a paramedic managed to stave off the worst effects of another measles epidemic. At the former time, no Nyinba had progressed beyond the early primary grades; now there are a handful of high school graduates and a few children in school in Kathmandu. Changes internal to the sociocultural system, for example in religious practice, marriage, or household organization, were not so apparent in these nine years, yet surely they too are under way.

The decades preceding my first visit saw dramatic changes in this region, although we tend to know about only those of wider historical significance. There were the conquests of local petty kingdoms by Nepal in 1789, wars with Tibet in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the emancipation of household slaves in 1926, and the recent Chinese takeover of Tibet. Resulting political upheavals in Tibet completely disrupted trading patterns in the 1960s, and trade still has not returned to any settled state. There were more gradual changes too, such as the slow decline in profits from the salt trade in the south and the slow increase in the Nyinba population, with all the economic and sociocultural changes attendant upon that.

Marxist perspectives may offer one way out of the synchronic-diachronic dilemma. However, they have been and may remain better suited to studies focusing upon conflict and inequality in political systems and transformations in economic systems than for detailed accounts of kinship, families, and the solitary social relationships built around them. Nyinba, and this is a point I stress, is a society based upon kinship, whose members by and large are kin, and the idioms and models for their unity all derive from that fact. Changes in systems of kinship, marriage, and household call for a more dynamic structural anthropology, which more recent ethnographic studies have been working towards.⁵

Changes in population are among the most critical matters. Although the Nyinba population has increased far less than that of most groups in Nepal, it continues to grow, despite the serious economic setbacks of the last several decades. Population growth, moreover, is not uniform. Some clans expand, while others contract; some village sections grow by partition, while others decline because of extinction. Among the questions to be considered here are how people's notions about social structure affect processes of change and the accommodations members of Nyinba villages collectively make to various changes, and how, in turn, these changes may influence cultural models and the patterning of social relations.

A concern with demographic processes directs our attention to the phenomena of continuity in change and change in continuity, to the continual reproduction of a society, both in its membership and in its social structure (Macfarlane 1976:5-6). In this book I am concerned primarily with issues of cultural and social analysis, drawn against the backdrop of a changing village population. In a second study, based on field research among seven communities of diverse ethnic origins living near the Nyinba region, I plan to examine demographic processes in greater detail and to demonstrate how these processes are moderated by culturally specific household systems. Meanwhile, I intend to keep the Nyinba community in view to better chart responses to change over the next several decades.

Fieldwork and Sources of Data

When I first went to Humla, I knew little about the region, beyond the fact that it was extremely poor and undeveloped and suffered chronic food shortages; this meant I would have to bring with me most of the food and all of the goods I would need for two years. This required reserving more than half the space on the small plane that flew twice weekly to the zonal capital. Making such arrangements has become progressively more diffi-

⁵For a recent example, see Moore 1986.

cult with every passing year, due to an increasing demand for seats and cargo space, without a comparable expansion in air services. I also hired a Sherpa guide, since Sherpas are famous for organizing expeditions of all kinds. The experienced Sherpa I chose quit the night before my expedition, because he had received a more lucrative offer elsewhere. He recommended a cousin in his place. That cousin had never guided anyone anywhere, having spent most of his adult years as a radio repairman in India. I had no choice, however, so I accepted the replacement. He found my research site to be the most miserable of places, declared the food and living conditions wretched, and resigned after a few months, although not without making the necessary arrangements for me. It was with his departure and my complete dependence upon my Nyinba hosts—so many days' walk from plane or radio communication—that my field research began in earnest.

I spent the first year of my fieldwork in a large rented room in a village house. The household in which I lived included three brothers who were polyandrously married. Polyandry, seen as so exotic in the West, was the Nyinba norm; after several years of living among polyandrous peoples, it seems unexceptional to me. During this period, I began making regular visits to the other Nyinba villages. I established ritual friendships with three women and one man my age, one in each Nyinba village. I also began visiting elders to record their recollections of the past and to collect accounts of villagewide genealogical data. The latter were checked against the household registers I had collected in Kathmandu.

As my fieldwork became more productive, the network of people I consulted spread throughout the community. It seemed better to establish my own residence, where I could freely reciprocate for the hospitality others had extended to me. I was offered, rent free, the only unoccupied Nyinba habitation, a cave shrine which had an attached cooking shed. Caves, as many Tibetan hermits have found, are quite comfortable places to live, being cool in summer and warm in winter. This cave had beautiful views of the Dozam Kholā and Karnali River valleys and had its own nearby water sources. It was also within easy reach of three of the four Nyinba villages and near a major road, which meant frequent passers-by, who were encouraged to stop for lunch or tea and conversation. For these reasons, I made the cave my home base during my second field research, seven-and-a-half years after I first left the Nyinba valleys. Following a brief period of readjustment, things seemingly resumed where they had left off so many years ago. Being gone seems to have had largely positive effects—worries about problems I might create had evaporated. I was able to ask questions I would have been hesitant about before, and this time I spoke to members of

every household in the community, nearly all of whom replied with great grace to detailed questions about their economic circumstances and their lives.

Nyinba and Tibetan Society

I describe the Nyinba as culturally or ethnically Tibetan and a Tibetan society, but it is difficult to say how representative they are of populations in Tibet, or even of Tibetan populations in Nepal. The ethnographies we have on Tibetan speakers derive largely from work with refugees or fieldwork outside political Tibet, and much of this remains in dissertation form. At this point, we can do little more than identify the uniformities in certain aspects of Tibetan life and the diversity and features of regional micro-variation in others.

The major poles and sources of variation are clear enough. First are distinctions between nomadic pastoralists of the "northern plains" and settled agriculturalists of regions where agriculture is feasible (Ekvall 1968). Second are distinctions between West ("Upper") and East ("Lower") Tibet. Third are those between peoples of the central plateau, who seem to be more socioculturally uniform, and "lower valley" peoples, whose societies may be more idiosyncratic. In the past, there were also major class distinctions, with the life of aristocrats differing from that of traders; this, in turn, differed from the life of serfs, which itself varied according to the nature of tenancy arrangements (Carrasco 1959; Goldstein 1971a). Political affiliation makes a difference as well—peoples within the borders of Nepal or India have been subject to different laws and cultural influences than those in Tibet proper.

Nyinba are lower-valley agriculturalists of the West, peasants who long have held rights of ownership over their land, subject to Nepalese laws and taxation schemes. They speak a distinctive dialect of Western Tibetan—and these dialects vary greatly from one mountain valley to the next. Nepali loanwords have entered the dialect, more so than for other Humla Tibetan speakers farther from Nepalese villages, less so than for those in closer proximity. As of this date, I have lived among four of the six Tibetan communities in the district, and would describe the situation there as more variations on common themes than dissimilarities and contrasts. In general, all the communities are more similar to Tibetans of the West than to other ethnic Tibetans of Nepal's East, such as the well-known Sherpa (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964; Ortner 1978).

Nyinba are idiosyncratic, diverging from Tibetan culture, it appears, in their compromise per-stirpes inheritance system, in the circumstances of

conjoint marriage, and in the institution of spirit mediumship. Some of these are practices which seem to derive from Nepali influences, and, I should add, the cultural borrowing goes both ways here. But Nyinba arrangements of polyandry, certain features of their system of ranking by descent, and their household system are unequivocally Tibetan. The problem of uniqueness versus generalizability is common to all small-community studies; here it is all the greater because of Nyinba distance from mainstream Tibetan life and their placement within the larger multi-ethnic society of Nepal.