

goldstein - brothers - share - wife - 39 - 48

ELECTRONIC RESERVES REQUEST

Article in Journal

Donna Perry, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
phone:

Course Title and Number: ANTH 103--Introduction to Cultural Anthropology
FALL SEMESTER, 2003

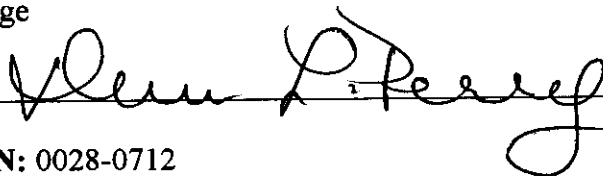
Library Use Only: NO

Date Reading Assigned: ~~2~~ Oct 1, 2003

for Electronic reserves only

This item meets the requirements of Brevity, Spontaneity, and Culmulative Effect to the best of my knowledge

Signature



ISBN / ISSN: 0028-0712

Book / Journal Title: Natural History

Publication Date: 87

Volume: March

Pages: 39-48

Chapter / Article title: "When Brothers Share a Wife"

Chapter / Article author: Goldstein, Melvyn

NATURAL HISTORY

Vol. 96, No. 3, March 1987

American Museum of Natural History, New York, N.Y.

Robert G. Goelet, President

Thomas D. Nicholson, Director

L. Thomas Kelly, Assistant Director

Alan Ternes, Editor
Ellen Goldensohn, Managing Editor
Thomas Page, Designer
Board of Editors: Carol Breslin,
Rebecca B. Finnell, Sally Lindsay,
Yittorio Maestro, Judy Rice, Bruce Stutz
Florence G. Edelstein, Copy Chief
Jaimie Epstein, Copy Editor
Iromie Weeramantry, Asst. to the Designer
Kay Zakariassen, Picture Editor
Renee Bacher, Picture Asst.
Thomas R. Miller, Editorial Assistant
Sandra O. Hughes, Text Processor

L. Thomas Kelly, Publisher
Ruth D. McCrea, Jr., General Manager
Ernestine Weindorf, Asst. to the Publisher
Lee B. Ewing, Asst. Business Mgr.
Cary Castle, Circulation Manager
Ramón E. Alvarez, Promotion Manager
Terence D. Frimmet, Asst. Circulation Mgr.
Lawrence E. Hoffer, Asst. Fulfillment Mgr.
Mark Abraham, Production Manager
Sherry Krukwer Sundel, Production Asst.
Laurie Vetrano, Advtg. Production Coordinator

Natural History Advertising Sales
488 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022
(212) 826-9467
Lewis T. Galati, Advertising Sales Director
Judy Lamort, Travel Advertising Manager
Account Managers: Richard Candels, Sonia
Christian, Linda Sparber, Mary Tredwell
Regional Offices:
Atlanta: Martin and Butler (404) 266-8811
Chicago: Jerry Greco & Assoc. (312) 263-4100
Detroit: Norma Davis (313) 647-7911
Los Angeles: LoVerme & Assoc. (213) 932-1742
San Francisco: LoVerme & Assoc. (415) 788-0420
Honolulu: Harry Schneider (808) 942-9638
Toronto: American Publishers Reps. (416) 363-1388

NATURAL HISTORY (ISSN 0028-0712) is
published monthly by the American
Museum of Natural History, Central Park
West at 79th Street, New York, N.Y. 10024.
Subscriptions: \$20.00 a year. In Canada and all
other countries: \$26.00 a year. Second-class
postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at
additional mailing offices. In Canada second-class
postage paid at Windsor, Ontario (permit no. 9579).
Copyright © 1987 by American Museum of Natural
History. All rights reserved. No part of this periodical
may be reproduced without written consent of Natural
History. The opinions expressed by authors do not
necessarily reflect the policy of the American Museum.
Natural History is indexed in Reader's Guide to
Periodical Literature.

Museum information: (212) 769-5100
Membership and subscription information: Write to
address below or call (800) 247-5470 if urgent.
Subscription orders, undeliverable copies, and
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
Natural History
Box 5000
Harian, Iowa 51537

2 Letters

6 The First Americans Merritt Ruhlen
Voices from the Past

12 This View of Life Stephen Jay Gould
Hatracks and Theories

26 Bacterial Bedfellows Dorion Sagan and Lynn Margulis
Did modern life begin as a sickly blob?

34 Reviews Douglas J. Futuyma
World Without Design

38 When Brothers Share a Wife Melvyn C. Goldstein,
photographs by Thomas L. Kelly
A Tibetan marriage custom solves a population problem.

52 Grass Roots of the Maned Wolf James M. Dietz
Brazil's long-legged canid survives by its wits and an omnivorous diet.

60 Sex Among the Sessile Text and photographs by Ronald L. Shimek
For sea cucumbers, multispecies orgies have benefits.

64 Hard Times on Mussel Beach John D. Goss-Custard
*An English shorebird teaches its young how to crack the riddle of a tasty
but well-protected shellfish.*

74 The Living Museum
Ancient Mansions of Chaco Canyon

78 Sky Reporter Stephen P. Maran
Unexplained Blazing Objects

82 Celestial Events Thomas D. Nicholson
A Promising Morning Sky

88 This Land Robert H. Mohlenbrock
Mount Graham, Arizona

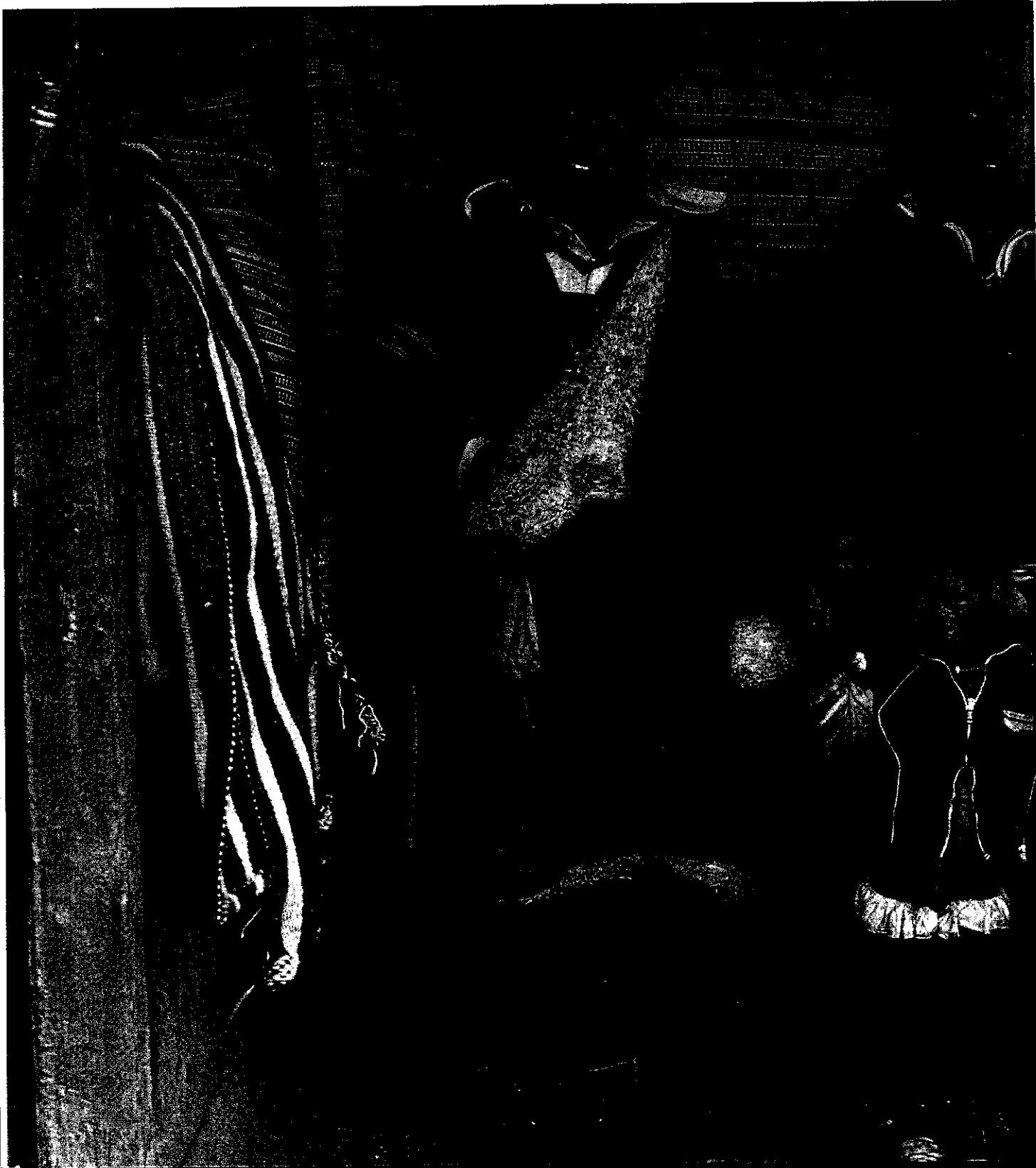
92 A Matter of Taste Raymond Sokolov
Talking Turkey

96 The Natural Moment Photograph by Stephen Dalton
Jumping Blues

98 Authors

Cover: *A Hindu maid in northwestern Nepal pounds grain for a family wedding
in which five Tibetan brothers will take one bride. Photograph by Thomas L. Kelly.
Story on page 38.*

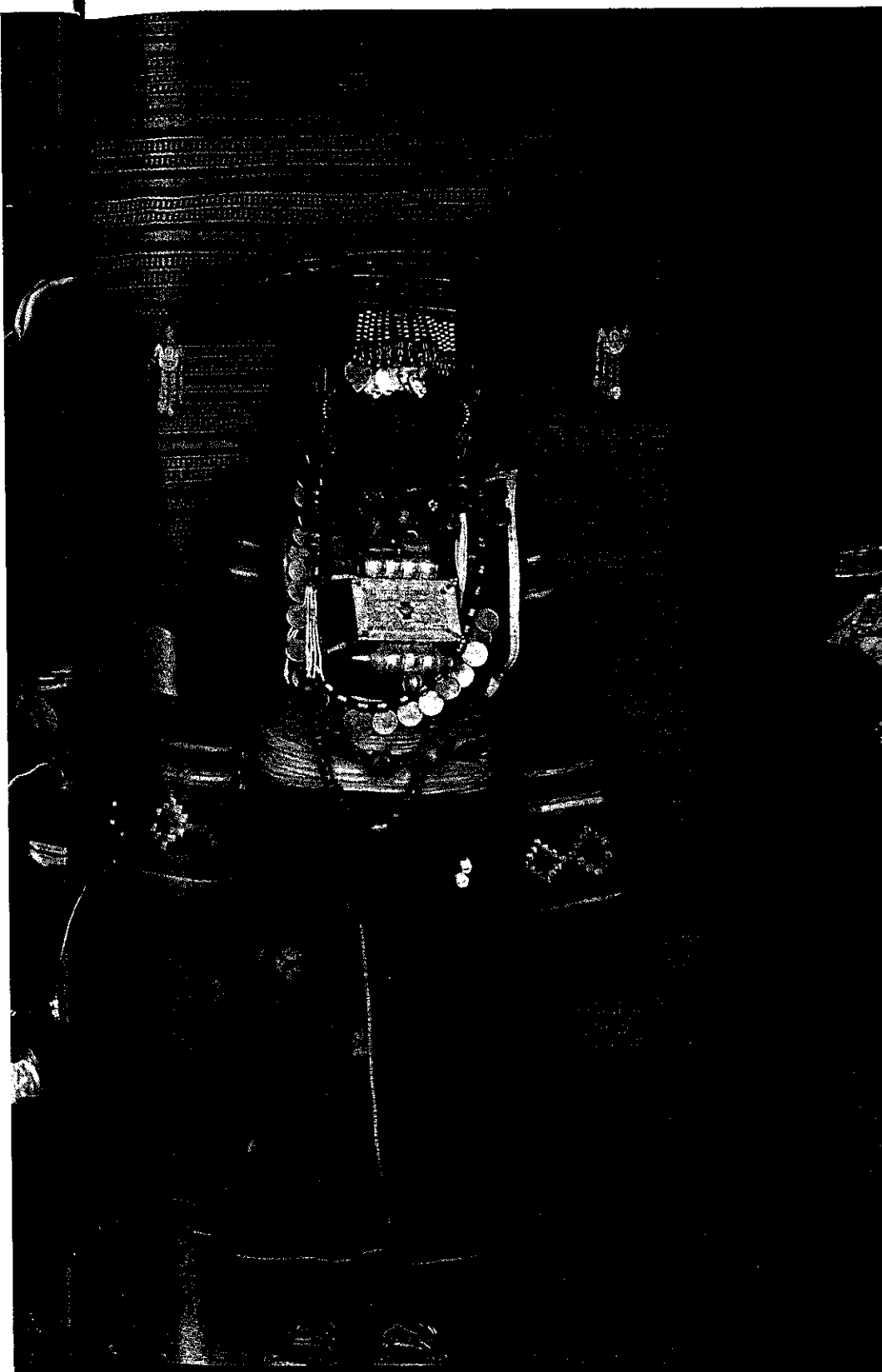
Among ethnic Tibetans who have lived along the Tibet-Nepal border for centuries, a form of polygamous marriage called fraternal polyandry is a traditional and widespread practice. This twelve-year-old bride from the village of Brassi, in northwestern Nepal, stands with three of her five husbands-to-be. The grooms, ages nineteen, seventeen, and seven, are brothers from the village of Bargaon (the other two brothers, ages fourteen and twenty-two, are off on trading trips).



When Brothers Share a Wife

Among Tibetans, the good life relegates many women to spinsterhood

Text by Melvyn C. Goldstein • Photographs by Thomas L. Kelly



Eager to reach home, Dorje drives his yaks hard over the 17,000-foot mountain pass, stopping only once to rest. He and his two older brothers, Pema and Sonam, are jointly marrying a woman from the next village in a few weeks, and he has to help with the preparations.

Dorje, Pema, and Sonam are Tibetans living in Limi, a 200-square-mile area in the northwest corner of Nepal, across the border from Tibet. The form of marriage they are about to enter—fraternal polyandry in anthropological parlance—is one of the world's rarest forms of marriage but is not uncommon in Tibetan society, where it has been practiced from time immemorial. For many Tibetan social strata, it traditionally represented the ideal form of marriage and family.

The mechanics of fraternal polyandry are simple. Two, three, four, or more brothers jointly take a wife, who leaves her home to come and live with them. Traditionally, marriage was arranged by parents, with children, particularly females, having little or no say. This is changing somewhat nowadays, but it is still unusual for children to marry without their parents' consent. Marriage ceremonies vary by income and region and range from all the brothers sitting together as grooms to only the eldest one formally doing so. The age of the brothers plays an important role in determining this: very young brothers almost never participate in actual marriage ceremonies, although they typically join the marriage when they reach their midteens.

The eldest brother is normally dominant in terms of authority, that is, in managing the household, but all the brothers share the work and participate as sexual partners. Tibetan males and females do not find the sexual aspect of sharing a spouse the least bit unusual, repulsive, or scandalous, and the norm is for the wife to treat all the brothers the same.

Offspring are treated similarly. There is no attempt to link children biologically to particular brothers, and a brother shows no favoritism toward his child even if he knows he is the real father because, for example, his other brothers were away at the time the wife became pregnant. The



The children of a polyandrous marriage regard all of their mother's husbands as their fathers, even if specific paternity is known. Children from the village of Brassi, above, toss drying diced radishes into the wind. Right: Representatives of the grooms dance in front of the bride's house. They are encircled by her representatives, who carry pussy willow staffs as mock protective weapons.

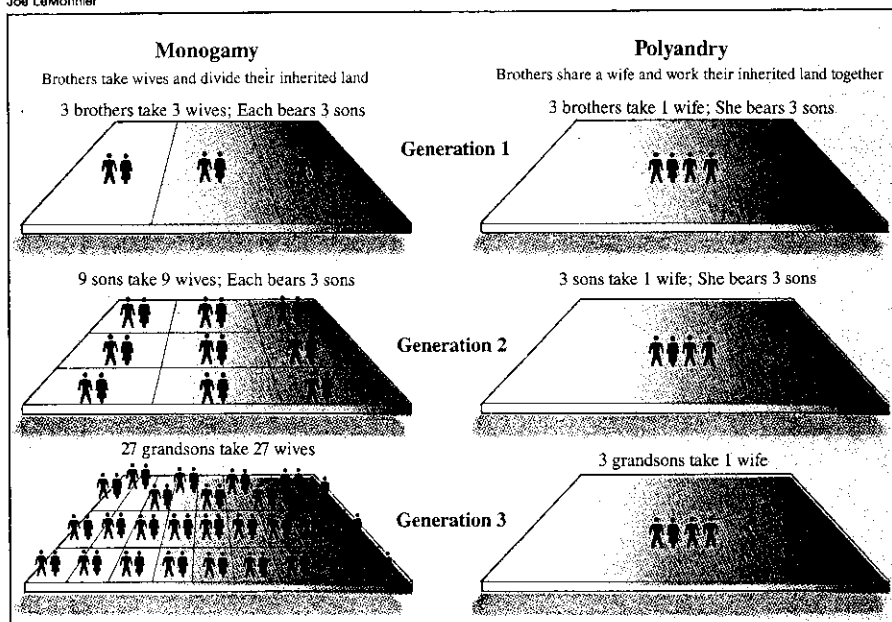




Family Planning in Tibet

An economic rationale for fraternal polyandry is outlined in the diagram below, which emphasizes only the male offspring in each generation. If every wife is assumed to bear three sons, a family splitting up into monogamous households would rapidly multiply and fragment the family land. In this case, a rule of inheritance, such as primogeniture, could retain the family land intact, but only at the cost of creating many landless male offspring. In contrast, the family practicing fraternal polyandry maintains a steady ratio of persons to land.

Joe LeMonnier



fact, divorce traditionally was relatively simple in Tibetan society. If a brother in a polyandrous marriage became dissatisfied and wanted to separate, he simply left the main house and set up his own household. In such cases, all the children stayed in the main household with the remaining brother(s), even if the departing brother was known to be the real father of one or more of the children.

The Tibetans' own explanation for choosing fraternal polyandry is materialistic. For example, when I asked Dorje why he decided to marry with his two brothers rather than take his own wife, he thought for a moment, then said it prevented the division of his family's farm (and animals) and thus facilitated all of them achieving a higher standard of living. And when I later asked Dorje's bride whether it wasn't difficult for her to cope with three brothers as husbands, she laughed and echoed the rationale of avoiding fragmentation of the family and land, adding that she expected to be better off economically, since she would have three husbands working for her and her children.

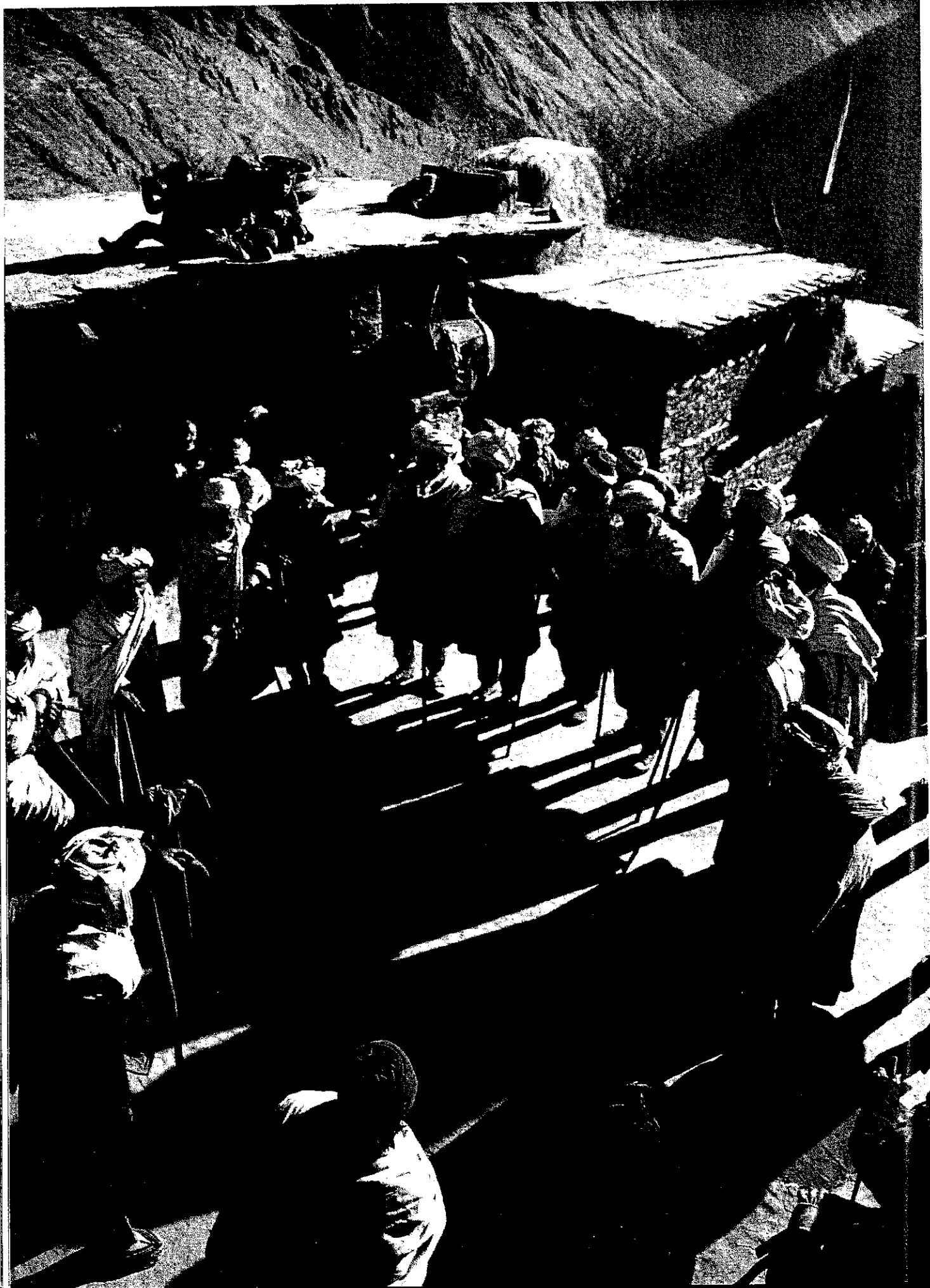
Exotic as it may seem to Westerners, Tibetan fraternal polyandry is thus in many ways analogous to the way primogeniture functioned in nineteenth-century England. Primogeniture dictated that the

eldest son inherited the family estate, while younger sons had to leave home and seek their own employment—for example, in the military or the clergy. Primogeniture maintained family estates intact over generations by permitting only one heir per generation. Fraternal polyandry also accomplishes this but does so by keeping all the brothers together with just one wife so that there is only one set of heirs per generation.

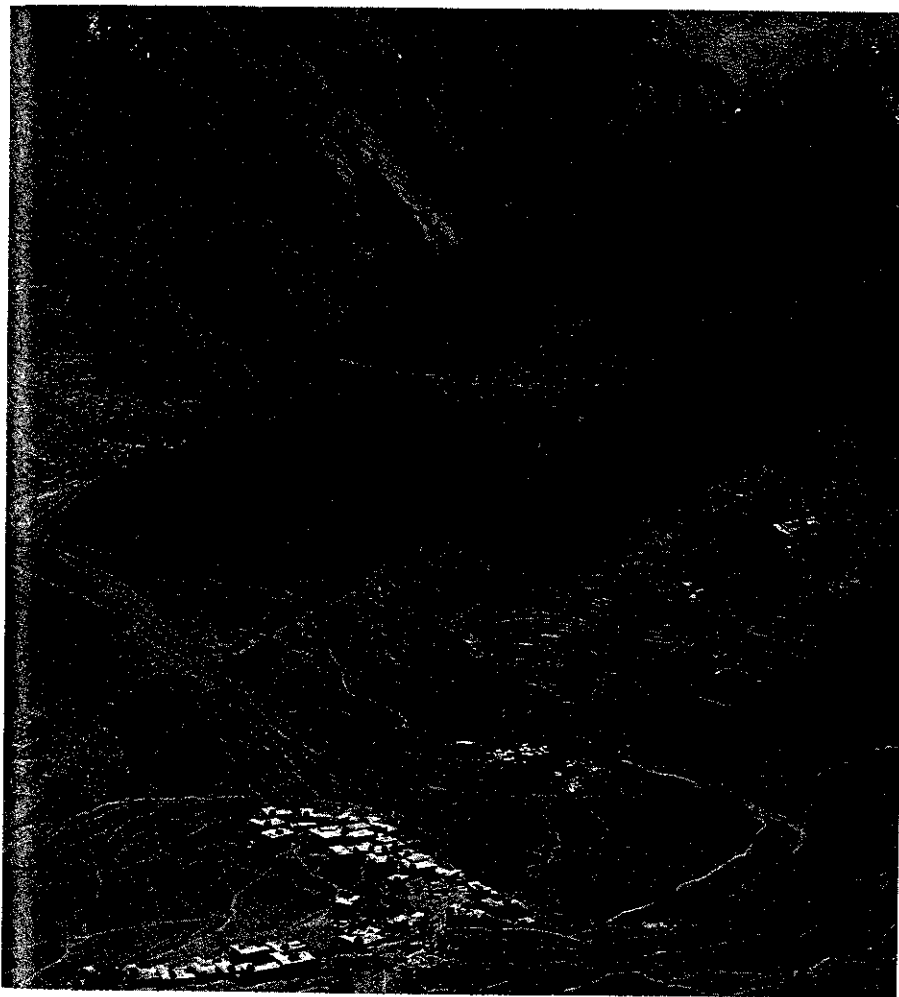
While Tibetans believe that in this way fraternal polyandry reduces the risk of family fission, monogamous marriages among brothers need not necessarily precipitate the division of the family estate: brothers could continue to live together, and the family land could continue to be worked jointly. When I asked Tibetans about this, however, they invariably responded that such joint families are unstable because each wife is primarily oriented to her own children and interested in their success and well-being over that of the children of the other wives. For example, if the youngest brother's wife had three sons while the eldest brother's wife had only one daughter, the wife of the youngest brother might begin to demand more resources for her children since, as males, they represent the future of the family. Thus, the children from different

children, in turn, consider all of the brothers as their fathers and treat them equally, even if they also know who is their real father. In some regions children use the term "father" for the eldest brother and "father's brother" for the others, while in other areas they call all the brothers by one term, modifying this by the use of "elder" and "younger."

Unlike our own society, where monogamy is the only form of marriage permitted, Tibetan society allows a variety of marriage types, including monogamy, fraternal polyandry, and polygyny. Fraternal polyandry and monogamy are the most common forms of marriage, while polygyny typically occurs in cases where the first wife is barren. The widespread practice of fraternal polyandry, therefore, is not the outcome of a law requiring brothers to marry jointly. There is choice, and in



Left: Honored guests from the bride's village sway on the rooftop of the grooms' house, singing in celebration of the union. Below: Bargaon, the grooms' village, enjoys relatively fertile soil, but the steep surrounding terrain prevents young men from striking out on their own by carving out new cultivable land. Hence the value of fraternal polyandry.



wives in the same generation are competing sets of heirs, and this makes such families inherently unstable. Tibetans perceive that conflict will spread from the wives to their husbands and consider this likely to cause family fission. Consequently, it is almost never done.

Although Tibetans see an economic advantage to fraternal polyandry, they do not value the sharing of a wife as an end in itself. On the contrary, they articulate a number of problems inherent in the practice. For example, because authority is customarily exercised by the eldest brother, his younger male siblings have to subordinate themselves with little hope of changing their status within the family. When these younger brothers are aggressive and individualistic, tensions and diffi-

culties often occur despite there being only one set of heirs.

In addition, tension and conflict may arise in polyandrous families because of sexual favoritism. The bride normally sleeps with the eldest brother, and the two have the responsibility to see to it that the other males have opportunities for sexual access. Since the Tibetan subsistence economy requires males to travel a lot, the temporary absence of one or more brothers facilitates this, but there are also other rotation practices. The cultural ideal unambiguously calls for the wife to show equal affection and sexuality to each of the brothers (and vice versa), but deviations from this ideal occur, especially when there is a sizable difference in age between the partners in the marriage.

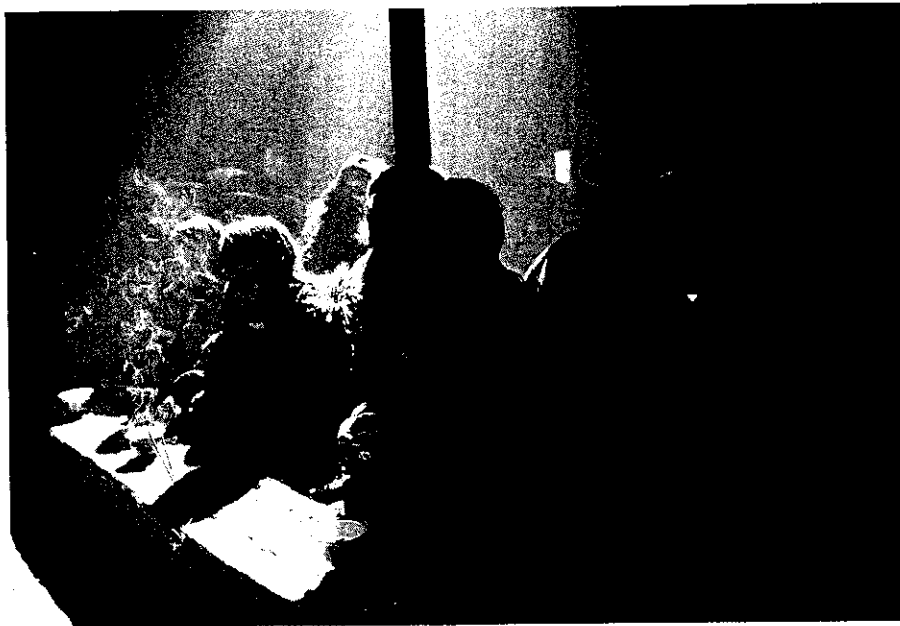
Dorje's family represents just such a potential situation. He is fifteen years old and his two older brothers are twenty-five and twenty-two years old. The new bride is twenty-three years old, eight years Dorje's senior. Sometimes such a bride finds the youngest husband immature and adolescent and does not treat him with equal affection; alternatively, she may find his youth attractive and lavish special attention on him. Apart from that consideration, when a younger male like Dorje grows up, he may consider his wife "ancient" and prefer the company of a woman his own age or younger. Consequently, although men and women do not find the idea of sharing a bride or a bridegroom repulsive, individual likes and dislikes can cause familial discord.

Two reasons have commonly been offered for the perpetuation of fraternal polyandry in Tibet: that Tibetans practice female infanticide and therefore have to marry polyandrously, owing to a shortage of females; and that Tibet, lying at extremely high altitudes, is so barren and bleak that Tibetans would starve without resort to this mechanism. A Jesuit who lived in Tibet during the eighteenth century articulated this second view: "One reason for this most odious custom is the sterility of the soil, and the small amount of land that can be cultivated owing to the lack of water. The crops may suffice if the brothers all live together, but if they form separate families they would be reduced to beggary."

Both explanations are wrong, however. Not only has there never been institutionalized female infanticide in Tibet, but Tibetan society gives females considerable rights, including inheriting the family estate in the absence of brothers. In such cases, the woman takes a bridegroom who comes to live in her family and adopts her family's name and identity. Moreover, there is no demographic evidence of a shortage of females. In Limi, for example, there were (in 1974) sixty females and fifty-three males in the fifteen- to thirty-five-year age category, and many adult females were unmarried.

The second reason is also incorrect. The climate in Tibet is extremely harsh, and

At a polyandrous wedding in the village of Halje, in Nepal's Limi district, wedding guests, below, enjoy salt-butter tea and barley beer inside the bride's ceremonial hall. Incense smoke swirls around one of the guests, right, who drinks from a traditional Tibetan wooden teacup.



ecological factors do play a major role perpetuating polyandry, but polyandry is not a means of preventing starvation. It is characteristic, not of the poorest segments of the society, but rather of the peasant landowning families.

In the old society, the landless poor could not realistically aspire to prosperity, but they did not fear starvation. There was a persistent labor shortage throughout Tibet, and very poor families with little or no land and few animals could subsist through agricultural labor, tenant farming, craft occupations such as carpentry, or by working as servants. Although the per person family income could increase somewhat if brothers married polyandrously and pooled their wages, in the absence of inheritable land, the advantage of fraternal polyandry was not generally sufficient to prevent them from setting up their own households. A more skilled or energetic younger brother could do as well or better alone, since he would completely control his income and would not have to share it with his siblings. Consequently, while there was and is some polyandry among the poor, it is much less frequent and more prone to result in divorce and family fission.

An alternative reason for the persistence of fraternal polyandry is that it re-

duces population growth (and thereby reduces the pressure on resources) by relegating some females to lifetime spinsterhood. Fraternal polyandrous marriages in Limi (in 1974) averaged 2.35 men per woman, and not surprisingly, 31 percent of the females of child-bearing age (twenty to forty-nine) were unmarried. These spinsters either continued to live at home, set up their own households, or worked as servants for other families. They could also become Buddhist nuns. Being unmarried is not synonymous with exclusion from the reproductive pool. Discreet extramarital relationships are tolerated, and actually half of the adult unmarried women in Limi had one or more children. They raised these children as single mothers, working for wages or weaving cloth and blankets for sale. As a group, however, the unmarried woman had far fewer offspring than the married women, averaging only 0.7 children per woman, compared with 3.3 for married women, whether polyandrous, monogamous, or polygynous. While polyandry helps regulate population, this function of polyandry is not consciously perceived by Tibetans and is not the reason they consistently choose it.

If neither a shortage of females nor the fear of starvation perpetuates fraternal

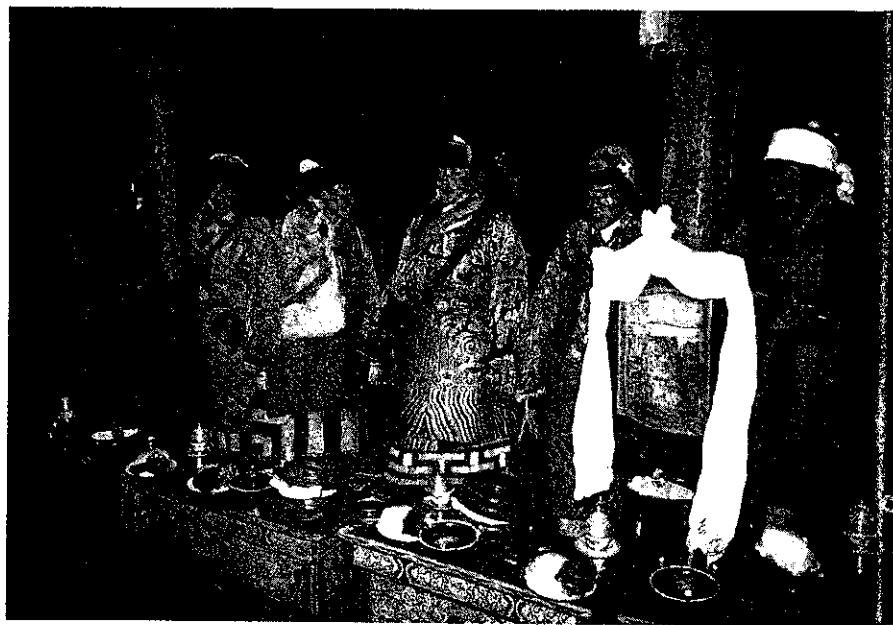
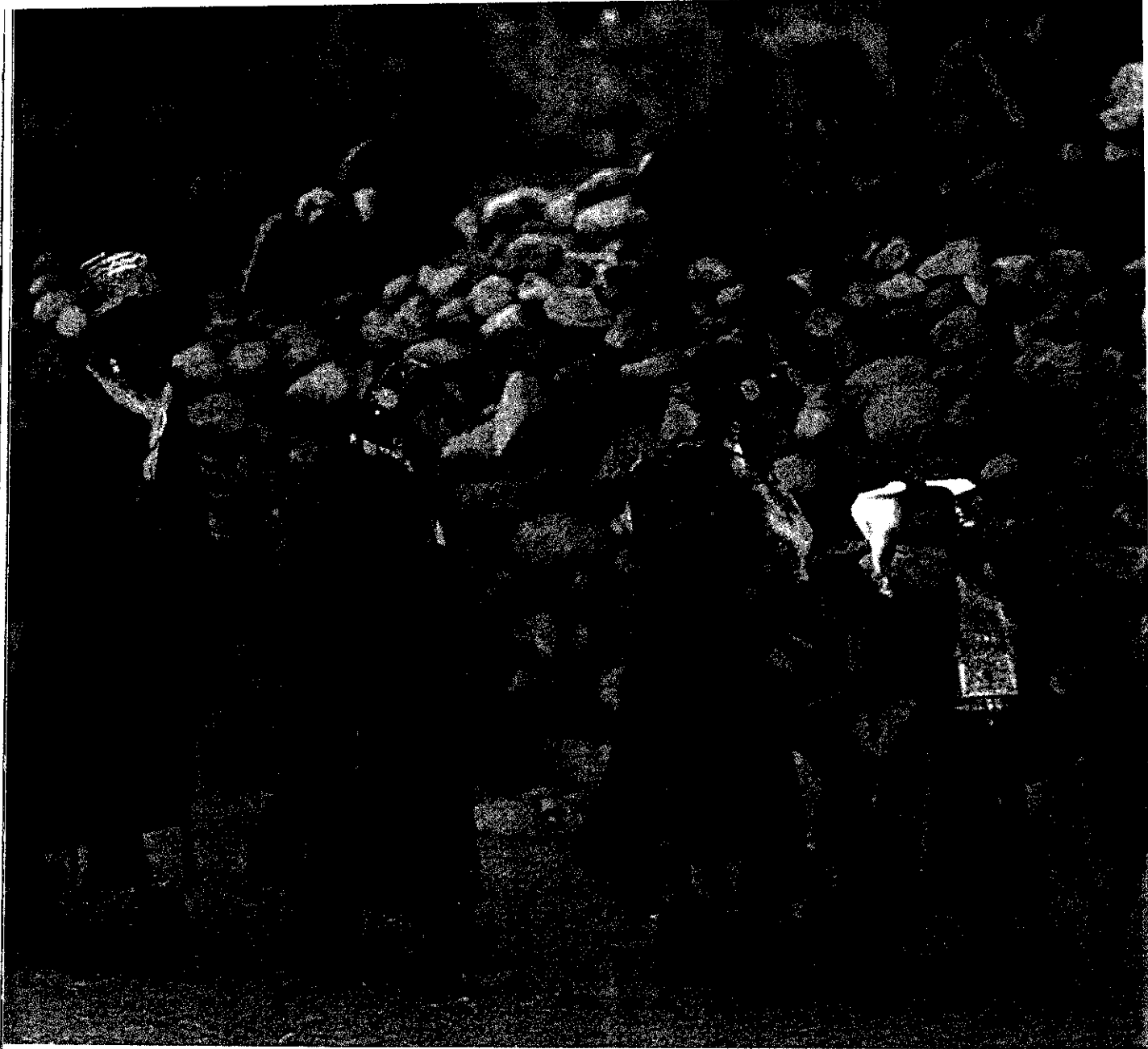
polyandry, what motivates brothers, particularly younger brothers, to opt for this system of marriage? From the perspective of the younger brother in a landholding family, the main incentive is the attainment or maintenance of the good life. With polyandry, he can expect a more secure and higher standard of living, with access not only to his family's land and animals but also to its inherited collection of clothes, jewelry, rugs, saddles, and horses. In addition, he will experience less work pressure and much greater security because all responsibility does not fall on one "father." For Tibetan brothers, the question is whether to trade off the greater personal freedom inherent in monogamy for the real or potential economic security, affluence, and social prestige associated with life in a larger, labor-rich polyandrous family.



par-
this
tive
ling
ain-
ife.
ore
with
and
tion
and
less
rity
l on
the
ater
my
rity,
ted
van-



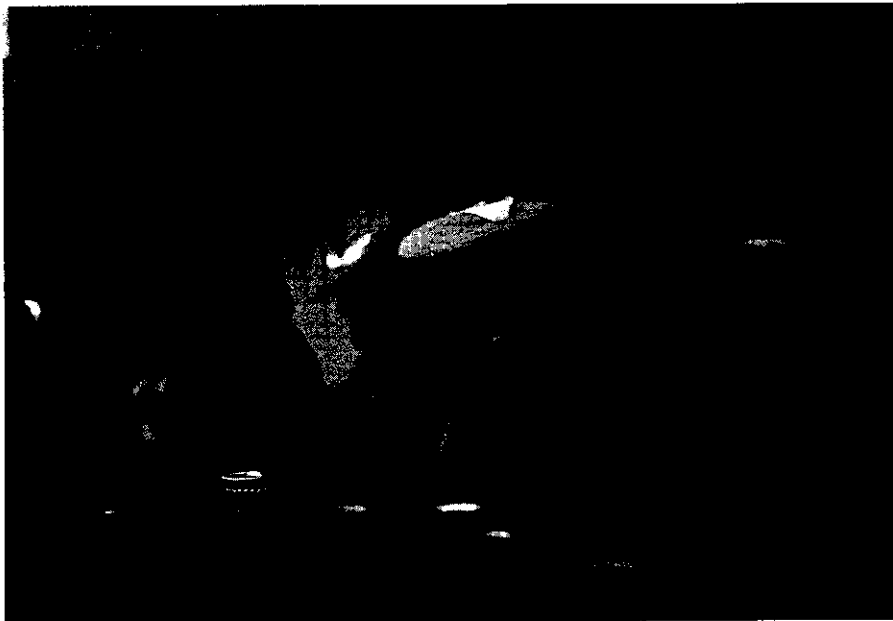
A ten-year-old bride, left, from Halje village, is adorned with mother-of-pearl earrings, turquoise-inlaid charm boxes, and a traditional headdress. She is marrying a man from the same village, in a union that will include any other males born to his parents.



In Halje village, representatives of the bride assemble to respond to a sing-song test of cleverness and worthiness by representatives of the groom.



Left: The bride is led into the groom's ceremonial grounds by her attendants. Below: Representatives of the groom are served barley beer. By custom, each recipient declines the offer a couple of times before giving in.



A brother thinking of separating from his polyandrous marriage and taking his own wife would face various disadvantages. Although in the majority of Tibetan regions all brothers theoretically have rights to their family's estate, in reality Tibetans are reluctant to divide their land into small fragments. Generally, a younger brother who insists on leaving the family will receive only a small plot of land, if that. Because of its power and wealth, the rest of the family usually can block any attempt of the younger brother to increase his share of land through litigation. Moreover, a younger brother may not even get a house and cannot expect to receive much above the minimum in terms of movable possessions, such as furniture, pots, and pans. Thus, a brother contemplating going it on his own must plan on achieving economic security and

the good life not through inheritance but through his own work.

The obvious solution for younger brothers—creating new fields from virgin land—is generally not a feasible option. Most Tibetan populations live at high altitudes (above 12,000 feet), where arable land is extremely scarce. For example, in Dorje's village, agriculture ranges only from about 12,900 feet, the lowest point in the area, to 13,300 feet. Above that altitude, early frost and snow destroy the staple barley crop. Furthermore, because of the low rainfall caused by the Himalayan rain shadow, many areas in Tibet and northern Nepal that are within the appropriate altitude range for agriculture have no reliable sources of irrigation. In the end, although there is plenty of unused land in such areas, most of it is either too high or too arid.

Even where unused land capable of being farmed exists, clearing the land and building the substantial terraces necessary for irrigation constitute a great undertaking. Each plot has to be completely dug out to a depth of two to two and a half feet so that the large rocks and boulders can be removed. At best, a man might be able to bring a few new fields under cultivation in the first years after separating from his brothers, but he could not expect

to acquire substantial amounts of arable land this way.

In addition, because of the limited farmland, the Tibetan subsistence economy characteristically includes a strong emphasis on animal husbandry. Tibetan farmers regularly maintain cattle, yaks, goats, and sheep, grazing them in the areas too high for agriculture. These herds produce wool, milk, cheese, butter, meat, and skins. To obtain these resources, however, shepherds must accompany the animals on a daily basis. When first setting up a monogamous household, a younger brother like Dorje would find it difficult to both farm and manage animals.

In traditional Tibetan society, there was an even more critical factor that operated to perpetuate fraternal polyandry—a form of hereditary servitude somewhat analogous to serfdom in Europe. Peasants were tied to large estates held by aristocrats, monasteries, and the Lhasa government. They were allowed the use of some farmland to produce their own subsistence but were required to provide taxes in kind and *corvée* (free labor) to their lords. The *corvée* was a substantial hardship, since a peasant household was in many cases required to furnish the lord with one laborer daily for most of the year and more on specific occasions such as the harvest.

Right: The bridal party is welcomed to the groom's courtyard as the groom stands on the roof. Friends of the groom's family hold offerings of food, while celebrants sing a tale about the marriage of a Chinese princess to the Tibetan king Songsten Gampo. Below: Praying that a marriage will be free of evil, a lama holds a vajra, a symbol of methods, and rings a bell, a symbol of wisdom.



This enforced labor, along with the lack of new land and the ecological pressure to pursue both agriculture and animal husbandry, made polyandrous families particularly beneficial. The polyandrous family allowed an internal division of adult labor, maximizing economic advantage. For example, while the wife worked the family fields, one brother could perform the lord's corvée, another could look after the animals, and a third could engage in trade.

Although social scientists often discount other people's explanations of why they do things, in the case of Tibetan fraternal polyandry, such explanations are very close to the truth. The custom, however, is very sensitive to changes in its political and economic milieu and, not surprisingly, is in decline in most Tibetan areas. Made less important by the elimination of the traditional serf-based economy, it is disparaged by the dominant non-Tibetan leaders of India, China, and Nepal. New opportunities for economic and social mobility in these countries, such as the tourist trade and government employment, are also eroding the rationale for polyandry, and so it may vanish within the next generation. □

