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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-

