THE RETURN OF POLYANDRY

There is an impressive diversity of Tibetan marriage forms, including monogamy, polygyny and polyandry, and combinations of these. The distribution of marriage form has followed social hierarchies. Before 1950, monogamy was found in all social strata, polygyny was largely found among the wealthy upper classes (primarily the aristocracy), and polyandry was predominantly found among the landholding farmers.[1] In the debates referred to by Charles Bell (1928), the British special ambassador visiting Lhasa in 1920, Tibetan intellectuals agreed that monogamy was the prevalent marriage form in Tibet, yet both polyandry and polygyny were commonly accepted. Different forms of polygamy served distinctive purposes; while polyandry was beneficial for keeping the farm estate undivided, polygyny was advantageous for initiating or maintaining political alliances. Plural Tibetan marriage forms, and particularly polyandry, were not only foreign to the new Chinese rulers but also strongly detested by them, yet these practices continued in various ways. Shortly after the revolution, China's Communist Party (CCP) did focus their attention on marital practices throughout the country. The new Marriage Law of 1950, reflecting gendered relations in Chinese society, banned multiple wives, concubinage, child betrothal and the sale of sons or daughters (into marriage or prostitution), and cadres and village leaders encouraged modest wedding arrangements. While being successful in the Chinese cities, the new polices on marriage were only partly incorporated into rural areas, and villagers continued parent-initiated elaborate weddings. However, concubinage, marriage of minors and polygamy were rapidly more

or less eliminated as cultural practices in inland China, mostly due to these changes in the law (Davis and Harrell 1993). Later, in 1980, a renewed Marriage Law was implemented, and this placed an even stronger emphasis on the prohibition against polygamy, banning what was called 'mercenary marriage', which refers to both polygamy and concubinage. These prohibitions were stated clearly in Article 2, which ends strongly with: '"Bigamy is prohibited"' (Engel 1984: 956). Reflecting the harsh rhetoric when describing the so-called old society in Tibet, the media, presenting the views of the CCP, frowned upon polygamy, and particularly polyandry, depicting it as an ancient tradition that is physically and emotionally harmful: a 'tumour left over from the feudal farmer-slave system of old Tibet'.[2] At the same time, the Chinese government showed a pragmatic approach to the issue. Engel (1984) cites the *Beijing Review*: 'In Tibet, an "autonomous region" of China where polygamy is still common, the law has been modified to allow continuation of those polygamous marriages that were contracted before the 1980 law took effect.' Such a pragmatic approach continued in rural areas of Tibet, and until the beginning of the 2000s, the various Chinese marriage laws had, as we shall see, a limited effect on local marriage practices. Since the 1980s, township leaders have been given generous space to negotiate local policy implementation on plural marriages, allowing for a continuity of polyandry.

A First Time for Polyandry

Lack of implementation of the marriage laws not only enabled continuity, but in the period after 1980, polyandry spread to new segments of the villages, as more and more farmers found it to be beneficial for their concerns and aspirations. Drolma's story, introduced this book, is one example of a new post-1980 polyandry arrangement. Also, in the house of our hosts, the household leader had arranged polyandrous marriage for his sons for the first time in his family's history. Moving into the Takrab house in Sharlung, we were welcomed by Lobsang Drolma, the in-married wife (*nama*) of the house, and one of her husbands. She showed Samdrup into the 'room of religion' (*chökhang*), where he would sleep, and then she took Mingzom, my daughter and me to the room above the entrance – a spacious room with large windows, a stove in the middle and carpet-covered benches along two of the walls. It was the room of her youngest husband and also a room for storing clothes. The *nama* had three husbands, but the eldest one, she told us, had gone to work in Western Tibet and was only home a few months a year. I asked where the youngest husband would stay, if we occupied his room, but she simply pointed in the direction of the kitchen-living room (*taptsang*). The Takrab was a big house, but not all the rooms had been completed. In

addition to the *taptsang*, the grain storage (*norkhang*) and the room for religion (*chökhang*), the *nama* had her own room that she shared with her eldest husband when he was home, while the middle husband shared the *taptsang* with his parents and his non-nursing children.

This arrangement was similar to what I saw in other houses too. Below I describe one such process of arranging polyandry for the first time, using the house of Döling as an example that can serve to illustrate the concerns, possibilities and limitations – and the decisions involved – in the coming into being of a polyandrous house in the recent history of Panam. Dargye and Chökyi, the household leaders, had married monogamously, and they could not recollect any polyandrous marriages in their respective family histories. As such, their story illustrates the changing marriage practices that Ben Jiao described in 2001, namely that there had been a significant increase in polyandry in Panam since the 1980s. From his study in a larger village in Panam, he showed that more than 30 per cent of the marriages were polyandrous. Most of these marriages had been arranged after the decollectivisation of land in 1980/81, pointing to the strong correlation between land tenure and marriage forms (Ben Jiao 2001: 125). At the time of our fieldwork, Döling was in many ways an ideal household composition in Sharlung, with a large marriage and access to substantial land. Its members included Dargye and his wife, Chökyi, their three sons and one daughter-in-law, their one unmarried daughter, and their three grandchildren. While the three sons were conjointly married, the daughter was an ordained novice nun in the local nunnery. Due to a lack of living quarters in the nunnery at that time, she also stayed in the house. This pooling of labour and people enabled Döling to consolidate a strong household and, in the context of sociopolitical reforms, to engage in a process that involved a transformation of the household towards what we, based on Lévi-Strauss, can explore as a 'house'.

Many afternoons, I found Dargye sitting in the open space that connects the living quarters of the house, preparing wool and drinking tea or *chang*. This was the calm period of late autumn, when the harvest was completed, and people spent more time on leisure. The sun still warmed the air, and many people enjoyed moving chores outside or simply socialising. During some of these afternoons, and later in the evenings after the chores of the day were completed, Dargye shared the story of his family with us. Told on many occasions over a period of four months, I have compiled the parts into one chronological narrative, starting from the 1950s, to the marriage arrangements for his children at the beginning of the 1990s, until the formation of what I have chosen to call the Döling house.

Dargye and Chökyi were both born as landless labourers (*yokpo*). Chökyi originated from a village south of Sharlung, born into a poor family with thirteen children. When she was around seven years old, a relative of her

father adopted her, and she came to the Sharlung house. In the past, this was an old, powerful and wealthy house from which the village had received its name. At one point in time, the Sharlung house had been struck by misfortune and multiple deaths, leading not only to suffering but also to labour shortage. Chökyi was one of several from the outside that was sent to help. Dargye's family rented a room in Sharlung village, and his parents and siblings worked for different landholders in the area. Dargye and Chökyi met while working the fields of Sharlung house. It was at the beginning of the 1960s, Dargye reckoned. The marriage was *khathukpa*, initiated by themselves and something like a love marriage, and his parents did not object. Dargye was the eldest of his many siblings – four sisters and three brothers. Three of his sisters were sent as a *nama* to another village, and two of his brothers as a *makpa*, moving into and becoming a household leader in the wife's household. After marrying, Chökyi moved in with Dargye and his parents (as well as one of his sisters and one of his brothers).

They were very poor when they married, Dargye explained. It was during the Team Period (*loré tsok chung*), he believed, and although they had some land, they had to pay heavy tax to the leaders and were only able to keep a little grain for themselves. He recalled it as a difficult time. Chökyi was also unhappy in the house of Dargye's parents. They were often quarrelling. One day, after their second son was born, she told Dargye that she wanted to take the children and move out, claiming that Dargye's father did not treat her and the children well. Their basic needs, such as enough food, was not covered in the household. Struggling between filial and marital obligations, Dargye was unsure what to do. Chökyi's advice to him was that because it is difficult to find parents but easy to find a new wife she did not want to pressure him to leave with her. Eventually, Dargye decided to go with her, and his team leader found a small room for them. This move did not change their team membership, and thus it did not affect their access to land or work. After some time, the team helped them to build a small house. They called it Norshar – because it was located east (*shar*) of the old Nor house.

Time passed, and Dargye became a member of the political committee in the township. Reforms also changed farm life. As already mentioned in the Introduction, the Household Responsibility System reform (*gentsang lamluk*) and the following decollectivisation in 1980/81 divided the village fields and animals equally among all villagers above 18 years of age – property that was to be administered by the households were these individuals belonged. The decollectivisation, Dargye recalls, were happy times. At the point of division, they were five people in the household (Kelsang, the youngest son, was not yet born), and they received fields for all five people. Dargye had been promoted to a political position, and while this did not provide him rights to more land, he was given a horse for transport to meetings, which came with an extra field

Figure 1.1. The Takrab house. © Heidi Fjeld

for fodder. Hence, he ended up with fields for six people. At the same time, Dargye's parents' household also received fields for five people, and after some complicated years, he inherited these too. After Dargye and Chökyi left, his parents shared the household with one son and one daughter, as well as one grandchild, who also remained in the household and inherited the land when the parents passed. Soon after, Dargye's sister also passed, and his brother, whose health was declining, moved to the city; they agreed that Dargye would take over the land in his absence. In exchange for the land, Dargye was obliged to take care of his brother's son. So, Dargye, summed up, they had been very lucky. All together, they were able to attach land for twelve people to their household. They built a new large house on some of the land – a two-storey building identical to the old, formerly affluent houses in the village. Because they felt so lucky, Dargye and Chökyi asked a lama to give the house a new and auspicious name. He called it Döling, a place (*gling*) of success (*don*).[3]

Weeks later, sitting in the kitchen-cum-living room drinking tea and *chang* and chatting about the happenings of the day, I asked Dargye to continue his story. The room was lit only by the small oil lamp hanging on the pillar by the stove, and the children were already asleep, lying between us in their home-made wool bags. Kelsang, their youngest father, was making *pag*, clumps of barley flour eaten together with soup and much else, in preparation for a three-day trip to the mountains to take food and drinks to the herders. Sonam

Wangmo, the *nama*, was boiling eggs for him to carry while at the same time serving tea to Dargye, who was resting from a trip to the country seat.

I asked him about what had happened after they had received all the land. He repeated that they felt very, very happy to receive so much. This, he said, put them among the biggest landowners in the village. At the same time, they were only six people to feed; himself and Chökyi, their three sons and one daughter (his brother's son had moved to Lhasa for education). A bit later, he said, guessing it was around 1983, an old nun from one of the neighbouring villages started approaching many households in the area. She was the former abbot of the local nunnery, and, following the open policies of the 1980s, she wanted to rebuild the nunnery that had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. She needed girls to help her. Many households in Sharlung and other villages decided to send one daughter for ordination, including Dargye and Chökyi. Their daughter was then thirteen, interested in religion and excited to join the nunnery. After her ordination, Dargye and Chökyi had the three sons' futures to consider. Jamyang, the eldest son, was approaching marriage age. Kelsang, the youngest, was still a teenager, and he was also interested in religion, always saying prayers and reading religious texts. They decided to send Kelsang to Sachung gompa (the monastery in the neighbouring village). He stayed there for some years and then left, Dargye said, so they arranged for him to join Jamyang and the middle brother, Jigme, who were by then in an established marriage. Finding a good *nama* had been easy because, Dargye explained, they had many fields and he knew many people through his position as village leader. Sonam Wangmo, the *nama*, is from Sakya, and because Dargye knew the leader in her village, it had been easy for him to make an initial inquiry about her. Dargye had heard that she was good woman – with a good personality, and, he said, her age was very compatible with his two eldest sons.

I asked him why he chose polyandry (*zasum*) and not a one-to-one marriage (*changsa réré*). Dargye started to explain the need for labour to work on their many fields. With polyandry, his sons could stay together, and they would not need to hire labour (*milak*) for the tasks. It is very good to keep many people together, he told me, especially when there is much land. The two eldest sons had a good relationship, and both preferred polyandry because they did not want to be poor on their own with only one field – that is, the fields are spilt when children move, which, Dargye said, nobody wants, and he continued, repeating, 'you know, *zasum* is a very good way – you can see it here and many other places.'

Dargye's smile seemed to signal the close of the part of the story concerning polyandry, and he moved back to Kelsang joining the monastery. It is a very good deed to send a son to the monastery, he reminded me, and they were very happy that Kelsang was able to join Sachung monastery. Sachung

was a highly venerated gompa; it was old and had remained intact through the Cultural Revolution (due to its use as a military depot); it was an important place for people in the valley. Kelsang stayed as a novice for a few years; he did not like it much. It seems they spent too little time in the gompa, only performing rituals on the 10th and the 25th day of the month, so Kelsang moved back home. Kelsang, who had finished packing his travel bag when Dargye told me this, added that they had also lost their teacher, which led many monks to decide to leave, and he found it difficult to keep the vows. When Kelsang came back from Sachung, he was simply added to the marriage of his brothers. This was the best way, Dargye said, and Kelsang did not comment any further. At eighteen, Kelsang was the right age for marriage, and being incorporated into the established marriage, he did not have to leave his natal home. Also, he was not much younger than the *nama*, which made the process easier. Dargye consulted both Kelsang and Jamyang, the eldest husband (but not Sonam Wangmo or Jigme), and they both agreed. With this arrangement, the household would be able to send one person out to make money, to the benefit of everyone. Dargye said this worked out very well, as Jamyang found work in Ngari and brought back cash income, while Kelsang worked the fields and Jigme herded animals. Ani, the nun daughter, helped with domestic chores, which was good for Sonam Wangmo as Chökyi was getting old.[4]

The story of Döling firstly illustrates the changing process of marriage in the period from the 1950s to 1990s. It shows how the two main entrances into marriage, initiated by the couple (*kathukpa*) or the parents (*changsa*), are associated with the older and the younger generation respectively. There has been a surprising alteration in the nature of marriage for the families of former landless labourers; from first being an event mostly involving the couple to being a collective household concern, as illustrated by Dargye's narrative. Before 1959, the majority of the farmers in Sharlung were married monogamously in *khathuk* unions. These marriages were informal, often couple-initiated unions with very limited ceremonial elements and could be described as a type of cohabitation that was culturally recognised and served to legitimise children. *Khathukpa* marriages most often led to the establishment of new households and affected the respective natal households' land only to a limited extent. Dargye's case illustrates how parent-initiated polyandry was arranged for the first time in the period after his household was provided with new land, a pattern seen in many Sharlung houses.[5] After decollectivisation of land in 1980/81, the majority of farmers in Sharlung married in a more formal way, described as *changsa gyak*, a term that translates both as 'marriage' and 'wedding'. These are parent-initiated unions within which the two households and their representatives play important parts. Following an elaborate wedding ceremony, *changsa* involves post-marital patrilocal

residence, except in cases where the wife has no brothers and thus is the heir to her natal household. Most importantly, with *changsa*, the newlyweds move into an already established household and become the next generation of household leaders there.

Secondly, the story of Döling illustrates domestic change and development among former landless labourers in Panam, a change that has strongly influenced considerations of marriage. Dargye's story is both typical and atypical; it describes a process in which the various parts are shared by many while at the same time depicting an unusual life. Dargye held political positions in Sharlung village, positions he had occupied since the 1970s, and in that sense his biography is unusual. Further, the inheritance history of his family deviates somewhat from the experiences of many of his co-villagers, as he possessed not only the fields distributed to him through the land reform in 1980/81 but also fields that he inherited in an ad hoc way from his relatives. The Household Responsibility System has had an arbitrary effect on the various households in Panam as it has elsewhere (Yeh 2004), and compared to other former landless labourers (*yokpo*) in Sharlung, Dargye and Chökyi were lucky to end up with more land than the number of people in the household indicated. Before 1980, the married unit was a less intricate part of the household as a social group. In the 1960s, living together with Dargye's parents was primarily for practical reasons due to extreme poverty. As a group, they did not share inheritable wealth, and when the disagreement between Chökyi and Dargye's father was resolved by moving, it had primarily emotional and not organisational implications. Dargye and Chökyi did not leave his parent's household economically impaired. Among the landless labourers, the household as a unit was only to a limited extent embedded with cultural meaning beyond the individual family, and the establishment of new households was not disfavoured as such. When they married, Dargye and Chökyi saw their arrangement as an agreement between individuals rather than between social groups. During the collective period from 1960, when group formations other than the state-operated communes were frowned upon, such notions of the marriage institution were widespread. Looking at the distribution of marriage arrangements in the older generation in Sharlung, post-marital, neolocal residence was common for people of all backgrounds during this collective period. There was a significant shift in emphasis when Dargye talked about his children's future and marriage, as he linked these to the social reproduction of the household. After the decollectivisation in 1980, all households, independent of social background, became structurally similar to the former landholders in agrarian Tibet – they had access to fixed plots of land that were to be managed across generations. It was with this new status as corporate estates, albeit with unequal number of fields, that the former landless

labourers made their decisions on managing household resources and future possibilities, including those of marriage.

Household futures involve considerations of two main human resources options; marriage and non-marriage. Concerning marriage, there are, schematically, three alternative possibilities: first, inviting a *nama* to the son(s) or sending a daughter as *nama* to another household (patrilocal residence); second, inviting a *makpa* to a daughter or sending a son a *makpa* to another household (matrilocal residence); third, approving or not approving a couple-initiated marriage (neolocal residence). In Sharlung, these three options were somehow ranked in terms of preference, where the marriages implying patrilocal residence were seen to be most fortunate, followed by marriages implying matrilocal residence, which in most cases was due to the lack of male heirs, and lastly marriages resulting in the establishment of new households, which were not only seen to be less fortunate but were clearly disfavoured.

Considering the future for his children and for the group to which they belong, Dargye and Chökyi both chose marriage implying patrilocal residence, and non-marriage. The two sons married together secured the reproduction of the household. This was imperative to Dargye's allocation of the human and material resources and reflects the centrality of sons in the domestic organisation in Sharlung. For those outside these central positions, there were several options, of which Dargye and Chökyi initially chose celibacy for both the youngest son and their only daughter but ended up bringing them back into the household.

While in many other societies non-marriage is problematic and, in some cases, even incompatible with the adult personhood, this is not the case in Tibet. Non-marriage might involve enrolment into a monastic institution or simply imply a – more or less – celibate life in one's natal home. When Dargye sent two of his children to enrol in monastic institutions, he did so for several reasons. One significant implication of the ordination of Kelsang was that he relinquished the inheritance he was entitled to. Moreover, monastic enrolment was a highly valued and well-established option for both men and women, and celibate sons or daughters reflected well on their family. This was particularly the case with monks, although the status of nuns was improving. Dargye saw his daughter's ordination as a contribution to the rebuilding of the local nunnery and to the production of local ritual expertise in general. At the same time, the nuns in Sharlung spent less time on ritual chores in the nunnery than they did on domestic chores in their natal homes. As such, the ordination of a daughter had a double implication; the continuous contribution to daily work in, and the positive reflection back on, her natal household, and the contribution to the highly valued efforts to rebuild religious institutions.

The third point that Dargye's narrative can serve to illustrate is the value of polyandry in domestic development and planned futures, including the inherent flexibility of these marriages. With four children, Dargye and Chökyi chose to arrange only *one* marriage. With one polyandrous marriage, they were able to pool labour resources while keeping the newly acquired estate undivided for the next generation. As all sons had equal rights to inherit land, every marriage potentially divided the estate, and aiming to arrange only one marriage per generation – what Goldstein termed the 'monomarital principle' (1971a) – was a well-established strategy to avoid fragmentation of Tibetan farms. Polyandry, as polygyny, is also inherently flexible, which contributes to the value of these marriage forms. Once established, these marriages could be altered rather easily; adding and removing partners was common. When Kelsang returned from the monastery, there were several options available to him; to marry independently and establish a new household; to marry as a *makpa* into another established household; to join the already established marriage in his natal household; to settle outside the village (working for income); or, which was less likely, to remain as a bachelor in his natal home. Of these options, it was only the establishment of a new household in the village that involved an activation of his inheritance rights, and hence, by implication, fragmentation of the farm land. This was one of the reasons for the general disfavouring of post-marital neolocal residence practices. The inclusion of Kelsang into the already established marriage was in no way dramatic, as it did not alter any structural arrangements in the domestic organisation; rather it maintained the status quo.

A fourth, and last, point that Dargye's story illustrates is the significance of governance, beyond economic reforms, to the spread of polyandry and domestic transformations in Panam. As mentioned, despite Chinese marriage laws, local leaders had since the 1980s been able to maintain a lenient approach to local variations of marriage, basically allowing all types of arrangements.[6] However, in this period, the government was also maintaining and further developing registers and statistics of the local population which influenced the nature of domestic units, and thus marriage practices. These unintended consequences pertain to the houses people live in and to changing naming practices. Starting already in the 1960s, the houses in the villages were redistributed from landholders to the landless labourers. These landholders' houses were named estates and often had long genealogies. These house names (*khangming*) served as identifiers, as family names, of its members. The places – the rooms and small houses – where the labourers lived were, however, not named, and those residing there were simply identified by first names. The redistribution of houses brought an increase in the living standard for most villagers, except the former large landholders (*genpo* and some *trelpa*). Later, the farmers started to build new houses too.

Before the Chinese invasion, Dargye's parents had settled in a small room in the Lungko house (one of the *genpo*) that they worked for at the time. During the Democratic Reforms in 1959, when land and property were first redistributed, Dargye's parents received a separate part of a house that had belonged to Dagpo, another large *genpo* in the village. They kept this house for some ten years, then they built their own simple house close to the Dagpo house. Although the first house might have had a name, nobody could remember it; the name was insignificant. Similarly, when Dargye and Chökyi moved from his parents' house, the government provided them with a room in one of the public houses (*chikhang*) at the time (this was the collective period, when most property and land belonged to the government). This place also did not have a name, but when they built a separate small house they named it Norshar, the place east of Nor (a *genpo* house). During the collective period, each individual belonged to a team; hence, in terms of governance, each citizen was registered (and controlled) through team membership. However, with the decollectivisation and the introduction of the Household Responsibility System reform, the households replaced the teams as the connecting units between individuals and the state. For bureaucratic purposes, the state encouraged the farmers to name their households as part of the ongoing social and cultural changes of the domestic units. While previously it was only the *genpo* houses – that is, the former corporate estates with known genealogies – that were named, after the Household Responsibility System reform all households, small or large, were given names. In the beginning, simple descriptive names were used, such as *Khangser* (new house) in Dargye and Chökyi's case. However, with time, many people in Sharlung renamed their houses. Having firmly established a corporate estate, Dargye and Chökyi invited a lama to name their new house properly, and hence Döling was founded. Together with land and household composition, these new names, coming from a culturally meaningful source, effect, as we shall see, the very constitution of the domestic units. The example of Döling illustrates how, in summing up, it is within these transforming households that former landless labourers found polyandry – for the first time in their family biographies – to be meaningful and favourable.

Increase of Polyandry in Panam

The return of fraternal polyandry (*zasum*) in Panam is significant in numbers, albeit it is difficult to produce statistical evidence of increase. There are no national or regional marriage statistics available for Tibet before 1950. Indeed, the (lack of) registration of polyandry in public records also complicates statistical overviews. In Tibet, polyandrous marriages was commonly

registered as a union between the eldest man and the wife, while his brothers (co-husbands) remained registered as living in their natal household.[7] This practice has continued with the Chinese administration as seen in Kyiling township, and therefore the incidents, and hence prevalence, of polyandry is difficult to establish. Aziz suggested, through interviews with exiled Tibetans from Dingri conducted in the 1970s, that some 30 per cent of marriages in (Central) Tibet before the Chinese invasion were polygamous, of which the clear majority were polyandrous (Aziz 1978a: 137–38). Goldstein's calculations from the Gyantse area (which is close to Panam) indicated that 60 per cent of the landholding families (*trelpa*) married polygamously and that in the remaining 40 per cent the families had only one son of that particular generation, thus being unable to arrange a polyandrous union (1978a: 209). The percentage of landholding farmers who were able to marry polyandrously resembles the situation in the Panam villages that I describe here.

During my first stay in 2002, I registered 51 marriages located in the 44 households in Sharlung. Of these, 21 were monogamous, 29 polyandrous and one was polygynous. These numbers are similar to what Ben Jiao registered a few years earlier, writing from a larger village of 90 households, where he found 54 per cent monogamy, 31 per cent polyandry, 11 per cent polygyny and 4 per cent polygynandry, the latter being a union of two or more wives and two or more husbands (2001: 125). When investigating more closely the 21 marriages registered as monogamous, I found that seven of these were *khathukpa* (out of which five had been established before 1980). Additionally, four were *makpa* marriages (matrilocal residence, often when there is no male heir), and seven marriages were the result of partitions of polyandrous marriages. As polyandry in Tibet is of the fraternal kind, its arrangement preconditions more than one son of the same generation to enter into it, hence we need to also take household composition into consideration. The remaining three monogamous marriages were found in households with only one son; in one case, the second son had established a new marriage outside the village. The numbers give a clear picture of polyandry as a preferred marriage form in Sharlung. When we discussed the high numbers of polyandry with people in Sharlung and its neighbouring villages, they were adamant that this was typical for the agricultural regions of Panam.[8]

The ideal constellation of a polyandrous marriage is three brothers and one wife, and people in Sharlung believed that three co-husbands was also the most common constellation. When surveying marriage distribution, I found that the average number of co-husbands was close to three; however, most of the marriages were unions of two husbands and one wife. Three marriages involving five husbands, but only one of these involved that all co-resided at the same time. In the two other, some of the husbands were either too young

to participate actively, or attended schools or worked outside the village for longer periods. In practice, then, most – indeed with only one exception – polyandrous marriages in Sharlung involved three or less husbands. Although a large number of co-husbands is advantageous for the household in terms of labour, constellations of four or more co-partners were recognised to be very demanding marriages, not only for the wife but also for the younger brothers, whose age would be significantly lower than their wife. Therefore, in these cases, off-farm activities were encouraged.

Looking at the numbers, polyandry does indeed appear to be widespread in Sharlung. This impression is strengthened by the fact that of the many monogamous marriages registered, one-third of these were couples divorcing from a larger polyandrous union, indicating an even higher percentage of arranged polyandrous marriages in the village.[9] Differing from pre-1950, polyandry was not restricted to a certain category of people but was rather distributed widely across social divisions and hierarchies.

Local Explanations

Despite being common and appreciated, perceptions and explanations of polyandry differ, not only in the villages around Sharlung but also outside the area. Particularly in Lhasa, young Tibetans conveyed some curiosity, and also animosity, towards the practice of polyandry. During a talk about marriage in Panam that I gave at the *English corner*, a language initiative operative in Lhasa until 2008, some of this disapproval became apparent. Tsepun, a then 35-year-old teacher who grew up in a village in Central Tibet but had lived in Beijing and Lhasa for the last 20 years, had a view on polyandry that I found to be rather typical among Tibetans in the cities:

> Polyandry is an old custom, something that we need to change. There are many good customs in Tibet that we should work hard to maintain, but some are not so good, and we don't have to continue to do something just because we have always done so. Polyandry is so strange; I don't know why anybody would like to be married in that way anymore. Maybe in the village this is still useful, but at least in the city we don't need so many people in the family. If there is one father and one mother, and two children – then that is enough.

In Lhasa, I often got the sense that people talked about polyandry with a certain sense of embarrassment, as if trying to conceal this practice from me, thinking it might leave a negative impression of Tibet. In Panam, on the other hand, my experience was rather the opposite: people were eager to talk about polyandry, and conversations often turned towards what they saw to be the advantages of such marriages.

The local explanations of polyandry I heard in Panam were materialistic, expressed as a strategy to strengthen the household. Basically, polyandrous marriage prevents land fragmentation and maximises male labour within the *khyimtsang*. In addition, normative polyandry limits the population growth in the village. People in Sharlung emphasised different aspects of polyandry; most often, however, they addressed one or two of the above-mentioned points. Below are six ways that people in Sharlung talked about polyandry, illustrating some of the variety of local explanations.

Some people think that those married as *réré* ('one to one', monogamy) are happy. But this is not always the case, because they have very hard work. It is better with *zasum* because then we have more hands. Three [husbands] is the best – one to work in the fields, and one to work with the *ralug* (sheep and goats) and one to bring income. It is much better when each person has less work – that makes everybody happier. (Lakyi phala, the household leader of a previous *yokpo* and now a relatively affluent house)

In Sharlung, some people have always had *zasum*. Mostly, earlier, it used to be the wealthy, but now it is the same for everybody. It is always good to be many people, and with *zasum* it is very easy. Even during the land division [1980/81 reform], those with many people got more land. For instance, some butchers in Bargang – they had *zasum* with two wives and one husband before the division, and therefore they had many children and received much land from the government [due to the per capita distribution of land]. Then in the next generation, the five sons married together, and therefore they have few children. So now they have land for many people without being many people – this is the smart way to go about this. (Gomchang Dadul, fifty, married *khathukpa* monogamously with one woman and, after her death, remarried with her sister)

Polyandry is very popular here now. This is for its economic reasons. The wealthiest *khyimtsang* have polyandry, right? For example, in the house by the foot of the mountain, Dagpo, five brothers share one wife. This is good because the problem in the village is that the number of people increases, but the land remains the same. In 1981, there were 200 people here; now there are around 300 or 400. But despite the increase in people, the land will not be redistributed in some 100 years. (Ösel, forty, deputy village leader)

Zasum is the marriage in the very, very old *drongpa* (*drong nyingba nyingba*). In the history of this place, it is those with *zasum* that have been prosperous and famous in the valley. The Dagpo, Lungko, Lampo, right? They were powerful in the old society, and they are still important. All of them have polyandry. They never had to split the land or the people. They stayed together, and the *zasum* was successful [no partitions]. So Dagpo are still powerful and wealthy (Longchang achi (elderly woman/grandmother), sixty)

The problem with monogamy (*changsa réré*) is that there are too few people, so it is not possible to make a household grow. *Changsa réré* are not so stable, because if something happens to the one husband it is very difficult for the wife and the children. Also, if the husband has to travel outside to make income, it is difficult for the wife because she has to depend on *milak* [paid assistance] for ploughing and doing the rest of the heavy field work. (Norshön Migmar, thirty-five, in a newly established household with his wife and one brother after a long-term conflict with his parents)

Ha, ha, here, brothers do everything together – they even share mistresses. Look at the woman (*ama*) by the river, for instance, and her lovers; the two are married together, and still have the same mistress! Why should they not be married together if they can have the same mistress? (Lobsang Drolma, thirty-five, *nama* in Takrab)

Central to these explanations is the economic rationale for polyandrous marriages, not for each individual but for the whole group. Such groups are residence-based and referred to as *khyimtsang*, *dütsang* or *drongpa*, which all translate to English as 'household' although of various kinds. Strengthening and perpetuating the household is essential in the preference for polyandry in Panam. The economic rationale of polyandry is based on the combination of post-marital patrilocal residence norms, equal inheritance for all sons, and the household administration of material and immaterial wealth, including farmland, animals and fortune (*nor*), as well as (re)productive forces (*yang*, *sönam*). As mentioned, because all sons hold equal inheritance rights, every son's marriage could potentially lead to fragmentation of the parents' land, and people saw this as very unfortunate, not only for the group to which they belong but also for each particular couple and individual. Further, motivations for polyandry were closely connected to the three-folded economy of the area; namely, agricultural production, animal husbandry and wage labour. The fixed, but limited, amount of land is best utilised by dividing the requisite labour among the household members themselves, thus avoiding the expense of external workers.

The demographic aspect of polyandry – the interrelation between population size and the amount of land available – was only mentioned to me by people in leading positions. Increasing population numbers is a concern among village leaders, as fertile land cannot be expanded. With a high occurrence of polyandry, fewer women marry, and this reduces the birth rates in the village. This is, however, an effect of polyandry, rather than reason. More often, people would rather actively compare polyandry to other forms of marriage – mainly to monogamy – and assess the advantages and disadvantages of the marital forms, particularly in terms of male workload,

security and the possibility of growth. The association of polyandry and (former) wealthy households, the landholders (*genpo/trelpa*), was explained to me repeatedly, and for good reasons. Several of the historically afflu-ent households in the village had, for as long as anyone could remember, arranged their marriages polyandrously. Polyandry was associated with these households and their history of wealth accumulation and growth; polyandry was historically proven, so to speak, to be intimately linked with a successful and higher ranked socio-economic position. I think it is important to note that the conceptual association of the landholders and polyandry had conno-tations beyond economy. As the quote from the older woman above says, the polyandrous *genpo* houses had a history of being powerful and well-known. The perception of polyandry as a marriage of the 'upper classes' indicates an ongoing process within which alteration of marriage practices is one aspect, and where former servants and labourers (*yokpo*), as well as the low-ranked skilled workers (*menrik*), incorporate cultural practices associated with the former landholders.

A different kind of explanation emphasises interpersonal relations between the co-partners in a polyandrous union, and, as stated with a chuckle in the last quote, the close relation between brothers more generally. The consub-stantial sameness of brothers creates both physical and mental resemblance, which, according to some of my interlocutors, implies an expectation of similar preferences, also sexually. More generally agreed upon in our con-versations in Sharlung was an expectation of solidarity among brothers (or siblings, particularly of the same sex). Still, the materialistic aspects remained crucial in the local explanations of polyandry. These explanations were made rational in close relation with the social organisation in the domestic groups (*khyimtsang*) into which villagers defined themselves and others. The cultural logic of polyandry is closely related to the inheritance practice, where all sons hold rights to equal shares of land. However, other peoples across the world experience similar challenges concerning the transfer of immovable goods from one generation to the next, and, yet, rather than arranging polyandry, they practise inheritance rules such as primo- or ultimogeniture. When dis-cussing polyandry with villagers in Sharlung, such alternative practices were not very attractive, because, as one elderly man said, 'brothers want to stay together'. Moreover, and close to his statement, a young woman's noted a wish to stay together: 'if we could choose, then all children would remain with their parents,' indicating what can be seen as a centripetal orientation of domestic organisation.

The Corporate Household

These local explanations are reflected to varying degrees in theories of poly-andry. More particularly, interpersonal relations and cultural values on the one hand, and socio-economic aspects on the other, have been at the core of anthropological analyses of Tibetan polyandry, represented by Nancy Levine and Melvyn Goldstein's work. Mapping marriage and family organisation in pre-1950 Central Tibet, Goldstein employed a socio-economic rather than a purely economic model. He emphasised social stratification and land tenure, pointing to the monomarital principle of the land-holding households: 'one whereby for each generation one and only one marriage should be made, the children of which are considered members of the family unit with full jural rights relative to their sex' (1978a: 208). This is an alternative principle to the more common ultimogeniture or primogeniture, aiming to result in a so-called stem family to take over an undivided estate. Polyandry is, accord-ing to Goldstein, 'a functional analogue of other wealth conserving kinship mechanisms . . . which operate to reduce the frequency of, or preclude, divisions of family patrimonies' (1978b: 335). During the social and political system of Ganden Podrang, the Dalai Lamas' rule, polyandry was particularly beneficial to those households with hereditary access to land, and with that, heavy tax obligations. For the landholding farmers – the *trelpa* – the tax burdens necessitated a broad labour pool within each corporate household in order to be able to fulfil these obligations in general, and the corvée taxes in particular. Goldstein noted that the two main 'goal-oriented factors' (1978b: 326) of polyandry were the wish to prevent land fragmentation in order to enable fulfilment of tax obligations and the wish to maximise male labour; of these, he places emphasis on the former (1971a: 72–73). Hence, he saw the efforts to preserve and perpetuate the corporate household across generations as the core motivation for choosing this potentially demanding marriage form – a theory that is very close to local explanations as found in Panam too. Polyandry, then, is a means to an end (Goldstein 1990: 619), rather than a goal in itself.

Nancy Levine's classic 1988 monograph *Dynamics of Polyandry* brought additional elements and a different perspective to fraternal polyandry, based on ethnography from Nyinba, a Tibetan-speaking community in Humla, Western Nepal – that is, outside the tax system of the Dalai Lamas' rule. She critiqued a materialistic (and deterministic) approach, arguing that 'the importance of polyandry extends beyond the economics of it' (1988: 159).[10] Levine presented five elements as crucial to the explanation of polyandry in Nyinba communities: first, polyandry had a special cultural value due to the cultural representation of the past in which ancestors are portrayed as brothers linked by polyandry and characterised by their family harmony;

second, fraternal solidarity was one of the core kinship ideals; third, the corporate household (*drongpa*) system presupposed polyandry and its economy; fourth, the Nyinba village, as a corporate unit, was structured around polyandry and non-proliferation of member households, making polyandry 'structurally pivotal'; and fifth, most men and women found polyandry a personally comfortable form of marriage and the one that 'suits culturally defined practical goals' (op. cit.). Hence, Levine concluded that polyandry has an economic rationale but that in the earlier literature this has been 'overemphasized at the expense of its kinship, political and symbolic correlates' (op. cit.).

Central to both Goldstein and Levine's analyses is, however, that the *corporate household* presupposes polyandry. Moreover, Levine's point that polyandry is 'structurally pivotal' within the village organisation concurs to a large extent with Goldstein's conclusion that polyandry in Tibet is oriented 'toward the social consequences of economic productivity, rather than toward subsistence per se' (1978b: 329). While Goldstein is primarily concerned with the external relations of the residence group, and particularly with the state (in terms of tax obligations), Levine focuses on both the politico-jural (political, economic and religious obligations) and the domestic (interpersonal relations) aspects of the residence group. They both argue that polyandry is closely intertwined with the corporate nature of Tibetan households. Neither Levine nor Goldstein define 'household' analytically, and it seems that they use it as an emic term. Also in Sharlung, people highlighted that to strengthen and continue the domestic unit was the most important motivation for arranging a polyandrous marriage, because such marriages enable accumulation of wealth through economic diversification, as well as maintenance of the unit across generations. The word they commonly used in Panam was *khyimtsang*, usually translated in dictionaries as family and/ or household (Das 1902: 162; Goldstein 2001: 135). Breaking down the word, the etymological meaning of *khyim* is 'home', while *tshang* is 'nest' or 'dwelling'. Other words also used to denote these domestic units are *thempa*; people (*pa*) of the threshold (*them*) and *dütsang*; where *dü* (*dud*) translates as 'smoke' and *tshang* as 'nest' or 'dwelling' – that is, the dwelling place around a hearth. *Khyimtsang*, as well as *thempa* and *dütshang*, refers directly to the place of dwelling; the house that people belong to that defines their social identity, and through which they gain their rights and obligations in village affairs.[11] Acknowledging the relevance of the physical house to the social unit, exploring the *khyimtsang* enables us to better understand the efforts that many Tibetan farmers put into strengthening and perpetuating it. The *khyimtsang* is not a house in the simplified sense of a physical structure (called *khang*) but a domestic corporate unit in a certain social organisation that holds value beyond household activities. Moreover, a *khyimtsang* as a house

can consist of several, or no households, and the constitutional nature of two terms differ in significant ways.

Anthropologists engagement with Lévi-Strauss' house perspective not only developed into a heuristic device for reframing studies of kinship, including kinship principles and practices but also socio-symbolic approaches to the domestic (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Lévi-Strauss' much-quoted definition takes a house to be a 'corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both (1983: 174). He calls the house, in this sense, a 'moral person', which indicates that the house is much more than a physical structure for dwelling; it is a social institution that is a property-holding unit that endures through time, often with ritualistic elements (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 14). The house is a subject with agency, rights and obligations. It incorporates not only the people living there, and hence constitutes the group in a particular time, but also the property itself – names, titles and other prerogatives of its identity. Seeing Tibetan *khyimtsang* as moral persons, or corporate bodies, holding material and immaterial wealth points to the significance and meaning of polyandry, beyond merely economic advantages. In the economic, social and political context of Panam (at the time of this study), a polyandrous marriage was one of the most effective ways to enable perpetuation and a strong transmission of name, wealth, reputation and identity over generations.

As mentioned in the Introduction, some Tibetan-speaking communities, houses and households are made distinct, and this helps clarify the status of the different domestic units. The two different types of households (*drongpa*) in Ladakh are clearly of different status – *khangchen* (the large house) constitutes units that have rights to land and obligations to village work, and *khangchung* (the small house) is an offshoot household consisting of individuals in a non-reproductive state, such as unmarried daughters or retirees, or a small household without land or village obligations. A village would consist of a fluctuating number of households (*khangchung*) and a fixed number of what can be termed houses as moral persons (*khangchen*) – that is, those houses that are stable and constitutive to the village (Phylactou 1989; Day 2015). As Day shows, 'these houses and households are sometimes distinguished, sometimes conflated and sometimes merged' (2015: 179), and during the last 50 years, these domestic units have in Ladakh come to share most characteristics, albeit with an awareness of difference. This has led to some local frustration over potential loss of identity, as there is an expectation that the *khangchen*, and their house names, 'fashion and convey a stable, lasting and even "timeless" series of social identities and positions' in the village (ibid.:

190). One of the ways that *khangchen* fashioned such stability was through fraternal polyandry, before it was effectively prohibited in Ladakh.

Childs' analysis of 1958 Kyirong shows that two types of households were distinguished: one hearth (*tap chik*) households in which all members resided together and cooked over a single fire, and two hearth (*tap nyi*) households that included both the main household and a subsidiary residence (Childs 2008: 71). The latter were termed 'adjunct house' (*zur khang*), or residence for the elderly (*gentsang*) (op. cit.). In Panam it was uncommon for a named house to have offshoot houses such as the *khangchung* or *zurkhang*, as all generations co-reside in one house. In fact, it was an explicit goal to only have one household per house, for the same reason as the monomarital principle. The common empirical overlap of household and house should not, however, lead to an analytical concurrence of the two terms.[12] Some local homesteads indicate how household and house might also be distinguished in Sharlung. One of these homesteads was a run-down and poor-looking building located to the west of the village, called Lampo. It was an uninhabited house, with no household activities but where the ritual presence maintained the status (and the power) of the house. The Lampo house used to be an influential house with a large household. In the last generation, ten children were born into the house; however, due to personal conflicts they had all moved out successively. Since 1995, the house had been empty of people; hence, empty of a household. It was not, however, empty of meaning. Because Lampo had a long history, it hosted a house protector (*namo*) considered to have significant power. The protector was the *kyelha* ('natal deity') of those connected to the house by filiation, who continued to perform offerings either in the house or through 'long-distance offering'. Lampo had been a well-established house in Sharlung for as long as people could remember and its historical high rank and ritual power were maintained through such continuous offering to the house protector. Much due to the protective powers of the *namo*, the Lampo house remained the loci of belonging for the individual members, and it would continue to be so until the *namo* was moved or people for other reasons stopped making offerings in the house. As such, this empty house illustrates the distinction between a household and a house; it was the house without a household.

Seeing the *khyimtsang* as a house rather than merely a household offers a broader perspective on polyandry, and particularly on its return and increase since the 1980s. What was at stake in the local efforts to strengthen and perpetuate the established domestic unit, the *khyimtsang*? People living together as members of the same house in Tibetan communities do share economic endeavours. However, more than that, I argue, the *khyimtsang* is also a physical house of social, symbolic and cosmological nature that provide belonging, protection and connections to its individual members.

Unintended Consequences

The renewed emphasis on houses among farmers seems to have been an unintended consequence of Chinese policies, which had started already during the late 1950s when the houses of the *trelpa* were redistributed to people of *yokpo* status, and continued throughout various reform periods, culminating in the post-1980 period when the homesteads were given corporate status through the Household Responsibility System.

The state-initiated socio-economic changes had led, and continued to lead, to a stronger local emphasis on the house as residence, as a structuring orientation in the village. With the changes in marriage forms, the characteristics of the domestic units were also negotiated. As Day (2015) describes from Ladakh, sociopolitical changes have blurred the distinctions between houses and households, leading them also to sometimes be conflated; the domestic units in Panam were also fluctuating. Before the 1950s, there was a clear distinction between the houses of the landholding farmers and the aristocracy, and the households of the labourers, servants and others of lower rank. The former were named corporate estates with long genealogies, connected in webs of inter-house networks and often hosting plural marriages that had involved elaborate weddings. These were clearly demarcated physical houses; defined, as we shall see, as cosmological orders and protective ritual entities, and material and immaterial wealth passed in these houses from generation to generation. The latter, on the other hand, were unnamed households that can perhaps best be negatively defined in the sense that they were households of various sizes that did not have a known biography and that had not perpetuated themselves as corporate units through generations. They were domestic groups that shared a common economic endeavour, married monogamously and lived in dwellings that did not enable the transfer of material or immaterial wealth across generations. Chinese social and economic re-engineering has changed the base of these distinctions and allowed for new negotiations, formations and alterations of the domestic realm. New access to land has enabled former *yokpo*s to organise themselves polyandrously and, by doing so, engage in a transformation of unnamed households into named houses, in the manner associated with the former landholders and high-ranking houses of the Panam region. As polyandry and *trelpa/genpo* are conceptually connected, inherent in the organisation into houses is an expectation – and value – of polyandrous marriages. Hence, the increased preference for polyandry is part of a shift towards a social organisation in which the farmers belong to named, corporate estates; houses that are meaningful units far beyond economics.

A theoretical emphasis on houses implies a new approach to the conceptualising of what in many ways is a conundrum of residence and descent

in Tibetan kinship. Throughout Tibet and the Himalayas, the contextual relevance of patrilineality varies, and in rural Tsang these descent groups has very limited organisational force. In the next chapter, the distinction between kinship as constitutive of personhood, on the one hand, and of local groups, on the other, shall inform the exploration of the meaning and impact of linearity, laterality and residence, as we turn to the sources of membership in houses of Sharlung.

Notes

1. See Bell (1928); Stein (1972); Goldstein (1971a, 1978a). The distribution of polyandry in traditional Tibetan society has been an issue of some discussion. Rockwell and Combe, both writing from eastern Tibet, held that only farmers practised polyandry. Bell, however, argued against this and claimed that polyandry was common among both the peasantry and the pastoralists (1928: 159–61). He concluded, referring to his conversations with the Lhasa aristocracy and his broad reading, that 'all agreed that, taking Tibet as a whole, monogamy was more prevalent than either polyandry or polygamy [polygyny]' (ibid.: 161). Also, he noticed, Tsang, where Panam valley is located, was as an area with an 'exceptional prevalence' of polyandry (op. cit.).
2. Macartney (1994).
3. Döling is a fictive name, chosen to reflect common types of house names (*khangming*) in the area. It has a connotation of auspiciousness. Other common names reflect a sense of happiness, topographic location, cardinal direction from a large house, or temporality.
4. Chökyi unfortunately passed away only one year later.
5. In the literature of Tibet, marriage (*changsa*) is often described as accompanied by elaborate wedding rituals and strong participation of the groom's and the bride's household members. This, I believe, is due to the dominance of upper-class informants in earlier studies of Tibetan societies (see Fjeld 2005: 22–23) and does not reflect all forms of weddings and marriages.
6. This was reflected also in the township leaders own marriages, which included both polyandry and monogamy.
7. Ramble, personal communication, Vancouver, 2013.
8. According to my interlocutors, polyandry is less common in the higher altitude villages in Panam where people engage in semi-pastoralism (*samadrok*).
9. That some monogamous marriages were arranged as polyandry also reminds us that the configuration of marriages can change over time, especially in the case of plural marriages, and thus, the marriage distribution presented here – reflecting a particular moment in time – cannot address this important diachronic dimension, as discussed in detail by Berreman (1975).
10. Levine relegates Goldstein's analysis, based on the economic rational, to only a sophisticated version of the earlier assumption that 'without polyandry, Tibetans would be reduced to poverty' (1988: 158). This seems to be a reading of Goldstein that is based on an exaggerated notion of difference. Moreover, it does not discuss Goldstein's later work on polyandry (1978a and b), where he gave the social aspects of economic considerations the main attention; hence, he developed a socio-economic and ecological rather than a purely economic perspective. The material Levine presents does not, to the extent that she maintains, disclaim Goldstein's argument that polyandry is oriented towards mini-

mising land fragmentation and maximising male labour in order to secure the economic growth of a landholding household.

11. While in other Tibetan communities *trongpa/drongpa* is used to denote the households of corporate character (Aziz 1978a; Levine 1988), this is not widely used in Sharlung.

12. The anthropological history of the two terms diverges extensively, indicating not only different connotations but, perhaps more importantly, different analytical potentials. The 'household' was traditionally employed to describe groups based on co-residence. Yanagisako writes: 'Generally the term refers to a set of individuals who share not only a living space but also some activities. These activities, moreover, are usually related to food production and consumption or to sexual reproduction and childrearing . . .' (1979: 165). Due to the extensive practice of the same activities in groups of people not residing together, several suggestions to separate the 'domestic' activities from the term 'household' have been suggested (see Seddon 1978); however, production/consumption and reproduction seem to remain at the core of the household descriptions. The household is analytically distinct as a category based on common economic endeavour at a particular time and in a particular space.