

Chapter 3

FRATERNAL RELATIONS



Polyandrous marriages involve complex constellations of people. They entail close cooperation among numerous individuals and ask each and every one to accept and prioritise a collective goal. The role distribution is relatively clear in a polyandrous marriage, based on the principles of gender and relative age. Yet, through navigation and negotiation, roles are adjusted and altered, enabling individuals to make their own way in married and household life. In the history of Tibet and the Himalayas, polyandry has been arranged for two or more brothers. There are no moral prohibitions against including non-related co-husbands as such; however, belonging to the same house is at the core of the cultural logics of polyandry and hence motivates the arrangement itself. In addition, by being of the same bones and flesh and thereby constituted by the same essential substances, brothers are very closely related, and brotherhood is associated with loyalty and solidarity, something often mentioned when people in Sharlung talked about polyandry. However, consubstantiality (i.e. being of the same substance) does not exclude the possibility of hierarchy, and rank and authority among brothers are clearly structured, both in the case of co-husbandship and beyond. The basic structuring principle within a same-sex sibling group is relative age, and while there are contextual possibilities for role formation and negotiation, the superior position of the eldest brother is largely undisputed. These hierarchies are internalised, embodied and enacted through childhood, and rarely questioned.

Siblings from the same mother and father are, by the precreation theory of flesh and bone, are the closest relatives, and especially those of the same

sex in a sibling group are expected to have strong emotional connections. Perceptions of brotherhood, then, are important to polyandrous practices. Levine argued that fraternal solidarity was pivotal to the motivation for polyandry among Nyinba (1988: 9, 278),¹ showing that the relation between brothers has its roots in stories of the past; the myths about their ancestors portrayed these as brothers who were linked by polyandry in a time characterised by family harmony (ibid.: 159). Perceptions of consubstantiality and the following expectations of sameness, closeness, solidarity and common interests were also evident in Panam, seen in daily life practices of friendship, affection and care, inside and outside married life. Brothers are not only co-husbands; they can also share extra-marital relations.² Similarly, Levine found that young Nyinba brothers shared premarital sexual relations (ibid.: 9). ‘Brothers’, an elderly woman told to me, ‘like to stay together’.

Among brothers, relative age is made apparent as a principle for rank from early childhood. The superiority of the eldest son is seen in many aspects of domestic life, such as in distribution of food during meals, clothing, in expressed affection – cuddling and attention – and in access to healthcare (see Levine 1987a, 1987b). When arranging a marriage, relative age and the superiority of the eldest was reflected in the various stages leading up to the wedding and further into married life. In the initial period of marriage negotiations, the eldest brother (*genshō*) often visited (in disguise) the potential *nama* and investigated, accepted or rejected his parents’ suggestion on behalf of his brothers. The younger brothers did not have this opportunity, and in the case of the *genshō* being absent, the task was simply not performed. During the wedding ceremony, the *genshō*’s dominant position was acknowledged with the *nama* being seated on his left side and his brothers on his right side, again organised according to relative age. The eldest husband can thus be seen as the mediator and connector between the *nama* and his co-husbands. Moreover, on the night of the wedding, the *nama* stayed with the *genshō*, who initiated sexual life of the marriage. Often the *nama* would stay the following nights with the younger husbands, also organised according to age. Later, it was the *genshō*, in cooperation with the *nama*, who decided the frequency and the distribution of the younger husbands’ sexual access to their wife. While it was the responsibility of the *nama* to make everyone feel equally well-treated, there was an expectation that she would be closest, in terms of emotional bonds and frequency, to her eldest husband.

In early scholarship on polyandry, the different roles of the men and their relations to the married woman was a topic of much concern. This was due to the interest in marriage definitions mentioned in the Introduction, and it was often argued that these plural unions should not be termed marriage but should rather be seen as ‘cicisbeism’ (the married woman having a lover outside marriage) or ‘polykoity’ (or what we would now call polyamorous

relations). Fisher (1952), for instance, claimed that the wife was married only to the eldest man in the fraternal group. The younger brother, Fisher argued, were merely co-residing with the monogamously married couple of their eldest brother. Today, however, there is no disagreement over defining these unions as marriages and all men included are recognised as husbands. However, it is clear that the positions of the co-husbands is ranked, their relation to the shared wife is different, and the younger husbands are thoroughly subordinated.³ Although personal qualities and skills might be given preference in certain contexts, a husband could nevertheless always claim his rights based on his position in the age hierarchy.

Relative Age and Encompassment

Robert Hertz's classical article on 'The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand' (1973 [1909]) can help provide some insights on brothers as co-husbands, as parts in a whole. A central point Hertz made was that the relation between right and left is one of qualitative difference, and that fundamental aspects of these differences can be found not only in nature but also in religion and in the body. The different qualities of the right and the left hand are based on organic symmetry, wherein the right hand is in a position to stand for the whole body, and thus incorporates also the left hand. Hertz argued that this ability of the right hand to *stand for the whole* is crucial to its superior position. Louis Dumont, working on forms of hierarchies in South Asia, expanded on these ideas and suggested that the relations between the oppositions – that is, the relations of incorporation – should more precisely be seen as a particular kind of hierarchy. Dumont argued that the oppositions – the right and the left – cannot be defined in themselves but 'only in relation to a whole' (1979: 810). What Dumont called a hierarchical opposition is the opposition between a set and an element of this set, where the element is identical to the set of which it forms a part (ibid.: 809). Further, the element is also a contrariety to the whole, and as such is a double relation. This double relation connects to the nature of hierarchical opposition and informs Dumont's well-known conclusion that 'essentially, hierarchy is the encompassing of the contrary' (op. cit.; see also Dumont 1970: 66). Encompassment is a value, not in the sense that it is what is considered good but as 'that which structures the relations of elements in the whole' (Robbins 1994: 28). What Dumont calls the 'dominant value', then, is, Robbins writes, that 'element which in general encompasses its contrary' (op. cit.). A dominant value often comes to symbolically represent the whole – that is, the set of parts incorporated.

In Tibetan fraternal polyandry, we can conceptualise the eldest husband as the dominant value of the marriage. Co-husbandship is a hierarchical

relation, in the Dumontian sense of the term, where the eldest husband encompasses the younger husbands, not only in the internal marital organisation but also in terms of symbolic representation. The eldest husband is not only the 'ultimate value' of the marriage but also of the social group they together constitute – that is, the house. Such encompassment could be seen in various contexts; in the wedding process and in the organisation of daily life, in distribution of labour and sex, and in the recognition and terminology of paternity. Moreover, in polyandrous marriages, the notion of encompassment provides a useful perspective on the handling of conflicts and resolutions that unfold in different ways when involving the eldest or the younger husband (Fjeld 2008a).

Distribution of Affection and Authority

Central to the success of a polyandrous marriage is a fair distribution of affection, including sexual access. Maintaining fairness was the common responsibility of the *nama* and the eldest husband but also a concern of the household leaders – that is, the parents (in-law). In Sharlung, it was the *namas* who were commonly blamed for marital failures.

Upon marriage, a system for sexual distribution (*kora khor*) is defined. In this initial period, the *nama* often has only limited influence on the details of the arrangement. Many women described this as a period of feeling shy and embarrassed. *Kora khor* translates as 'going around in circles' and is the basic principle of sexual access in a polyandrous marriage. In cases, and phases, where the *nama* had a weak position, it was her eldest husband who administered the *kora khor*. However, after the first initial marital period, the *nama* was expected to participate in making these decisions. My interlocutors assessed that in Panam an arrangement where the *nama* had close cooperation with her eldest husband in the periods when he was present in the house and where she made independent decisions when he was absent was most widespread. There were, however, exceptions to this, depending on interpersonal dynamics.

There are several patterns into which sexual access can be distributed, depending upon the labour division among the co-husbands, structural elements of the interior of the house, the nature of the relations of the partners and the preferences of the *nama*. In the larger houses in Sharlung, the co-husbands and the wife had private sleeping rooms, while in houses with less space, the husbands often alternated where they slept. It was common for the *nama* to share a room with her eldest husband; indeed, this was a sign of a successful – a good – marriage. When discussing this with women, indeed many felt sad for *namas* without their own room, indicating the vulnerability

of their position and relations in the house. Below, I describe the four main ways to arrange *kora khor*.

The first type of *kora khor* was found in the many marriages that involved only two husbands, and where one of them worked outside the village for several months per year. In such cases, the husband that travelled would often stay with the wife in the whole period that he was home, while the home-based husband and the wife shared a room when they were alone. When both husbands were there, she would also visit the home-based husband but not frequently. More complex systems evolved when two or more husbands co-resided for the majority of the year. The second type of *kora khor* commonly practised in the early phase of a marriage involving two husbands was that the husbands and the wife each had separate rooms, and the wife alternated between sleeping in her room and the husbands' rooms. She might or might not decide how to alternate. Dikiyi, a young woman in the village, told me that her two co-husbands worked together during most of the day (in the field, or elsewhere) and that they at some point during the day decided on the nightly arrangement, if any. When the evening set in, the designated husband would take his blanket to the wife's room, and, by recognising the blanket, she would know who she would be with. Moreover, Dikiyi explained that although she did not dislike this system, she expected that in a few years' time – when her children were older and her position in the house more strongly consolidated – she would administer the *kora khor* on her own, although, she pointed out, she wanted to make sure that both husbands were content. In the third, and most common type of *kora khor*, the *nama* shared a room with her eldest husband (who may or may not work outside the village). Dikiyi's neighbour Phundröl, had a more active role in defining the *kora khor*, despite also being in an early phase of her marriage. She had a strong position, both in relation to her parents-in-law, and to her three husbands, and came across as a confident and outgoing person. In her house, the spatial arrangement was such that Phundröl shared the sleeping room with her eldest husband while the other two husbands each had their own room. The eldest husband worked outside the village for more than four months per year, and in these periods, Phundröl would sleep alone and define the *kora khor* on her own terms. When he returned back home, she stayed with only him for two weeks, before returning to the regular *kora khor*. According to Phundröl, it had been she who suggested this system: 'of course I did', she said, and she had then asked her eldest husband if he agreed with her, which he did. Phundröl chose to move around her husbands' rooms. She was nursing one child, who slept in her room, while the other children slept in the kitchen/living room (*tapsang*) together with the grandparents. Independent of breastfeeding, Phundröl always returned to her (and her eldest husband's) room after completed intercourse with one of the younger

husbands. When I asked if she had wished to share a room with her other husbands in the period when the eldest was travelling, she said: 'No. I have a better relation with the *genshō*.' The fourth type of *kora khor* is the clustering of sexual activities; a system where the *nama* visits all husbands during one night. This was rather uncommon, and talked about as an exception, and only practised in marriages with no more than three husbands. According to hearsay, two *namas* in Sharlung preferred this system, and although it is accepted, other women did chat about it with some curiosity.

Despite being a collective concern in the household, sex was private. Some of these types of arrangement, particularly the arrangement where the husbands are visiting the *nama*'s room, were potentially embarrassing for those involved. Hence, there were several more or less discreet ways to indicate on-going sexual activity in a particular room, enabling others in the house to keep a distance. Two strategies can serve as an illustration. In Darkhang house, for instance, when the *nama* and one husband entered a room for sex, she put either the strap holding up her boots, or the belt on her *chuba* on the door, signalling the need for privacy. In other houses, women would put their boot straps on top of the blanket, indicating the same. Because there was no electricity in Sharlung at the time, the rooms were very dark at night; thus, the strap on the blanket was for people to be warned by touching the blanket if they had already entered the room. The practical signalling of on-going sexual activity did not only avoid what was seen to be an embarrassing situation but also displayed performance of *kora khor* for the others in the house, providing an indication to the household leaders.

To sum up, the distribution of emotional and sexual connections also reflects the special relation between the *nama* and the eldest husband. Women openly revealed having more affection for the eldest husband. The two held a particular position with regards to the future, as the next male and female heads of the household. Their cooperation was crucial for the future of the house, and much emphasis was put on enabling this, both between themselves and among the parent generation. Fair distribution of *kora khor* was an important part of affection and a collaborative sensibility also outside the conjugal unit.

The position of the eldest husband and his special relation to the *nama* was also reflected in the issues of paternity, although in a different way. The hierarchy and the symbolic relation between the brothers and co-husbands came to the fore in the question of paternity. The eldest husband symbolically stands for the group of fathers, and he is called '*pala*' (the conventional term for 'father' in all marriage forms). However, this did not mean that the other husbands were called *akhu* (father's brother/uncle).

Social Fatherhood but One *Pala*

In the known cases of fraternal polyandry, paternity is defined biologically, classificatory or socially, which, as Levine and Silk have argued (1997), very much influences the conflict level of polyandrous marriages. Levine's Nyinba ethnography indicates that a high level of conflict is found among those who openly identify biological paternity among the co-partners. The potential conflicts in this is based in the per stirpes inheritance system, where the land is transferred from a father to his biological child regardless of age hierarchy. These inheritance rules are also evident in Panam. In Sharlung, it was, however, taboo to identify openly the genitor of a child, and all children were recognised offspring of the marriage – that is, of all the husbands. Socially validated fatherhood, combined with internalised age hierarchy, contributed to a relatively low conflict level among co-husbands in Sharlung. The eldest husband's encompassment of the younger was reflected in the terminology used to denote paternity. The eldest is the classificatory father (*pala*), and his co-husbands are termed according to age, *ajok* (the middle) and *achung* (the younger). Thus, the younger husbands were not conceptually linked directly to fatherhood but rather to brotherhood yet clearly distinct from father's brothers outside marriage, called *akhu*. These terms that the children used for their fathers did not fully describe the relation between the eldest husband, his brothers and their offspring, because although only the eldest husband was termed 'father' by the conventional term, all husbands were recognised as not only social fathers (pater) but as genitors. This is also based on the flesh and bones idioms and consubstantiality of brothers.

All husbands were considered to contribute with male substance in the creation of a child born to the wife. Because male substance manifests in the bones of a child, and because the co-husbands are (ideally, and most often in practice) of the same patrilineage, the substance transferred from the co-husbands is seen to be the same; they are biologically identical. Thus, the explanation of fatherhood is connected to local understandings of biology on the one hand, and the constitution of a child's body on the other, emphasising consubstantiality of siblings of the same mother and same father(s) (*pachik machik*). *Pachik machik* is commonly used to describe siblings in monogamous marriages; however, siblings from polyandrous marriages, and thus children of different genitors, were also referred to by these same terms. Hence, the group of brothers/fathers were '*pachik*', suggesting socially validated fatherhood. Fatherhood is, however, more complex. All children of a particular marriage were seen to be 'fathered' by all their mother's husbands, not only socially but also in terms of providing the crucial genealogical matrix of the children; the precondition for this being that the mother (although she often knows) will not disclose who among her husbands is the genitor of a child.

Local procreation theory does not explicate plural genitors. Women are perceived to be fertile in a period of around five days (the fifth to the tenth day) in the menstrual cycle, which means that in a situation with several husbands present, the genitor cannot always be determined. My interlocutors shared the understanding that one intercourse is sufficient for conception; there were no notions of nurture by additional sperm for a successful impregnation (see also Diemberger 1993). Thus, each conception recognises only one genitor, however his identity was not revealed, neither in private nor in public. Being unaware of the genitor of a particular child is more than a lack of knowledge. Efforts were made to produce this ignorance about genitors. In the anthology *Anthropology of Ignorance*, High et al. (2012) argue that ignorance cannot be explained simply as negative, as the absence of knowledge, but rather as something that is produced through specific practices. Cultural production of ignorance is rather the 'production, out of the infinite sea of things that people happen to not know, of culturally recognized and elaborated units, fields, modes of ignorance' (2012: 33). The unknown genitor of polyandrous unions is an example of a culturally and socially produced ignorance. I often heard people talk about resemblance – which child resembles which father – however, always in playful and joking manner, and never confirming a connection. Although women did hint about likely genitors among themselves, they put much effort into keeping this information vague and away from men, and from becoming known in the public. They did not name the likely genitor within the house nor outside. In cases of two husbands only and where one was absent during parts of the year and therefore biological fatherhood would be easy to deduce, women could tell stories about the time of conception, a husband's travels and visits, or other activities that produced some, even if little, uncertainty. Even when, at some level, it would be rather obvious that only one of the husbands could have been the genitor, this is not explicitly produced to be a fact but rather undercommunicated and actively ignored. Several women told me that in daily life they would point to particularly strong emotional ties between one father and a child or hint about resemblance, often to emphasise other-than-genitor relations and also to produce ambiguity and uncertainty. As one man of a marriage with three husbands said: 'There is no way to know.' The production of ignorance is an important, and shared, effort to control jealousy and maintain a collective sensibility. Not even during divorces was this ignorance challenged, and I am not aware of any cases where fathers or mothers violated this norm.

Throughout my stays in the Takrab house, I tried to systematically observe father-children interactions, looking for indications of special bonds between what I found out were the biological fathers and their children. I have come to conclude that in the cases I was able to observe, having contributed male

substance to a particular child does not define or affect father-child relation in a substantial way compared to relations to other children of the marriage. In some cases, the mother whispered to me who she held to be the genitor, and observing those father-child relations unfold, I found no signs of them being more emotionally attached to their children (see also Levine 1987b). All husbands were 'one father (*pachik*)', a group represented by the eldest, the *pala*. As such, the *pala* encompasses the *ajok* (the second eldest) and the *achung* (the younger), and he is not only a part of the whole ('one father') but his relation to the whole is of a particular kind. The *pala*, I suggest, symbolically stands for the whole. The paternal terminology thus refers indirectly to the relations between fathers and children, and directly to the relation between fathers, or co-husbands, and the house, as the eldest husbands not only encompass their brothers as co-husbands but also as the household leaders, and by that, the whole house.

Transfer of Leadership

The principle of relative age is confirmed in leadership relations and power transfer processes. Although there is always the possibility to negotiate and influence the ascribed positions within hierarchical relations, the foundation of the distribution of authority in polyandrous marriages remains for the most part unchallenged.

The leadership structure of a house was formalised and organised around a male (*sayön*) and a female leader (*nangma*), of which the former had general authority. The *sayön* ('the leader of the place') or *khyimdak* ('owner of the house') was publicly recognised by the house members and the community. He was the ultimate leader of the house, who organised not only the daily (male) tasks, such as farming, herding and other off-farm activities and projects but also, for example, the future planning of the next generation's marriage. He acted on behalf of the house, maintaining mutual aid networks for funerals and weddings, and he represented the house in village obligations, including partaking in community work. In Sharlung, there was an unchallenged arrangement whereby house leadership was transferred from the *sayön* in one generation to the eldest man in the next generation. House leadership preconditioned marriage, and should the eldest son refuse a married life, he would not be eligible for the leader position. In an organisation based on a monomarital principle and following one household per house, the eldest husband also held a dominant position in the one and only marriage in his generation.

As with most stratified arrangements, age hierarchy between siblings is a cultural norm and is naturalised in Tibet. In our conversations, people simply

explained the difference in influence and authority among brothers with the tautological truism that the eldest is more highly valued because he is more important, and further that it is natural that he is more important because he is the eldest. Age hierarchy sensibility is doxic, in Bourdieu's term – that is, a learned natural and social order that appears self-evident (1997: 164). From birth, the eldest son is placed in a superior position and taught to lead, while the younger brothers are placed in an inferior position and taught to look to the eldest for leadership and advice. During childhood, their parents explicitly show more affection for the eldest son; when the mother has cooked, he receives food first. Their sisters cuddle him often, listen to his stories and give him compliments for his achievements. Only seldom do younger brothers challenge the legitimate authority of the eldest; in cases of extreme incompetence, due to disability or addiction, or long-term periods of absence, it is acceptable for a younger brother to take over the *sayön* position, however this was said to be rare. I did not see examples of male household leaders who were not the eldest living member of their generation in Sharlung, although there were some female household leaders.

Polyandrous Masculinities

When brothers are co-husbands, certain types of masculinities are culturally produced and socially encouraged, particularly a type of collaborative masculinity. Yet, polyandrous relations, and co-husbandship, have not been explored in gender or men's studies. One might wonder why polyandry and polygyny are so seldom compared in the social sciences, and particularly why cross-gender comparisons in plural marriage are non-existent. Broadly speaking, both marriage forms include plural partners, both are justified through household composition and wealth (and labour or land, with the exception of Mormon polygyny), and both involve complex emotional and personal relations. Much has been written about co-wives but less about co-husbands (Goody 1982; Ember et al. 2007). One of the reasons for this difference is, of course, that the number of women who are co-wives in the world is much higher than the number of men who are co-husbands. In addition, I think the status of 'co-husband' challenges gender norms in ways that make us think about this phenomenon as an exception, especially in men's studies. Although men's studies are developing theories about different ways to enact maleness, to which co-husbandship could be a relevant case, the main interest in these studies has been the effects that different enactments of maleness have had on gender difference and inequality (Gutmann 1997). For instance, explorations of so-called hegemonic masculinities – normative masculinity that 'embodied the currently most honoured way of being a

man' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832) – have remained focused on relations between men and women or, more concretely, the practices that legitimate 'the global subordination of women to men' (op. cit.). The notion of hegemonic masculinity implies a hierarchy that includes subordinated and alternative masculinities and a dominant position based on an internalised form of power. Co-husbands are, as we have seen, related through enactment of hierarchies, of naturalised dominance and authority, and the role of the eldest brother could in that sense be interpreted as an enactment of hegemonic masculinity.⁴ After much critique, Connell and Messerschmidt suggested that a revised version of this concept recognises, first, the plurality of masculinities and, second, the hierarchy of masculinities – ideas, they argue, that have survived two to three decades of criticism. Certain masculinities, they write, 'are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others' (ibid.: 846). This hegemony is socially and culturally produced and continuously changing, challenged also by alternative masculinities, and leading to various constellations of gender relations. Women, and relations to women, are also central to the process of constructing these masculinities, as is clearly evident in the case of the husbands and their shared wife in polyandrous marriages too.

In the little research done on Tibetan masculinities, one type that is often described as hegemonic, or perhaps better termed a dominant masculine ideal, is a 'heroic' masculinity (Makley 2007), a potentially explosive masculinity that needs to be tamed. Hillman and Henfry (2006), interviewing Tibetans and Chinese living in Dechen (Kham, Yunnan province), found that the term *pho khyokha* was readily used in discussions about Tibetan masculinity, translating as something like a 'manly man' (ibid.: 261). Both heroic masculinity and *pho khyokha* are closely connected to the imaginary of a young nomad; wild, physically strong, virile and passionate, as well as loyal. Makley, exploring gender and masculinities in the rapidly urbanising Labrang, a monastic power centre in the mostly pastoral Amdo region in north-eastern Tibet, found that (among other complex forms of lay and monastic masculinities) 'the most basic aspect of heroic masculinity in practice was the assumption that young men were naturally compelled to engage in violent competitions with other young men, and to pursue sexual encounters with women' (2007: 243). In Labrang, young men were expected to 'learn to channel' this 'explosive potential', and this taming is achieved through homosocial and patrifilial relations, which are expressed in loyalty (op. cit.). Male superiority, Makley argues, is less about the ability to control women and more about the ability to move out of the domestic sphere and connect (the household) with larger (translocal) networks – networks that are formed through homosocial relations and activities. Monkhhood, which has been an alternative status for Tibetan men, is also a channelled masculinity,

she argues, tamed through the ritualised transition performed through ordination. Hillman and Henfry also found that monks were perceived to be *pho khyokha* – the physical strength associated with lay masculinity was then interpreted as the strength of the mind, and in being able to ‘abstain from certain worldly pleasures’ (2006: 266). Both Makley’s study and Hillman and Henfry’s studies are from Tibetan areas close to, or associated with, nomadic communities – areas that are far from Panam, not only in geographical distance but also in ways of life. However, these masculinities are produced in a broader context, too; a context that is partially shared by Tibetans across the PRC. Perceptions of Tibetan masculinities are (in)formed by the context of the official transcript of Tibetans as the ethnic (minority) Other, also among farmers in Central Tibet, and the ‘young nomad man’ is very close to the Chinese representation of Tibetanness (especially since the end of the 1990s) (Louie 1992; Makley 2010). As Connell and Messerschmidt argue, broadly speaking, masculinities are produced through the interplay of local, regional and global levels, and indeed, the (regional) representations of not only ‘Tibetan’ as an ethnic minority in China but also ‘Tibetan man’ in Tibet as *pho khyokha* – the sturdy, untamed nomad – provide a cultural framework that might come into play in daily lives and interactions (ibid.: 849) – that is, as gendered practices in particular localities, such as in agrarian Panam.

The dominant ideal in the context of polyandry is a collaborative masculinity, in which the enactment of maleness maintains both amicable homosocial relations within and outside the household, as well as with the wife. Yet, there are multiple masculinities at play – including what could be termed heroic, on the one hand, and caring, on the other – all of which were normative ways of being a man in Panam. Yet, the sense of a tamed or channelled ‘explosive’ masculinity prone to violence and sex, as described from Amdo and Kham, does not resonate strongly with dominant masculine ideals in Panam. The image of the horse-riding wild nomad circulates there too, but more as a figure in films and stories, and serves, in some ways, as an Other. Especially Khampa men are talked about as wild, unpredictable and difficult to trust – based also on experiences with business interactions in Panam villages – and are examples of a masculinity that would undermine polyandry. The eldest brother, the person of doxic authority, enacts maleness in a way that emphasises control and decisiveness – enabling collaboration – which could be seen as the dominant masculine ideal in Panam. The production of collaborative masculinity is inherent in the treatment of boys while growing up, yet this is associated with both a heroic and caring masculinity. Naughty boys were seen to be funny, and this wildness was also encouraged, indicating the need for some process of taming into adulthood. Yet, this wildness was less associated with a potential to ‘engage in violent competitions’ and to ‘pursue sexual encounters’ (Makley 2007: 243) and more with being unruly and free,

forming an alternative heroic masculinity. A caring masculinity, especially in relation to children and wives, was subordinated; it was a recognised way to be a man, however, it was less explicitly appreciated. The plurality and hierarchy of masculinities inform polyandrous relations and brothers as co-husbands, and the acceptance of various ways to enact maleness was closely connected to relative age and to roles in a marriage. The handling of conflicts in a polyandrous arrangement can serve to illustrate the significance of relative age, of roles and the ideal of a collaborative masculinity.

When Things Get Complicated: Polyandry-Specific Conflicts

Throughout the years, both scholars and popular media have engaged with conflicts in, and partitions of, polyandrous marriages, reflecting perhaps the underlying notion of polyandry as going against a Western idea of male sexuality.⁵ Also, in Lhasa, Tibetans often talked about polyandry as potentially ridden with conflict. It is worth noting that although many polyandrous marriages had been divided at some point in time, many remained together either in the original constellation or with a reduced number of people. In fact, according to local registers referred to by the township leaders in Kyiling, the conflicts leading to divisions in the area were often not specific to polyandry but rather intergenerational disagreements, such as between the *nama* and her mother-in-law.

Nevertheless, also in Sharlung, people acknowledged that polyandry was a more demanding form of marriage, as compared with monogamy (yet less demanding than polygyny due to the competition between sets of heirs in the latter). Three main polyandry-specific conflicts were prominent: first, an unfair distribution of affection and sexual access (the *nama* disrespecting one or more of the husbands); second, an unfair contribution to, and distribution of, economic resources; and third, the youngest husband's lack of interest in the *nama* (particularly in cases of significant age differences between the two). In addition, conflicts between the *nama* and her sister-in-law were common, and although these cannot be defined strictly as polyandry-specific, they were more prominent in polyandrous houses.

In Sharlung, I was told that most of the conflicts were of the first type; namely the distribution of affection and sexual access, reflecting the responsibility given to the *nama* in polyandry. However, in the various cases of conflict escalation and divorce, the *nama* and her eldest husband often operated as one union. In the situations where the *nama* had a difficult relation with one or more of the younger brothers, the eldest husband would often side with her. Similarly, the *nama* would most often support the *genshō* during conflicts with his brothers (or with parents, as was often the case).

Conflicts that involved either the *genshō* or the *nama* often resulted in divorce and establishment of a new household; there were only a few cases where the *nama* and a younger husband had moved and re-established themselves elsewhere. As in the Norkhang case I describe below, domestic conflicts that involved the *nama* and *genshō* were perceived to be highly problematic and a potential crisis, and serious efforts were made to mediate. When mediation failed and division occurred, the eldest son's parting from a house was morally and materially sanctioned, often leading to disrupted relations and limited inheritance.

The Partition of a House: Norkhang versus Norshön

A house-based community like Panam emphasises sibling unity. With patri-ideology, this particularly concerned brothers, but in the context of a high incident of polyandry and a surplus of unmarried women, sibling unity also often included a sister. Classical conflicts in kinship relations are that between siblingship (filiation) and that of conjugal relations (affinity). The siblingship is at the core of the polyandrous house in Tibet, and the *nama* was seen to be the one that potentially could threaten the harmony of the sibling group, and particularly the position of an unmarried sister-in-law, in cases where they shared a house.

The following example shows several aspects of co-partnership on the one hand, and the superior role of the eldest husband on the other.⁶ Two dimensions of polyandrous conflicts are central: first, the foundation for the conflict and the internal power relations in a sibling group; secondly, the handling of domestic conflicts and the sanctions against the eldest son for threatening the perpetuation of the house. During my stay in Sharlung, several domestic conflicts were on-going. Some of these had started more than twenty years before and had never been resolved; others had a shorter history and negotiations were still sporadically occurring. The following is an example of a partition of one of the larger houses, called Norkhang. The division was the result of several failed attempts to reach an agreement within the original house. The split from the house had been very dramatic, and four years after, the two parties still avoided each other. Although this particular partition had some unusual elements to it, it can serve to illustrate common basic problems leading to partitions of polyandrous marriages in Sharlung.

The Norkhang household had been divided when the two eldest sons, their shared wife and only child moved and established a new household on their own. The three young adults had borrowed money from the wife's natal house in the neighbouring valley and had received financial help from friends in Sharlung to build a small house on one of the less fertile plots of land that the two brothers had inherited from their natal household. They called the

new house Norshön – the ‘little Nor’. Remaining in the original Norkhang house were the men’s mother and father, one brother, who had also been part of the conjoint marriage, one nun sister, as well as three younger siblings and the mother’s sister.

We enter their story when the *sayön* of the Norkhang house, the *makpa* Dawa Tsering, and his wife had suggested to their three eldest sons that they would arrange a marriage for them.⁷ The three sons were at the time 26, 23 and 18 years old and had agreed to marry together. Through his affines in the neighbouring valley, Dawa Tsering had been told about a woman called Sökyi, who was of the right age and was also from one the wealthiest houses, and he decided to approach her father. They easily came to an agreement of a possible marriage. Dawa Tsering travelled with his eldest son, Migmar, in the guise of businessmen, to meet Sökyi. During the visit, Sökyi served tea and *chang*, as is usual when receiving guests, and according to Migmar, her way of serving, showing a kind and humble personality, and her striking beauty and suitable age convinced him that she was a good match for him and his two brothers.⁸

The role of the eldest as a representative for the group of future husbands is uncontested in this first phase of the marriage negotiations, as already mentioned. When I asked Migmar’s younger brother, Namgyal, if he could have travelled to see Sökyi that first time, he told me he could have visited her, but his opinion would not have mattered. That assessment, he said, is the privilege of the *genshö*. We can take this as another example of how the *genshö* encompasses the co-husbands, and as an indication of the hierarchical arrangement being made evident from the very beginning of a polyandrous marriage. The *genshö* is the one ‘part’ of the ‘whole’ (group of brothers in marriage) that has the particular embracing character that is embedded with the ability to act in accordance with the will of the other encompassed parts. The encompassing status of the *genshö* was reflected in wedding preparations, the daily organisation of domestic life and in the escalation of conflicts.

The problems in Norkhang started shortly after the wedding. Sökyi, the *nama*, did not settle with ease into the house. In particular, she was unhappy and uncomfortable with the way her sister-in-law and mother-in-law treated her. Dawa Tsering and his wife, on the other hand, had two main concerns in this early phase: first, that Sökyi did not manage a good *kora khor*, and second, that Migmar contributed too little to the household economy. These conflicts between in-married and resident women and between generations were not uncommon in Sharlung. They often involved the *nama* but were not driven by jealousy among co-partners (as is often described in studies of polygyny). According to Dawa Tsering, they experienced a dramatic change in cooperation and co-residence relations after Sökyi moved in. Their claim

was that Sökyi did not treat the three brothers equally; in fact, they said, she did not like her youngest husband. Observing how the marriage unfolded, it was their opinion that Sökyi did not 'love him' (that is, did not include him properly in the *kora khor*). The parents and their eldest daughter (who was a nun but lived at home) encouraged Sökyi to connect better with the youngest husband, but, according to the nun, Sökyi got angry with everyone except Migmar and Namgyal, her two oldest husbands.

Migmar and Sökyi, on the other hand, denied any unfair distribution of affection and held that the youngest husband had in fact been included in the *kora khor*. They claimed that the accusations from the parents (in-law) were simply redefined after the conflict had escalated, in an attempt to legitimise their position after the fact. Moreover, they argued that the parents' critique of Migmar's (lack of) contribution of his off-farm income to the household came up only after it was apparent that Migmar took Sökyi's side in her conflict with them. Lack of economic contribution and unfair distribution of affection were indeed two problems that could legitimise a divorce in a polyandrous house. The main point of interest here is the immediate support that Migmar gave to Sökyi when it became clear that she was unhappy in the house. Initially, the quarrels had occurred between Sökyi and her sister-in-law, in particular, but also with her mother-in law, and he sided with her regardless of the moral sanctions he could expect if he chose to break with his own parents. This choice consolidated a particularly close relation between Migmar and Sökyi, the *genshō* and *nama*. From then on, Migmar tried to convince his brothers to side with them against the parents, and after some time, Namgyal did. However, the youngest husband did not.

After some time, two constellations emerged in the household: Sökyi, Migmar and Namgyal on the one side and Dawa Tsering, his wife, the youngest son in the marriage and the nun, ani Lobsang, on the other. The younger household members were not involved in the conflict. The disagreement between the two parties kept escalating, and at some point it turned into a physical fight between Migmar and his father (of which the context remains unclear). After the fight, Dawa Tsering stated that he did not want Migmar to remain in his house, as he said he no longer trusted him. For the first time after the conflict had started, the two parties agreed, because Migmar and Sökyi also wanted to move, although for different reasons. Migmar convinced Namgyal to continue to be part of the marriage and to move with them. Independent of the conflict level, the splitting of a household was a complicated process in which the inheritance of immovable property was a major concern for all involved parties. This was particularly the case for the eldest son, as will be made clear in the following. Before that, I want to describe the process of negotiation, the parties' claims, and outcomes, to show how material and moral sanctions are interconnected when the eldest

son decides to split from his natal house. This is even stronger when he is joined by his wife and a brother.

After the decision to move was made, the negotiations of dividing immovable and movable property started. Migmar and Namgyal were entitled to equal inheritance of land, while the *nama* was entitled to, in addition to her original dowry, compensation for the work already performed in the household. They claimed: two individuals' shares of land (that is 2.4 *mu* (0.4 acres)) each in line with the ideal inheritance norms, and land instead of cash as compensation for the *nama*'s work (the amount set to be land for half a person, that is 1.1 *mu*). Dawa Tsering refused both claims. His position was that the two sons should inherit no more than 1.5 *mu* of land each, and the *nama* should get compensated for her work in barley (*né*). One could expect that inheritance of land would have been easier after the Household Responsibility System, as the redistribution so clearly defined the amount of land per person to be attached to the household. According to the National Inheritance Law of 1985, each child of a household is entitled to inherit a full share of land upon exclusion or partition (Palmer 1995), and in Sharlung this was 2.4 *mu*. Although being the normative practice in other parts of Central Tibet,⁹ age neutral inheritance rights among sons was primarily an ideal in Panam, and in practice, the transfer of land was negotiated in every individual case. Within the village, some of Norkhang's *ganyé* relations – a network of mutual assistance that I return to in the final chapter – and later Tashi-la, as the village leader, tried to mediate between the parties. They all agreed with Dawa Tsering's claim that because Migmar would severely damage the strength and the future of the house upon moving – a moral misconduct – he should be materially sanctioned and receive only 1.5 *mu* of land, and that the *nama* should receive her compensation in barley rather than in fields. 'We have to consider the situation for the parents,' Tashi-la explained to me, 'and for them, it is a great disadvantage that their two sons move. They have to make a new plan for the future. That is difficult because they are getting old,' he continued.

Being unhappy about the village leaders' decisions, Migmar and Sökyi went to the township leaders and asked for their assistance. Two leaders looked at the case and decided that Dawa Tsering should respect the standard set by the Household Responsibility Reform and give 2.4 *mu* of land to the two sons, as this was their full share provided by the government. Further, the leaders set the compensation to be given to Sökyi for her work in the household to one *mu* of land, as well as cash payment – five yuan per day of work. After two years of marriage, this meant 3,600 yuan, a substantial amount of money at the time. Needless to say, Migmar, Sökyi and Namgyal were satisfied with their suggestion. But Dawa Tsering refused to pay because, he claimed, the township leader was biased towards Sökyi as they originated from the same

village. Moreover, he argued, the decision was not made in accordance with local norms of division and inheritance in polyandrous houses. Dawa Tsering brought the case to the county court, which was the highest legal authority in the area. There, three judges decided that he should give two full shares of land to his two sons, but only cash or kind compensation to the *nama*. This was set to be 1,800 yuan – that is, five yuan per day for one year.

Looking at the two lowest levels of mediation, the *ganyé* and the village leader, it is evident that the mediators put a strong emphasis on securing the elder generation, and by doing so, they sanctioned those who moved. Both the *ganyé* and the village leader disagreed with the claim of full land inheritance for the sons. A central element in their concern with the eldest generation was obviously the loss of labour. In addition, the handling of the move of Migmar, Namgyal and Sökyi should be seen in relation to the house. This is particularly explicit in the cases of polyandry. Moving out in order to establish a new household was morally and economically sanctioned by both the *ganyé* and the village leaders, not only due to their concern for the older generation but also because a split undermined the normative order of a house-based social organisation. This conflict was dealt with in the context of an increasing emphasis on perpetuating named houses, or corporate estates. Despite the ideal of equal inheritance rights amongst sons, the practice of unequal inheritance rights in polyandrous houses was well-known from the landholding estates before 1950. Although equal inheritance rights of all sons is an important part of the cultural rationale of polyandry in Sharlung, individual sons that move out are sanctioned with the restriction of inheritance rights for the sake of maintaining an estate as much as possible. This is particularly clear in the case of the eldest son(s). Younger sons who are not part of polyandrous marriages have alternatives to claiming their land inheritance; in the early 2000s in Sharlung, these were primarily to enrol in school and later settle outside the village, to marry out as a *makpa* and thus become a *sayön* elsewhere, or to seek work in the construction business and move from the village. These options were more limited for eldest sons.

Migmar's (and Namgyal's) separation from the house left the Norkhang significantly impaired. Firstly, the estate was smaller, both in terms of land and labour. Secondly, Norkhang lost its future leader and representative, who was the person who had, through childhood, been raised to be the authority in his generation. Thirdly, because the wife and a child moved with Migmar, there was a setback in terms of time, as a new marriage had to be arranged, hopefully resulting in new grandchildren. Lastly, as in most cases involving the *genshö*, the process of parting was also very difficult and led to hostile relations between him and his natal house. This was not only emotionally challenging but also had a significant impact on future work exchange and mutual aid systems central to the organisation of village life. The Norkhang

example illustrates how conflicts involving the *genshō* can be heated and are thus sanctioned both morally and materially. The particular handling of conflicts that involved the eldest son reinforced and reconfirmed the position of the *genshō* as having the most value within a marriage and, in that, the future house. The *genshō*, encompassing his wife and his co-husbands, was critical to the succession of the house and was given a responsibility to represent, not only formally in terms of local political processes but in terms of the social group to which he belongs.

Encompassing the Brothers, and Representing the House

When talking about conflicts, people in Sharlung held that the most common division of polyandrous marriages occurred when the eldest husband and the *nama* established a new household on their own. However, when looking at the household survey, this seems to be only partially accurate. Mapping household constellations over time, it appears that the most common reason for partitions of polyandrous marriages in Sharlung was the youngest husband leaving. Such discrepancy between the survey and what I was told indicates the perceived social implications of the youngest separating from a house compared to that of the eldest husband for the continuity of the house, and hence how these conflicts are noted, remembered or ignored.

As the Norkhang case shows, conflicts that involve the eldest husband of a polyandrous marriage are serious and can lead to public discussion and mediation in order to minimise the risk of partition. In the cases of partition and re-establishment, the relations between the eldest husband and his natal house very often remain strained for years after. Contrary to this, problems that involved the youngest husband only very seldom developed into full-blown conflicts, and post-partition relations remained good. This makes sense when looking at the context of the relations that the younger husbands have to the group of husbands as a whole and the group's relations to the house as a unit. Because the younger husbands are encompassed by the eldest in terms of their belonging, the implications of their departure are less severe for the continuity of the house. While they, and particularly the youngest husband, constitute significant parts, they do not manifest the whole. Age was relevant not only for the internal organisation of co-husbands' roles but also for the relation between the wife and her partners. In marriages with a large age gap between the co-husbands, and thus between the youngest husband and the *nama*, the youngest's discontentment often concerns lack of sexual attraction. Such problems were solved pragmatically and with ease. When arranging a marriage, the ideal age of the wife should be younger than the eldest but older than the second husband. In the large polyandrous marriages of four or

five co-husbands, the youngest husband will thus often be significantly junior to his wife. For instance, in the marriage in the Dagpo house where five husbands share the *nama*, the youngest brother is fifteen years younger than his wife. Because of this significant age difference, he has partly been raised by his wife, something recognised to be potentially problematic for future sexual relations. When I visited them, the boy was thirteen and had enrolled in middle school in the county seat. It had been made clear to him that after he had got to the proper age (they indicated 16), he would have to decide on whether to actively become part of the established marriage in the future, or not. However, there was a clear alternative open for him; to live, work and remarry outside the village.

The discontentment that involved the eldest or the youngest husband was handled in very different ways, for while strong moral and social pressure was put on the eldest to remain in his natal house, a smooth transition was facilitated when involving the youngest husband. In many of the large polyandrous marriages, the youngest husband had parted from the marriage and relocated elsewhere. Most of these were talked about as being unproblematic partitions, where solutions had been found that were acceptable to all parties. Important to such resolutions was the issue of inheritance and, particularly, the transfer of land. While a young husband settling outside the village could not and did not claim land from his natal house, those who remarried and remained in the village had to activate their inheritance rights, and as such, the partition was more complex and problematic. However, even in the latter cases of re-marriage and neolocal residence in the same village, such partitions were seen to be less serious and were dealt with in a different way than those exemplified by the Norkhang house above. Hence, a youngest husband's marital discontentment had several solutions, and indeed those that did not involve fragmentation of land were preferred. A very easy solution was to re-marry as a *makpa*, thus moving into his new wife's home and eventually taking over his father-in-law's estate. This solution did not only keep the land intact but also potentially developed a network for labour exchange, in which he continued to help his natal house. The youngest husband's separation from a marriage was not marked ritually, nor was it sanctioned morally; it was mainly seen to be loss of labour, as well as emotional loss of parting with a close relation. The acceptance of a youngest son's wish to move was connected to the expectations of his contribution to the household as a common economic endeavour, and to the house as the basic social unit of belonging, expectations that were fundamentally different compared to the eldest son. While the significant domestic group, the house, remained unmarked by the youngest husband's departure, it deteriorated significantly upon the eldest husband's establishment of a new household.

Summing up, much has been written on fraternal solidarity among Tibetan-speaking peoples in the Himalayas and elsewhere, reflecting an old concern of kinship theories.¹⁰ Through local procreation theory, a group of brothers was seen to be if not identical then very similar in bodily substances. Consubstantial similarity produces expectations of fraternal solidarity and good relations, and these expectations were important when considering fraternal polyandry. Yet, fraternal solidarity does not exclude a hierarchical organisation. Dominant masculinity ideals also emphasise collaboration among brothers, and it forms a category of subjectivity that defines the premises for authoritative agency (as Makley phrases it, 2007: 32) and decision making. Throughout childhood, the hierarchy of relative age is internalised. The hegemonic masculinity of male collaboration informs this process of naturalisation of power and the doxic status of an age hierarchy. A younger brother remains in a position with limited influence in his natal house throughout his life. At the same time, this subordinate position gives him more freedom to choose whether to remain as part of the polyandrous marriage throughout his life, or to move out. The socio-symbolic unity of the house is internal and external in the sense that members perceive themselves to constitute parts of a whole and others perceive the house to be one social



Figure 3.1. In an ideal polyandrous constellation, one husband would work the land, one would herd the animals and one would bring cash income to their household. The *dzo*, the cross-breed of yak and cow, were used for farm work, including male tasks such as ploughing and threshing. © Heidi Fjeld



Figure 3.2. All households in Sharlung had goats and sheep, and some had *dzo* and cows. The animals had been redistributed from the communes to the individual households as part of the Household Responsibility System, in 1981, and the numbers had increased over the decades. © Heidi Fjeld



Figure 3.3. The eldest brother and husband is expected to become the household head (*sayön*), responsible for the running of the household, including making sure that the ritual obligations are fulfilled. © Heidi Fjeld

unit. Like the right hand encompasses the left and comes to stand for the whole body in Hertz's old article, the eldest encompasses his young co-husbands and comes to stand for the house.

While age and authority can be clearly defined and easily translated into roles, in the following chapter we will see that gender is more ambiguous. In different life phases, younger husbands, as younger wives, have limited influence in their households. Yet, the pathways of women and younger husbands are divergent, and in the next chapter, we turn to women's roles in polyandrous houses and continue to explore the question of being central or peripheral to the order of things.

Notes

1. Several theorists have taken a similar stand on the association of the unity of a sibling group with the prevalence of fraternal polyandry before Levine (see Mandelbaum 1938; Radcliffe-Brown 1941: 7; and to a certain extent, Prince Peter 1963). However, Levine explores fraternal solidarity from an empirical rather than a theoretical point of view.
2. In other cases of adultery, people say that it most often occurs between a married man and his wife's sister(s). This is also not an uncommon perception among exiled Tibetans (Tsomo Svenningsen, personal communication, Oslo, 2004). In Sharlung, a sister of a deceased wife is also a preferred second marriage partner, for reasons more related to expected concerns for her sister's children.
3. Similarly, co-wives in polygynous marriages are ranked according to relative wedding order, most often corresponding to age (although young age tends to be an advantage in terms of influence and ability to build alliances with the husband).
4. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been broadly critiqued (as reviewed by Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). More recent turns in masculinity studies, informed by post-structural sensitivity to plural experiences and discursive productions of gender, have moreover questioned the very concept of 'masculinity', among other things for essentialising the complexity of male lives but also for giving a false flair of unity to this complexity (MacInnes 1998; Whitehead 2002).
5. See, for instance, Goldstein (1978b), Schuler (1987), Levine and Silk (1997); Haddix (2001).
6. The case featured in this section was also discussed in Fjeld 2008a.
7. The two have five sons and three daughters, of which the two youngest sons are still in junior middle school in Panam and primary school in Sharlung and not considered as potential partners in marriage. One daughter was sent as a *nama* to two brothers in a neighbouring valley, while the fifteen-year-old daughter still lived at home together with the eldest sister, who was an ordained nun in the local nunnery.
8. Agreeing on the transfer of a *nama* is often a long negotiation over compensation for the loss that her household will suffer when she moves out. The receiving household first has to bring gifts to her household members (very often clothes), and *khatak*. Some ten to thirty days later (depending on the astrology), the *langchang* is arranged, in which the girl is informed and led to her new house. On this occasion, her natal household members receive more gifts, and most importantly, her mother is given a new woollen *chuba*, an apron and blouse as the '*uri pangden*' (*uri*: breastfeed, *pang*: the area on the belly

where the baby sits while breastfeeding). In addition, the *nama*-receiving household should bring at least two bags of *tsampa* and/or barley (unroasted), a *sha khok*; a newly slaughtered sheep where the wool and the head are kept and the stomach is filled with wool. These gifts are standardised, and the negotiations rather concern the amount of *tsampa* and barley, extra meat and wool, as well as extra demands from the girl's household leader.

9. Samdrup, personal communication 2002.
10. Fürer-Haimendorf (1964); Prince Peter (1963); Levine (1988); and Radcliffe-Brown (1941).