

Chapter 4

FEMALE ROLES



Polyandry is not reversed polygyny. It is a marriage between a group of men and one woman, rather than one woman and several men. As with polygyny, it is initiated by the men's family, and the cultural logic of polyandry is based on a wish to secure the perpetuation of the patrilocal residence group. Although not female-initiated, men and women had a shared preference for polyandry in Sharlung. At the same time, polyandry was recognised as a complex form of marriage that requires careful manoeuvring, not only within the conjugal group but also within the larger household, where most, but clearly not all, members have strong filial ties. The *nama* has a special role – a responsibility – in making the polyandrous marriage work. This chapter explores women's perceptions of polyandry and their concerns, considerations and efforts to establish and maintain a good marriage. This is not a small task, as the frame within which they manoeuvred their marital and household relations is a gender model that identifies women as inferior to men, and a social organisation where women are ideologically peripheral to the order of things.

Social organisation in Panam is patrifocal, reflected particularly in male inheritance rights, post-marital patrilocal residence and patrilineal kinship ideology. We have seen that the eldest husband is at the centre of the marriage arrangement, encompassing his co-husbands as *pala* and later as *sayön* (household leader) and representing the house both socially and symbolically. Such a distribution of centrality was also evident in the organisation of married life and in the allocation of work and the execution of authority

more broadly. We can also approach women's positions in polyandry through the notion of centrality, not in the sense of being either central or peripheral but rather as moving between more or less central positions – positions that change over the course of married life.

Both men and women talked about polyandry as a form of organisation where women are structurally subordinate and symbolically peripheral. In Panam, this was expressed both in the aim to perpetuate the house (which ideally corresponds with a patrilineage) and in the value of maximising male labour in the household. Men were simply seen to be more important. Women's roles were comparable to the youngest husband(s) in large polyandrous marriages – as being subordinate to the eldest brothers and father(s). Indeed, the *nama* was *initially* also structurally peripheral and subordinate to her husbands, including the younger ones. However, with time she gains authority over others in a trajectory that is not open for her younger husbands. As such, gender models can only partially explain intra-household gender relations and women's roles in polyandry. An analytical approach that goes beyond gender alone is concurrent with what Levine described in her article on differential childcare in three Nyinba communities, where she argued that what at first glance seemed to be a son preference should rather be interpreted as the discrimination against not daughters as such but 'against any less desirable child' (1987a: 281). In other words, daughters and sons with several older brothers were less central to the perpetuation of the corporate household, and their degree of centrality was thus defined by their roles. At the same time, hierarchical gender models clearly informed marital and household relations both as ideas and practices. Levine also found that although the rationale of differential childcare goes beyond gender alone, in practice a significant percentage of the neglected children in her ethnography were girls. The same point can be made regarding *namas* and their positions in Panam; gender alone cannot explain their often subordinate position, yet in practice gender models inform their ability to enact and negotiate their roles and relations, also compared to younger husbands. Women in Tibet are – broadly speaking – structurally subordinate and must, in significantly different ways than younger men, depend upon personal skills and interpersonal relations to gain a secure and stable position within a marriage and a house. Also, women's work obligations are heavy and extensive, particularly in a context where continuous periods of pregnancies and childbirths are common. As such, it is fair to say that the burden of women is heavier than that of men. Women are also more vulnerable in the cases of norm violations, such as divorce, children born out of wedlock, or infertility. At the same time, as *nama* a woman has the potential to consolidate a very strong and powerful position in the course of a lifetime, and this potential is, I argue, greater in a polyandrous marriage.

Being a Woman/Being a *Nama*

Compared with women elsewhere in South Asia, ‘Tibetan women’, particularly nomads, have often been depicted as more independent, less shy or timid, more outspoken and in general more active in participating in public spheres.¹ Yet, as Charlene Makley (1997) has noted, the category ‘Tibetan women’ is essentialising and blurs the differences and nuances of geographic regions, class and relations to production, and it would serve our purposes better to focus on women’s experiences as ‘subjects in their lives’ in the larger social context of which they are part (ibid.: 18). In the introduction to the ground-breaking anthology *Women in Tibet*, Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (2005) delineated two generalised findings on women’s experiences in Tibet: first, that individual women have achieved prominence in Tibetan societies throughout history, also in the areas traditionally dominated by men, and second, that ‘enduring androcentrism and misogynistic gender tropes’ are readily observable in Tibetan communities, but that these tend to vary according to geography and social status/class (Gyatso and Havnevik 2005: 9). Indeed, we know of outstanding women from Tibetan history, although they are most often only mentioned in passing and are described as exceptions. In the history of Tibetan medicine, for instance, there are cases of skilled daughters of medical houses (*mendrong*) being trained as physicians by their father or uncle (also in cases where they had brothers). In the history of war, there were woman warriors fighting and leading battalions in eastern Tibet (McGranahan 2010).² At the same time – also in Tibetan medicine and on the battleground – ‘women’, and female bodies in particular, were associated with pollution and thus danger, weakness and lower birth.

Androcentric and misogynistic gender tropes inform how women and men talk about women and can be summed up in the general assumption that being born a woman is less fortunate than being born a man.³ In Panam, people explained this simple fact with the worldview of karma, merit and reincarnation, in which a woman can pray to be reborn as a man. When talking with women about gender (in)equality, I often got the impression that they pitied themselves for being born a woman, thinking that it comes with obvious disadvantages, such as a weaker body, childbirth, more sickness, as well as an emotional mind. Hamsa Rajan describes similar observations about internalisation of female subordination in her study of domestic violence among Tibetans on the north-eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau (2014, 2018a, 2018b). Although I did not see signs of domestic violence in Panam, Rajan’s findings are relevant in terms of how women interpret their subjective experiences. Rajan found that ‘The husband, often seen as the disciplinarian and head of household, was viewed as having the right to punish and silence his wife when “necessary”,’ and that ‘hitting was often considered

not particularly heinous, but rather relatively mundane and normal', a view that women, also those who had been victimised, agreed with (2018a: 5). When explaining why a woman can expect to have a harder life than a man, Tibetan language itself is often engaged as evidence. Indeed, a common word for 'woman', *kyéme*, translates as 'low birth' (*skyes* is birth and *dman* is low or inferior).⁴ Also the alternative, more neutral term for women, *büme* (*bud med*), can easily be confused with *bumé* (*bu med*), meaning 'not boy', indicating that women are negated men, or that the female is a deviation, or inversion, of the standard male. Although these terms had different meanings in the past – *dman*, used in *kyéme*, was simply a feminine ending, and *med*, used in *büme*, was an archaic feminine form – they have come to convey inferiority and negation today.⁵ Gyatso and Havnevik also noted that androcentrism and misogynistic expressions are explained in the truism 'that to be a woman is to have bad karma, low status and poor abilities' (2005: 9). There are numerous Tibetan proverbs describing women as being of lower birth and subordinate to men. For instance, one well-known saying describes the value of monks over nuns: 'If one wants a teacher, one makes a son a monk, and if one wants a servant, one makes a daughter a nun'.⁶ Yet, gender models of Tibetan Buddhism are contradictory. While clearly misogynist, there is also 'the deification of a female principle in Buddhism', as Gyatso has summed up (2003: 89). In practice, however, this deification did not come to the fore in my interaction with people in Panam, rather, ideas of women being inferior and subordinate to men were readily expressed both by men and women.

In explaining the poor abilities and hard life of women, people in Sharlung often referred to the disadvantages of having a female body. This body was generically understood to be inferior to the male body, perceptions that are in line with Tibetan medical texts as well. The main medical treatises – the Four Tantras (*Gyüzhi*) – clearly explain that the female body is the result of 'less merit' and is a weaker body (Fjeld and Hofer 2011: 194). One passage in the *Gyüzhi* notes: 'since she is of lower birth, the female (*bud med*) body has extra illnesses' (g.Yu-thog 1984: 393, cited in Fjeld and Hofer 2011: 194), referring to the thirty-two illnesses that only affect female bodies.⁷ This weakness and associated suffering also connects to childbirth, a painful and high-risk event with a potentially deadly outcome. In addition to being weak, the female body is also inherently polluted, epitomised by menstruation blood. The possibility of spilling menstrual blood on the ground is the explanation often given as to why women are prohibited from entering certain temples, such as protector temples of monasteries. Carole McGranahan, in an article on gender and Tibetan historical narratives, describes some of the ways that the notion of polluted female bodies informed Tibetan soldiers' practices (in the Chushi Gangdrug movement); women could not be soldiers due to pollution, bullets dipped in menstruation blood were perceived to be more

deadly and soldiers were not allowed to have sex on the evening before or the day of the battle. Underlying these practices was the fear that female pollution could 'weaken one's protective amulets or even eliminate its powers' (2010: 772). These characteristics of the female body include particular sufferings of the mind as well. Dan Martin cites an early commentator named Kunga, writing a message to the future generations of women, saying: 'Women's bodies are vessels of pain, and women's minds are vessels of suffering' (2005: 78). Analysing medical texts and illustrations, Rae Dachille-Hay has shown that also in those the representation of female bodies indicates an emotional vulnerability of women (2011). The weakness of the female body and mind was emphasised by my interlocutors as well; as one older woman explained: 'Women cry so easily because we cannot control our minds. With these strong emotions, we cannot make good decisions because we are too attached to everything: to our children, to our natal home'.

When asked, women in Sharlung described themselves as being of lower value and less skilful than men; however, they seemed to accept this as a matter of course. I could not find any emerging feminists in the villages of Panam, which resonates with Rajan's research from the north-east as well, where 'feminist consciousness is extremely rare' (2018b: 291).⁸ This lack of engagement with female hardships did not reflect disinterest, but rather I got the sense that women did not conceptualise and interpret their experiences through being part of the group of 'women' (*kyéme*). Rather, kinship categories – female roles, that is, being a wife or a daughter, or an ordained nun – were the basic reference point when considering lived experiences. Living a life as a *nama* – having moved away from home, performing *nama* work, having *nama* duties, being pregnant and giving birth, building and managing close relations within a new house – formed shared experiences of relevance when women talked about 'gender issues'. My questions about the relations between women and men were often answered in the context of intra-marriage and intra-household relations. The life trajectories of a *nama* and a resident unmarried daughter, for example, were described as fundamentally different, pointing also to the importance of exploring female roles – women as subjects in their lives – rather than 'women' as *one* category.

When talking with *namas* about female lives, they were most concerned with the process of relocation after marriage, and the difference between being married or not. Being sent to a new household, often in a new village where they did not have established connections, was for most the core of their narratives of hardship. Marriage form, and number of husbands, on the other hand, did not often come up as a worry. Many women spoke about *makpa* marriages as a significantly different situation. Although a wife of a *makpa* also has a hard life due to a heavy workload and childbirths, they do not have to suffer leaving their natal home. Similarly, women in monogamous, neolocal



Figure 4.1. Women's workload is both broad-ranging and heavy, both in the field and within the house. Here women are winnowing using the tractor as a fan. © Heidi Fjeld



Figure 4.2. A nun washing clothes in the river. Ordination does not exclude domestic work for women. © Heidi Fjeld

khatukpa ('love') marriages did not experience the emotionally strenuous move into a new household. Common to all categories of women, though, was the expectation that their lives would be filled with heavy workloads and bodily suffering, and be harder compared to the lives of men.

Women's Preference for Polyandry

Gender (in)equality was also less of an issue in discussions about marriage forms. Plural marriage is seen to be neither more nor less exploitative of women. When considering the alternatives, '*zasum* is better', women repeatedly told me. Their preference for polyandry was based first on the prospect of being able to better maintain the land, and second on a sense of safety. Women were drawn to the possibility of having an easier transition into a new household after the wedding and the positive implications of having multiple husbands in a household – several fathers to the children and stronger allies when dealing with the often delicate relationship with parents-in-law. Yet, polyandry was recognised to involve a way of life that is not compatible with all women, nor all men. For this reason, women were often consulted when parents were considering a polyandrous marriage offer, and refusing to marry more than one husband was accepted without much



Figure 4.3. Nuns from the local nunnery practising playing *gyaling*, a woodwind oboe-like instrument used for rituals. © Heidi Fjeld

argument. Sonam, a *nama* of three husbands in Sharlung, was born into a wealthy and influential house in a village outside Gyantse city. She was one of the women I spent most time with in the village. She grew up on a farm with three fathers and one mother, as well as her paternal grandparents. Her eldest father (*pala*) was also the village leader. At the age of seventeen, her *pala* started to receive inquiries about marriage, and he conveyed some of the offers to her. She explained:

Pala said that he wanted to ask me about my opinion on the offer that had been made because it involved living in the city. A leader in Gyantse had asked for me to marry his son. They were very rich. But when my father said this, I became scared because I did not know about life there, and I did not know how to live in the city, with a leader. So, I said that I did not want to marry him. *Pala* accepted this. . . . Later he came with a new offer, this time from Sharlung. This was much better for me, and I agreed to go here.

As Sonam had not mentioned the fact that moving to Sharlung had involved plural marriage, I asked her if she had preferences in terms of numbers of husbands. She said:

Most important for me was to live in a village, so that I could live the way I knew. I can only do farm work, not much else. So, for me it doesn't matter about the number of husbands. Even though moving to Gyantse would be easy – with wealth and only one husband – I could not live there.

Sonam preferred a polyandrous marriage in a village even when given the alternative of a monogamous marriage in a city. This is a choice that my Lhasa friends found perplexing. To Sonam, polyandry meant a good and manageable life. The two of us often engaged in wishful thinking, trying to formulate the unimaginable, she was also very curious about my life as a mother. One of her amusing ideas was to send me as a *nama* to three brothers she knew in her home village. She would laugh so hard when thinking about the looks on their faces when this blue-eyed woman with a daughter and very limited spinning skills appeared during the wedding ceremony. In line with these conversations, I asked her if given the choice she would choose to live with only one of her three husbands. She replied:

Why? We would be so poor! Who wants that? It is very difficult to live one-to-one (*réré*) here, also for the *nama*. Being a *nama* is much work here because we do agricultural work, domestic work, milk the animals, feed the babies and many other things. Then we have to take care of the husbands, and their parents. When we are more people it is less work – so *zasum* is good. The most important thing is to reduce the work because it is too much. But I think it is easier for the *nama* with one husband because it is only one husband to take

care of, and not many to take care of. But if the marriage fails and some are unhappy, it is always blamed on the *nama*, right? She has to do good *kora khor*. If she cannot do this, then the husbands will be unhappy and maybe they will divide.

Sonam's reflections illustrate well the ideas about marriage alternatives that I often heard in Sharlung; her concerns were about livelihood, the amount and character of work, rather than the number of husbands. She also recognised the increased emotional strain associated with more than one husband to care for but concluded that the benefits outweighed the negatives. Larger households have an obvious economic advantage, which was intensified with the economic development policies of the 2000s encouraging off-farm activities, and women were very well aware of this. In general, the expectations were that a polyandrous life would involve less hardship than a monogamous life. This was an assumption shared by most of my interlocutors in Sharlung. As the grandmother (*achi*) in Takrab said: 'Sometimes a boy makes a girl like him (*gabo chewa*) and then – *khatukpa* (sic!). This happens, but it is a pity because they will have much hardship in life.' In other words, falling in love can happen, but it is unfortunate. This concern about degrees of hardship is thus not associated with marriage arrangement – whether it is initiated by the couple or the parents – but rather with residence implications. Following *khatukpa* marriages, the couple establishes a household on their own, a situation that is vulnerable both economically and socially, with a small farm and limited possibilities for help.

Moving households as a newly-wed woman is a precarious transition that brings worry and vulnerability, also in Tibet. The relation between the in-marriage daughter-in-law and the resident mother-in-law is one of potential conflict, often expressed in work expectations, demands and sometimes exploitation. In the initial phase of marriage, the *nama*'s work abilities and also her personality is under scrutiny, and this period lasts until she has children. Several proverbs address this point. Rajan quotes this saying: 'Don't say a bag is not heavy when you've only just started carrying it; don't say your daughter-in-law is good when she has only just arrived [to your household]' (2014: 146), while Geoff Childs quotes this Tibetan saying from Nubri in Nepal: 'However ferocious a warrior may be, a friend of valor he shall need. However pretty a wife may be, a son on her lap she will need' (2004: 106). Chökyi, the *nama* in the Longchen house and a young mother of two, said this about arriving into a new house:

It is the same for every *nama*. In the beginning, we don't like to leave from our parents. When we come to a new place, we don't know anybody. We are afraid that we will not work well enough and maybe the household leader will be angry and treat us badly. It is difficult and many cry.

Explicitly comparing polyandry with other marriage forms, women in Sharlung explained that with multiple husbands this transition could be less onerous. The potential conflict of this initial period is with the parents-in-law, and the *nama*'s support and alliance then primarily lies with her husband, and hence, multiple husbands can strengthen her position in relation to the older generation. With the support of one or more husbands, the recently arrived wife can feel less vulnerable and more protected against extreme workloads, neglect or maltreatment.⁹

Yet, relational maturation is a complex process when multiple husbands are involved. The *nama* has only formal and not yet emotional relations to her husband(s), and this develops with time. Chökyi, talking about her own entry into marriage with three husbands, continued:

After some time in the new house, I liked my husbands. First, I became close to *genshō*. It is natural because he is oldest. He was very nice to me, always looking after me. He also helped me to fetch water many times. I liked him from the beginning. But I also tried to pay attention to the two others because my mother had told me before the wedding that it is very important to be just and treat the husbands in a fair/impartial (*drangpo*) way. It was only a short time after the wedding that I felt good with *genshō*. Then it was easier to like the others also. *Achung* was young, much younger than me, but he is very kind. So, I never said anything bad to him. *Ajok* was also nice, but he was shyer. Also, he was often herding and not so often there.

I asked her about the other people in the house and her relation to them during the first period after the wedding.

In the beginning, I was very shy with them, and also afraid, especially with the *sayōn* (household leader). Longchen is a big house, so it is a lot of work for the *nama*. I tried to work hard so that mother (-in-law) should not complain. . . . I was also afraid of Ani (nun). She is almost my age, but still I did not dare to approach her. I thought that she was not so nice also, because she did not help me with work. . . . In the beginning, I spoke with *genshō* for the most, and then if I needed something from the elders, he asked his parents for me. Then, later, we had very good relations. They are nice people and always treated me well. Sometimes now I argue with Ani, but not so seriously.

Other women I spoke with gave a similar account of their initial period in a new household, in that they focused on working hard and establishing good relations with their husbands. It was a clear pattern that the newly arrived *nama* associated herself with the eldest husband, as Chökyi said, 'because it is normal'. However, it is a newly-arrived *nama*'s overall concern to establish affectionate relations with all husbands as soon as possible. Conjugal relations are a *nama*'s introduction to a household and form the basis of her

status and support in the village. These relations develop throughout the life course and are essential, especially when negotiating work and roles with the mother-in-law and the often-present unmarried sister-in-law (such as Ani in Chökyi's case). Returning a *nama* was not unheard of in Sharlung and occurred for the most part when there had been disagreements between parents-in-law and the *nama*. In these situations, she would depend upon her husband(s) for support. In one case that had happened two months before our first arrival in Sharlung, a *nama* had been sent back to her parents four months into the marriage. The relations between her and the two husbands had not yet developed to be very affectionate, and thus when her parents-in-law complained about what they perceived to be her lack of willingness and ability to work, the husbands did not take her side in the conflict. She returned to her natal house with a compensation of 200 *jin* (100 litres) of *chang*.¹⁰

Having multiple husbands can also act as social security for women – a safety net. As a young woman called Tsering told us:

My grandfather died when he was young, and my grandmother had to feed my mother and her siblings alone. It was a very difficult life. Because she had no land, she had to take work as a carrier for big traders. Once a year she went with them to India, carrying their things for a small salary. Every time, she was gone for maybe six months. Then my mother was left alone with her siblings, and they worked with their maternal uncle (*ashang*). My mother has told me about this difficult time, and she said that there was no protection for them. I am thinking that this is different now with *zasum*, so the children have more than one father. Many things can happen; one can become sick and maybe die, and then it is easier for the wife to get help with the children.

Rural development policies since the 1980s have encouraged a diversified household economy, leading men to leave the farm. Even with predominantly subsistence farming before 2000, men left to herd the animals, and although trade was no longer a major work opportunity, they departed for whatever labour opportunities appeared. Pilgrimage also contributed to men's mobility away from the wife and children. With the economic development policies since the 2000s, off-farm activities have become an increasingly attractive source of income, leading more and more men (and later also women) to 'go for income' and be away from the house for longer periods of the year.¹¹ These historical and contemporary drivers to diversify the economy and encourage the mobility of household members has reconfirmed the notion that polyandry serves as a safety net for women. As Tsering continued: 'A *nama* is vulnerable and is easily put in a difficult situation if something happens to her (one) husband.' From a local perspective, going for income is not without risk. Leaving the village for longer periods also exposes young people to different

lifestyles, challenging village and household loyalty, identity and their sense of belonging. Therefore, it was primarily the eldest husbands that were sent to work off the farm, as they were expected to have the strongest attachment and commitment both their wife and to their household. In our conversations, women also expressed their concern that one of the husbands would stop returning; indeed, this has happened many times in Sharlung, but often with the youngest husbands, as described in the previous chapter. The safety net of polyandry thus also works in the case of divorce and division.

Being Sexually Active with Several Husbands

Polyandry was also recognised as being a demanding form of marriage. Women were very much aware of the responsibility that lies on the *namas* to make sure all marital partners were content. Central to this sense of responsibility was the importance of establishing a *kora khor* system that would be fair to all. Some divorces in Sharlung had stemmed from a woman's lack of will, or ability, to do *kora khor* in a way accepted by the husbands (and parents-in-law). As Chökyi said: 'Not everybody is able to do *kora khor*. It depends on your personality.'

The fact that a woman has several sexual partners was a topic discussed with some embarrassment (*ngotsa*), also among married women themselves.¹² Although fully accepted as a marriage form, I noticed a self-consciousness among women that polyandry is unusual. This was particularly reflected in giggles and laughs when we asked about sex. One of our afternoons sitting in the open space of the living quarters, Mingzom (my daughter's nanny) and I asked Lobsang Drolma about affection and sexual practices. It was a quiet afternoon. Nobody else was in the house – Tashi-la had gone to visit relatives; her eldest husband had not yet returned from Ngari, Orgyen and Wangchuk were outside working, and Ani-la was in Gyantse to help relatives there. Although Tibetan women are often not particularly shy when talking about sex, it is taboo in the presence of male relatives, and so we were careful with the timing of these conversations. Lobsang Drolma had told us that Namgyal Tsering, her eldest husband, was on his way home after five months in Ngari. Talking about him, she was smiling more broadly than usual. I asked her if she was looking forward to seeing him again, and she laughed and confirmed that she was very excited. It seemed to me that she had a different expression when talking about Namgyal Tsering, compared to her two other younger husbands, so I asked if she had an especially close relation with him. Lobsang Drolma explained: 'No, no, I love all three just the same. This is the most important for a *nama* – to treat all equally.' Mingzom, interrupting her, said that it must be very difficult to love three men at the same time. 'I cannot do

that!’ she exclaimed, giggling. Lobsang Drolma replied: ‘It is not so difficult for me. It is true. But Namgyal Tsering is different because he is the eldest, and most important to the family.’

During most of our stays, we had lived with Lobsang Drolma and her two younger husbands. Trying to observe expressions of affection between them, I had only noted a few differences, such as a bit more distance between her and Wangchuk, the middle one (*ajok*). Orgyen, the youngest husband, was often in the house playing and taking care of their children and also occasionally helping Lobsang Drolma with preparing dinner. This caring masculinity seemed to have little effect on her. While his relation to the children was very affectionate, his interaction with Lobsang Drolma was less so. At first, I took this lack of affection between the three as an expression of what is normative and accepted regarding intimacy – you are not supposed to show affection in public. However, after the return of Namgyal Tsering, Lobsang Drolma’s behaviour changed. When he was around, she paid close attention to his doings and sayings, flirting and giggling at his small jokes. Her eyes followed him, and she was often physically close to him, touching his leg while laughing and gently hitting him when he teased her. Having been away for a long time, upon his return Namgyal Tsering was very busy visiting friends, and he regularly came home late, often rather intoxicated. Lobsang Drolma often waited for him to return, serving him *chang* before the end of the evening, something I did not see her do with her other husbands. Her behaviour towards Namgyal Tsering was, I believe, an expression of the special relation between the *nama* and the eldest husband described in the previous chapter. Bringing the conversation back to *kora khor*, Lobsang Drolma continued talking about the return of her eldest husband: ‘When he comes home, I stay with him again. Because he has been away for a long time, I stay only with him for a long period. Then, I only visit the others occasionally.’

Mingzom, who is from a village outside Lhasa where polyandry is uncommon, tried to formulate a question between all the laughter: ‘Do you have sex very often? Don’t you get tired?’ Lobsang Drolma started to giggle loudly and moved her index finger back and forth on her cheek as if to indicate that the questions were embarrassing. She never answered the first question; however, concerning the second question, she explained: ‘No, no. But the pregnancies make me tired.’ Lobsang Drolma was carrying her fourth child at the time and was often nauseous. She continued: ‘I get sick a lot. Still I have to work and do *kora khor* in the same way. That is tiring.’ I asked her if the *kora khor* is constant or if it changes at some point.

It is the same most of the time. After a childbirth – then there is no *kora khor* in the first month. But after that it is the same. This is maybe a difference between a *nama* with one, and a *nama* with many husbands. With one hus-

band it is easier to rest if needed. With many husbands it is difficult to change the *kora khor* because maybe some will be upset.

Mingzom, still not convinced about the value of polyandry, continued: 'But – what if you don't like one of your husbands? What can you do?' The issue of a fair distribution of sex and affection is at the core of a successful polyandrous marriage, and, as mentioned, the *nama* is blamed for failures. However, both the eldest husband and the *nama* are credited for the success of a marriage. People gossip about *namas* and their ability to love all their husbands, and the public interest in larger marriages with a significant age difference between the *nama* and the youngest husbands is particularly strong. Lobsang Drolma continued:

It is the responsibility of the *nama* to be fair (*drangpo*). Sometimes the *nama* does not love one husband, but she has to try hard to visit him and show affection. And then, affection can change. This happened to the *nama* in the Sharlung House. At first, she did not like the *ajok*. She did not want to visit him often, and he was angry. The other [two] husbands were also upset and told her to treat him well. So, she included him into the *kora khor*. She told me that in the beginning she thought it was horrible, but after some time she was used to it, and now she likes him.

Independent of marital form, sex is considered an important part of marriage and of utmost importance to the formation of bonds between the partners.¹³ Although many women did have a special relation with their eldest husband, it is in the interest of not only the marriage and the household as a whole but also of the woman herself to develop good relations with all husbands. Stronger relations with more people enable the *nama* to negotiate more individual autonomy – that is, to participate in decisions about how she uses her time, about distribution of work, and when to leave the village for events such as pilgrimage or visiting her relatives.

Gender Roles across the Life Course: The Struggle for Female Headship

The experience of being a *nama* changes with time – that is, with stages of life – and is shaped by marital form, household composition and interpersonal relations. In addition to the patri-orientation, the cumulative effect of patrification results in houses consisting mostly of individuals who are agnates. However, a *nama* in a polyandrous marriage has the potential to become very influential and, importantly, gain a strong position vis-à-vis a mother- and sister-in-law. In this process, building strong relations with her

husbands is essential. Yangzom, a woman in her late 40s, explained the roles of a *nama* in this way:

The *nama* is very important in a marriage, and especially in *zasum*. She is responsible for her husbands' happiness, for working hard so that the mother-in-law likes her, and for listening to and working hard for the household leader. If she is a bad *nama*, she is blamed for the failure of the marriage, and then she is treated badly also. If she is a good *nama*, everybody in the house will treat her well. People see her as a good person because the marriage is good. Then, when her oldest husband becomes the household leader, her power is very strong, not only over the women in the household but also the men. Then, she has good relations with all her husbands, and her sons support her, and nobody can treat her badly.

The presence of large sibling groups within one household complicates the power balance between those who gained their membership by other sources than filiation, mostly only the in-marrying wife. One of the demographic implications of high polyandry rates is a surplus of unmarried women in the community, as I described earlier. Parents acknowledged the potential conflicts between a resident unmarried daughter and an in-marrying wife, but still, these household constellations were common.¹⁴ Unmarried daughters in the household reduce the work burden of the *nama* and enable women to participate with agricultural labour to a larger degree. Also, parents see an unmarried daughter, lay or ordained, as a caretaker for their old age.¹⁵

The *nama* primarily forms alliances with men, and most importantly her husbands, and only secondary with other women in the household. This is similar to what Levine noted from Nyinba communities (1988). Often intra-house female relations can remain strained throughout a lifetime. It is not an easy task for a young *nama* to integrate in a potentially impenetrable group of parents and siblings, and although the set trajectory of a *nama* is to become the female household head, this is complicated in the cases of an un-unmarried sister-in-law living in the house. The following example serves to illustrate *namas'* possible struggle for influence in the midst of cumulative patrification, pointing to the significance, but also limitations, of wife-husband(s) relations in intra-household dynamics.

The main negotiation between the *nama* and her unmarried sister-in-law was the distribution of authority over women's work. This was formalised in the status as *nangma*, female household head. While the male household leader (*sayön*) administers the male tasks of the household, the female head is responsible for the distribution of domestic tasks or what is seen to be women's work, such as cooking, taking care of the children, washing clothes, keeping the agricultural produce, weaving as well as doing some agricultural work (such as weeding). The female household headship (*nangma*) was ideally

transferred from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law in the same gradual way as with the male household leader. The exact point of transfer was therefore undefined – depending on the health and interest of the *nama* and her relation to the *sayön* – and varied from a few years after the first children were born to much later in life and often following the death of the mother-in-law. In Sharlung, the *nangma* was usually the oldest woman in the house (i.e. the mother-in-law), and the norm was to hold back the power transfer until the younger woman's children were no longer dependent upon her, or until the elder woman's health was deteriorating in such a way that she was no longer capable of performing her tasks. However, there were some exceptions to this slow transfer, most commonly following an untimely death. In those cases, if the eldest son is suddenly taking over as the household leader, he might argue for the transfer of the *nangma* status from his mother to his wife as well, given that ideally the male and female household heads are married. Depending on the nature of the relation between mother and daughter-in-law, this occasionally led to conflict, which may not be resolved before one of the women passes away. In Sharlung, there were cases of power struggles involving unmarried daughters of the house (of two generations) that had resulted in a draining of real power from the *nangma* position and a transfer of 'de-facto' headship to an unmarried daughter of the house. This had left the *namas* in difficult situations, often involving loneliness and also sometimes neglect and maltreatment.

One well-known case of such conflict was the long and complicated history of the Darkhang house, where two generations of women had been involved in power struggles – with different results. Darkhang was one of the older houses in Sharlung, but due to a series of unfortunate events, in addition to the local political history, in the 2000s it was a poor house. When we entered the story, the household consisted of a man and his wife (Yangdröl), his unmarried sister (Pema), their two sons, a daughter-in-law (Nyima Tsering) and their three small children, as well as their two unmarried daughters (Tsomo and Loyang, of which the latter was a nun). Pema, the unmarried woman of the older generation, had been ordained in the local nunnery in the past but had been forced to disrobe in 1959. Pema had therefore moved back into her natal home, where her brother lived with his family. She remained unmarried throughout her life and was still called Ani, referring both to her former status as a nun and her kin relation as 'father's sister' to the children of the house. Darkhang was a female-dominated household in terms of internal organisation and power distribution, reflecting the presence of unmarried daughters with strong personalities, especially in the older generation.

The *nama* of Pema's generation, Yangdröl, was entitled to receive the female headship from her mother-in-law. This, however, both did and did not happen. In practice, Pema and her mother had been sharing the

leadership tasks, distributing the women's work and controlling the agricultural produce, and little, if any, of that influence was transferred to Yangdröl during the mother-in-law's lifetime. Following the passing of the mother-in-law, Yangdröl took the formal title of *nangma*, but this was not reflected in practice. By that time, Pema had – through years of cooperation with her mother – established herself as figure of authority within the household. When Yangdröl, on the other hand, tried to execute her given powers by taking charge of the cooking and serving, she was simply disregarded, not only by Pema but also by her husband and their children. As one of her sons said, 'Ama [Yangdröl] was not as strong as Ani [Pema].' Yangdröl had tried to enact the *nangma* title, but after a while she realised that all household members related primarily to Pema as the female head, including her husband and her children. Gradually, after that, Yangdröl said, she accepted her subordinate and unfortunate, position.

When Yangdröl's two sons reached mature age, they married a young woman called Nyima Tsering. She was only two years older than the youngest daughter in the house, Tsomo, and a little younger than Loyang, the nun. The first years of this marriage were amicable. Yangdröl spent much time by herself at that time, walking the fields and sitting around the hearth engaging in religious activities. Thus, the new *nama* Nyima Tsering worked mostly with Pema from the beginning. The two developed a good relation, but it was still too early to share leadership of any kind. Nyima Tsering's children were small and still depended on her, and she was only at the beginning of consolidating her position from an outsider to an insider. After some years, Nyima Tsering explained, she started to notice a deterioration in her relation to Tsomo, her sister-in-law; Tsomo worked more closely with Pema than before and at the same time she felt that Tsomo was rude and refused to help her with chores. Aware of Yangdröl's sad experience, Nyima Tsering worried that her sister-in-law would actively work to marginalise her in similar ways. Thus, Nyima Tsering decided to confront Tsomo. The conflict escalated, and it took several years before it was resolved. In the process, the other house members had to side with either her or Tsomo.

Most people sided with Nyima Tsering, despite her original position as an outsider, which I believe is an indication of the expected gender roles and life course development, on the one hand, and personal attributes and abilities to make alliances, on the other. When Nyima Tsering confronted Tsomo, she already had three sons. Her relationships with her two husbands, her father-in-law and Pema were solid. The first two critical phases of her marriage – pre-pregnancy and before having several children, including a son – had passed, and therefore she was confident to bring up the problem with Tsomo. The conflict was solved by sending Tsomo to work in another household – that is, not depriving her of membership in her natal house but

creating a distance between her and Nyima Tsering. Through this, Nyima Tsering was recognised as the future *nangma* of Darkhang house, and she continued after this to consolidate a central and influential position.

In this house-based organisation, the formal, and expected, trajectory of an in-married wife is to transition from a peripheral role in the initial phases, during which she could easily be replaced, to a more solid attachment with the birth of children, to a more central role in moving towards taking over as female head of the household. The expected trajectory of a resident unmarried daughter, on the other hand, is to remain peripheral – an assistant – serving the household. Indeed, as Schuler showed in detail in *The Other Side of Polyandry* (1987, from Chumik in northern Nepal), unmarried women were characterised as peripheral to the social structure and organisation in a community of normative polyandry. This was also the case in Panam. However, as Childs, Goldstein and Wangdai have shown from other Panam villages, people's attitudes towards daughters are changing. As parents prefer to 'receive care from one's own daughter rather than a daughter-in-law who is viewed with some trepidation' (2011: 20), they found that to an increasing degree parents were investing in daughters so that they will remain as care contributors in their old age.¹⁶ Despite these changes in which unmarried daughters have gained more social value and have thus indirectly become an incentive for continued arrangement of polyandry, their roles were still peripheral to the social organisation of normative polyandry. This is a peripheral position that they share – in some ways – with the youngest husbands in large (more than three husbands) polyandrous marriages, which can serve to remind us of the limits of a gender focus alone when discussing plural marriages. As Levine argued in terms of 'the less desirable child' in the corporate household being vulnerable to neglect or differential childcare in Nyinba communities, the social categories of 'young *nama*' and 'youngest husband' shared a precarious position in larger polyandrous marriages.

Yet, gender and gender models are not irrelevant. Underlying many of the concerns expressed by *namas* above are implications of a post-marital residence pattern. For a *nama*, it was the initial phases of a marriage, after leaving home and settling in her husbands' household, and being an outsider in a well-established group that was talked about as the most difficult.¹⁷ *Makpas* share this position of outsider, in leaving their natal home and settling into a well-established group. Yet, there are fundamental differences between *makpas* and *namas*, and these reflect not only organisational factors (through which the *makpa* will become the household leader and eventually embody the centre of the house) but also gender factors (that women, their bodies and their work are of lower value, less important and fundamentally more peripheral to the order of things). In Sharlung, this gender hierarchy was naturalised and not contested.

Unidirectional Gender Manipulations

Despite a naturalised hierarchy, gender categories and classification were somewhat open to manipulation and transgression. Yet, as two very different examples will illustrate, such manipulation has the effect of reproducing and reconfirming an established gender model. The first example is about cross-dressing and female transgressions of gender expectations, and the second is about incidents of sex-change during childbirth.

When we met her, Phuntsok was fifty years old and lived in her natal house, Lhokhang, together with her elder sister and her family. Her appearance was like that of a local man, and she was unmarried. In rural areas such as Panam, bodies were clearly gendered through clothes, shoes, jewellery and hairstyles. In the 2000s, most people, and especially the women, wore traditional clothes. They wore dresses (*chuba*) with aprons indicating married status and kept their hair long, often in braids with colourful thread. When women wore traditional boots (*lham*), which was not very common, these had patterns and colours defined as being ‘for women’. Phuntsok, by contrast, wore woollen trousers, a jacket and male-patterned boots, and her hair was cut short. Upon meeting her for the first time, it was not obvious to me that she was born a woman. She smoked cigarettes, and her bodily movements appeared more masculine. Her male appearance concurred with the work she was conducting; she was responsible for the male chores in the Lhokhang house, as she operated the draft animals and she ploughed and harrowed. Through these responsibilities, she also cooperated with other men in the village, providing labour assistance to male chores. In her spare time, Phuntsok was also making boots; a clearly defined male task. In order words, she lived as a man. Among her co-villagers, this performance was unproblematic, and I never heard any condescending or stigmatising attitudes towards her; in fact, her gender identity and performance was not a topic of much interest or concern.

Phuntsok’s biography is interesting, as it illustrates gender transition, also to her co-villagers, who, they told me, had no previous experience with women acting as men, or men acting as women. Phuntsok’s parents had six daughters and no sons; therefore, when the daughters became of marriageable age, they decided to invite a *makpa* (adopted bridegroom) for one of them. Four daughters were sent as *namas* to other villages, and Phuntsok remained in the house. When I asked why she never married, she laughed and explained that she was never interested in living a married life and that her parents accepted this.

Talking about her life history, Phuntsok explained that she had dressed like a man for as long as she could remember, something that others also confirmed. When she was about 12 years old, Phuntsok announced to the rest of

her family that from then on she would do the male chores of the household. She explained her decision with two main points: she had no brothers, and her father was physically weak from illness, hence there was a need for male labour. She cut her hair short and started to wear trousers. From a very young age, Phuntsok had assisted her father and learned all the skills from him, including ploughing and harrowing, considered the heaviest work and prohibited to women (I will return to this prohibition below). Throughout her adult life, she had, villagers said, 'been like a man' (*pumo bu trawa*). Her work history was identical to most men in Sharlung: when she was younger she helped herding smaller animals; in her adult life, she was responsible for the draft animals; later in life, as her hair turned grey, she was involved in less tiring, but still male, activities, such as making boots. Her sewing skills were well-known, and many customers came from the surrounding villages to use her services.¹⁸ Throughout Central Tibet, women are restricted from ploughing and harrowing because of their innate ability to bring pollution to the fields; hence, it would be a moral wrongdoing (*dikpa*).¹⁹ Phuntsok was the only person born as a woman who ploughed and harrowed in the area around Sharlung, showing that gender manipulation and transgression was possible. Cross-dressing can enable women to perform male tasks, something that has been reported from other areas of the Tibetan ethnographic region. Watkins, working with Tibetan-speaking Nyeshang in Manang, northern Nepal, found that some women disregarded gendered work restrictions simply by dressing in men's clothing whenever ploughing their fields (1996: 49). McGranahan has written about Chime Drolma, a woman born in the late nineteenth century in Kham, who was a 'female leader in a male dress' that fought the Chinese nationalists and communists in the 1930s, not only as a warrior but also as a leader of warriors (2010: 787–88). She is described as 'an exceptional female . . . whose action were designed to protect her people, land, and country, and who chose to dress as a man to accomplish her goals' (ibid.: 789). Cross-dressing is clearly a means to cross gendered boundaries and evade restrictions, also in Phuntsok's case, yet the direction of transgression points to a gendered order of things in which a woman performing as a man is made sense of as an act of upward mobility.

Phuntsok's male appearance does not alter people's classification of her as a woman; she is merely 'like a man'. Tibetan grammar and name traditions help with the blurring of gendered identity: the name Phuntsok is gender neutral (as many Tibetan personal names), and the personal pronoun *khong* is used to denote both 'she' and 'he'. Takrab *achi* pointed out that 'Phuntsok is not a man: she (*mo*) is a woman. But a special woman. Like a man.' Phuntsok's transgression from female to male appearance is best understood, I argue, to be an expansion of the gender categories of man and woman, on the one hand, a challenge of the gendered division of labour, on the other; yet

it does not produce new gender categories (such as a third gender) but rather reconfirms the established ‘man’ and ‘woman’.²⁰

In the excellent article ‘One Plus One Makes Three’ (2003), Janet Gyatso discusses a third sex category that is mentioned in Indian and Tibetan medical texts, called *maning*. Phuntsok is not *maning* or intersex, nothing of the kind was ever suggested in Sharlung. However, what Gyatso indicates as a ‘mucosity’ of sex categories can help us understand the expression ‘just like a man’. Gyatso describes an analysis made by Zurkarwa Lodro Gyalbo, one of the most influential medical commentators of the sixteenth century. He suggested that there might be a deviance between a fixed sex and what he termed a mind-continuum (*semgyü*, similar to personality). By separating sex and mind, he points to their different character in terms of permanence and argues that while the latter can change during a lifetime, the first cannot. Zurkarwa Lodro Gyalbo concluded that ‘there can be a woman who possesses a man’s mind-continuum, but that does not automatically mean that she has actually become a man’ (cited in Gyatso 2003: 106). One way to understand Phuntsok’s gendered being is as someone who ‘possesses a man’s mind-continuum’ (*semgyü*), enacted through cross-dressing, appearance and labour, while at the same time being classified as female.

If gender categories are open to manipulation, and their boundaries are not strictly defined, we could perhaps expect to see in Tibet an egalitarianism in which gender identity is one of individual choice of both men and women involved, and where men, as well as women, engage in transgressing the borders of sex and gender. This is, however, clearly not the case. Gender manipulation is not only very rare in Central Tibet, but it is unidirectional; women aspire to be, and perform as, men, and not the other way around. Within the logic of Tibetan gender models and the local world of rural Tsang, the opposite is absurd. There were, however, according to Lhasa friends, a group of male cross-dressers performing in one of the popular *nangma* (nightclubs) there at the beginning of the 2000s. Their appearance as women was filled with great amusement, and my friends interpreted their performance as commercial entertainment rather than an expression of ‘mucous’ personal gender identities. Apart from the *nangma* drag performers, I have not found examples of men cross-dressing as women, or living as women, in Central Tibet.²¹ I asked people in Sharlung if they had heard about a reverse process, where a man lived and performed as a woman; however, I could not get an answer to this, because, I believe, of what they thought was the absurdity of the question.²²

The second example to illustrate the unidirectionality of gender manipulation is a phenomenon called *lunglok*. *Lunglok* is a widely shared idea in Central Tibet of a baby changing sex in the process of childbirth – that is, from the moment of being inside the womb to the moment of appearing

to those helping with the delivery (see also Levine 1987a: 290). *Lunglok* is not uncommon, and it is seen as a result of harm (*nöpa*) caused by ghosts or bad spirits (*döndré*) during the course of the delivery.²³ *Nöpa* from a *döndré*, or from other sources, is a common threat during childbirth, and women sought protection from lamas or other local religious experts during pregnancy to try to resist these external harmful forces. According to Lobsang Drolma, who had experienced *lunglok* twice, a *döndré* can cause three degrees of harm during childbirth: the first and most serious is the death of both mother and child; the second is the death of the mother or the child; and the third is the sex change of the child. *Lunglok* is seen to be a physical process, involving a substitution of genital organs, which can be partly observed by the person helping with the delivery. The mother, on the other hand, will not be able to see the actual transformation, simply due to bodily constraints. However, there are some general indications of *lunglok* that also the mother might observe, the most important being that blood appears before the baby, and often that this happens two times. During the birth of Lobsang Drolma's youngest daughter, both Tashi-la and Orgyen (her youngest husband) were present, and they both claimed to have seen the baby's penis disintegrate (*mépa jé* – dissolving into nothing).²⁴ Both cases of *lunglok* were talked about as unfortunate events.

I have not been able to find examples of a reverse process – that is, a baby changing from a girl to a boy during the delivery. When asking this in Panam and Lhasa, the question was held to be as absurd as the question about men living as women. As Lobsang Drolma said: 'I don't think it is possible to change from girl to boy, I have never heard about this. Maybe if you are very lucky! But *nöpa* cannot bring that.' *Lunglok* is caused by harm – by forces producing unwanted results – while the change from a girl to a boy would be a positive and fortunate event. In other words, *lunglok* is a process of downward gender mobility, as compared to what would be the upward mobility of a girl changing into a boy. Both these processes reflect gender norms involving a hierarchy in which women are subordinate to men and seen to be of lower value.

Woman as Initially Peripheral and Processually Influential to the Order of Things

Gender hierarchies do not (in)form all categories of women in the same way. Gender ideologies are also contextual and contradictory, as we know from the many studies on the multiplicity of gender discourses conducted across the world. In Central Tibet, these discourses play out very differently in urban and rural areas, among younger and older generations, among highly

educated Tibetans, among monastics and cadres. In Panam, gender norms were clearly connected to roles and to the life course, and particularly to the status of being married or unmarried, and if married, being a mother, and if a mother, being of age. Gendered roles are not very flexible, yet gender manipulation is possible, such as in the case of Phuntsok. McGranahan notes that because ‘a sexed, gendered body is a very real means of grounding lived experience for Tibetan individuals . . . [e]mbracing masculinity as a personal style is thus to launch a critique of cultural norms’ (2010: 789). And yet, if Phuntsok’s act of transgressing female gender expectations is a critique, its reception is muted. Many times her co-villagers pointed out to me that her being ‘like a man’ is unproblematic, uninteresting – a topic unworthy of discussion. McGranahan notes in the same paper, thinking about exceptional women who are stronger than men, that ‘Transgressing the expected order of things is remarkable, but not necessarily to be remarked upon’ (ibid.: 789). In a similar way, avoiding focus on Phuntsok’s exceptional gender performance enables the normative gender categories to remain unchallenged and unchanged.

Normative polyandry produces a higher number of unmarried women compared to normative monogamy or polygyny, and so-called ‘surplus women’ remain peripheral to the house-based social organisation and its cultural rationale. In the past, many of these unmarried women, lay or ordained, lived very precarious lives, often in poverty and reliant on personal relations for sustenance. Yet, compared to *namas*, unmarried women also have more freedom to make their own lives. The roles of daughters are changing, and this freedom also manifested in new ways in Panam, leading women out of the village and to more independent lives (see also Childs, Goldstein and Wangdai 2011 and 2012). Nicola Schneider, in her work with nuns in eastern Tibet, found that the idea of marriage and married life was one of the motivations for seeking ordination in a nunnery (2013). A life as an unmarried woman, lay or monastic, is a life on the periphery of the social and cultural order of things in rural areas; unmarried women are not central to the reproduction of the corporate household and not central to the upholding of religious expertise (although attitudes towards nuns are changing). A married woman, on the other hand, moves from a peripheral to a more central position within the house throughout her life course. *Namas* in polyandrous marriages talk about the potential influence and centrality of their position. Such potential is greater for women married to more than one husband, with whom they build close, supportive and collaborative relations. For *namas* in polyandrous houses – often houses of relative wealth – they might also enact that centrality in inter-house relations and village affairs.

Discussing gendered values among Lio in Indonesia, Howell (1996) made the point that we should be careful not to privilege sexual difference over

other more relevant forms of differences and concluded that ‘Having escaped from a previous gender blindness, we must not now become blinded by gender’ (1996: 267). This well-made point is significant also to the case of gender and polyandry. If we look beyond gender and compare the social category of ‘young *nama*’ with that of ‘youngest husband’, they do share some experiences; both are initially peripheral to the house as a social unit. Yet, the initial process of establishing a secure position in the household differs – while the peripheral husbands are ascribed their positions, in-married wives achieve theirs by their own personal abilities to form alliances and affectionate bonds. A *nama*, as a woman who has moved patrilocally after marriage, is also more vulnerable to maltreatment and abuse as Rajan describes from north-east Tibet (2014), especially in the initial period, as compared to younger husbands. At the same time, in-married women are expected to establish a leading position within the house; to become the female household head. Comparing across gender boundaries, the youngest husband and the unmarried woman are in the most precarious positions, as the expectation of their roles is to remain peripheral through their lifetime. For women marrying into a polyandrous house, this marriage form can provide a stronger sense of safety, enable economic vitality and, despite involving a demanding and complex form of relationality, more broadly, a less strenuous life.

Notes

1. See Bell (1928: 129ff.); Ekvall (1968); Stein (1972); Havnevik (1989). While there are very few studies of Tibetan lay women (with the exception of some chapters in Gyatso and Havnevik (2005); Fjeld and Hofer (2011) and Hofer (2015) on outstanding women in Tibetan Medicine; Rajan (2018a) on domestic violence in north-eastern Tibet), there has been a growing body of literature dealing with monastic women during the last decades, such as Havnevik (1989, 1999), Gyatso (1989, 1998, 2003), Gutschow (2004), Diemberger (2007), Schneider (2011, 2013) and Jacoby (2014), and also, female ritual practitioners and experts, Schrempf and Schneider (2015).
2. See Fjeld and Hofer (2011) for more on female *amchis* in the history of Tibetan medicine, and McGranahan (2010) on women warriors and gender and history more broadly.
3. These perceptions of women are found across the Tibetan plateau; for instance, to the south of Ü-Tsang, Childs notes from Nubri valley in Nepal that: ‘Women are considered to be more intelligent than men, yet less able to control their passions and hence less suited for the life of contemplation’ (2004: 62), while in the northeast, Makley, writing from Amdo, notes that: ‘Tibetans across the community (men and women) tended to argue that the male body was the result of greater stores of merit (Tib. *bsod nams*) from past lifetimes and that this underlay men’s ability to transcend bodily limitations and to succeed in pursuits of the mind. Meanwhile, the female body was considered to be a lower rebirth (Tib. *skye dman*), more hampered than male bodies by physiological processes and thus suited to household labor’ (Makley 2003: 601).

4. After strong pressure from Tibetan Women's Association in India, the exiled government in Dharamsala suggested a new spelling for 'woman', *kyéme*, where *kye* is still spelled *skye* (birth) but where *me* is spelled *smān*, meaning medicine, thus giving *kyéme* a new etymology meaning birth medicine (Tsomo Svenningsen, personal communication, Oslo, 2006). Rumour has it that it was a Western ordained Tibetan Buddhist nun in Dharamsala that initiated this rewriting. I cannot confirm this. Women Hofer and I talked to in Lhasa have asked their husbands and family to avoid the term *kyeme*, replacing it with *Aji* (*A ca*), meaning both wife and woman. We have also been told that the Dalai Lama avoids using *kyeme* (Fjeld and Hofer 2011).
5. I am grateful to the reviewer who pointed out the historical meanings of these two terms.
6. See Lopez (1998: 211). Another example is from Kim Gutschow, writing about nuns Zanskar in Ladakh, who found that in Tibetan proverbs women are said to be seven lifetimes behind men and that women must accumulate the merit of seven additional lifetimes before they can be reborn as men (2004: 16). She further points out that there is a rather dubious logic to such a system, for if it always takes seven more rebirths, how can a woman ever be reborn as a man?
7. Gyatso and Havnevik speculate that these thirty-two illnesses might reflect the negative counterpart of the thirty-two marks of the Buddha that women cannot have (2005).
8. Rajan nuances this statement and holds that 'local forms of feminist consciousness' do circulate among Tibetan women but often in artistic expressions, such as poems (2018b: 291). Moreover, among some Tibetan Buddhist nuns, and especially in exile, there are feminist initiatives that debate also the situation of women in rural Central Tibet (see, for instance, tibetanfeministcollective.org).
9. Rajan, writing from an area with stronger patri-orientation and where women are more exposed to domestic violence, also notes that 'At times, husbands help to shield their wives from the worst of their sisters-in-law's or mother-in-law's abuse' (2014: 147). She also found that heavy burdens of work, scolding or maltreatment from the mother-in-law to the daughter-in-law were not seen to be acceptable. For more on acceptable and non-acceptable reasons for beatings of a wife in north-eastern Tibet, see also Rajan 2018a.
10. Being a returned *nama* is not uncomplicated. Re-marriage is possible, and indeed most common, according to my interlocutors; however, she cannot expect to settle in a high-ranking house. A re-marrying woman contradicts marriage patterns by being sent to a household that is lower-ranked than her natal group. Hypergamy is thus the result of moral disruptions. Re-marrying women are looked down upon and termed second-hand, or 'used' (*chelmo*). However, after the re-marriage has been arranged, the *nama* seems to be treated well. For the husbands, on the contrary, a new marriage would not lead to a decline in status.
11. See Goldstein, Childs and Wangdai (2008) for more on 'going for income' from Panam villages.
12. When talking about issues related to sex, there is always a significant amount of giggling involved. However, I do believe that we managed to talk about these issues in a substantial way (see also the previous chapter on the varying practices of *kora khor* systems). Mingzom, my daughter's nanny, was very curious about the sexual aspects of polyandry, and with her straightforward personality, she started many discussions with the women of Sharlung, and particularly Lobsang Drolma in our house. These conversations were, however, characterised by many questions and only brief answers.
13. See also Levine (1988) for the importance placed on sex in polyandry among Nyinba.

14. These patterns have been changing with the development of job opportunities since 2005, in which it is becoming common to send daughters for income outside the village.
15. See also Childs, Goldstein and Wangdui (2011) for more on changing roles of daughters in Panam.
16. That is, economic and social investment in externally-residing daughters, such as education and financial aid to set up an independent livelihood, in the hope that they will remain close to their natal house (Childs, Goldstein and Wangdui 2011).
17. See Rajan (2014) on the differences of women's experiences of abuse depending on the post-marriage residence patterns, in the north-eastern edge part of Tibet.
18. Making shoes is defined as men's work, and in Sharlung no woman except for Phuntsok knew how to produce these traditional boots, although women spin the wool and make the frieze that is used as the main material for the boots (and clothes).
19. Despite the fact that women's restriction from ploughing in Himalayan societies has been mentioned in much of the ethnographic literature (Levine 1988; Watkins 1996; Vinding 1998; Gutschow 2004), explanations are limited. Carrasco, for instance, simply states that women occasionally can plough (1959: 48), but he does not suggest circumstances for such occasions. One exception is Vinding, who claims that no ethnic groups or castes in Nepal allow women to plough and suggests that ploughing is sinful because it involves killing worms (1998: 211, 32n). Gutschow, writing from Zangskar in northern India, links the prohibition to the defilement of the female body and its ability to pollute the fields (2004: 69–70), an explanation similar to those I found in Panam. She refers to a local proverb that gives an indication of the rigidity of the gender restriction against ploughing (and in Zangskar, weaving): 'If women were to weave or plow, the mountains would fall down' (ibid.: 69).
20. Nepal and India recognise a third gender for those who do not identify as male or female; however, this is not a strong notion in Tibetan communities.
21. More recently, Tenzin Mariko, a transwoman from Bir now living in Dharamsala, has become a public activist for trans-rights in Tibetan communities, challenging these unidirectional gender transitions.
22. In neighbouring areas to Tibet, such as Mongolia and Nepal, there are known ritualised inversions where men act as women, and women act as men (Lindskog 2000). These inversions are commonly termed 'reversed rituals' (social order is reversed in bounded ritual contexts). I was not able to find examples of such reversing practices in Sharlung.
23. In early Buddhist texts, the sex of a person is described as something that can change within one life, as well as between lives. In the Vinaya, rather than being the result of spirit attacks these changes are referred to as being karmic in nature. Apparently, the Buddha himself accepted sex change, both from woman to man, and from man to woman, as is described in the Vinaya to have happened with a monk and a nun. Further, in the Dhammapada commentary, sex change is not seen to limit the spiritual potential of the person (Harvey 2000: ch. 10).
24. It is interesting to note that the word used to describe the change from a penis to a vagina, *mépa jé*, does not imply a transformation of something to something else but, rather, something dissolving into nothing.