



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 10
Number 1 *Himalayan Research Bulletin*

Article 6

1990

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Recommended Citation

March, Kathryn S.. 1990. Children, Childbearing, and Mothering. *HIMALAYA* 10(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol10/iss1/6>



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Children, Childbearing, and Mothering⁴

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It is collectively inconceivable to Tamang not to marry (or not marry a cross-cousin); it is also unimaginable not to want children.⁵ But if the structural backbone of Tamang social life comes from the exchanges between patriline in cross-cousin marriage, its emotional heart lies in the bond between parent and child. Cross-cousin marriage reaffirms the widest circles of affinity, delineates the boundaries of the Tamang world, and defines the outermost limits of Tamang social identity.⁶ Parenthood, however, creates the smaller islands of affection where Tamang--children, parents and siblings alike--find the love within which they anchor their emotional identity. With this simultaneous push toward marital exchange and the pull of remembered parent-child intimacy, then, it is not surprising that most Tamang women seek to become parents.

Tamang parenthood creates two different cores of intimate relations: *mheme* and *phepe*.⁷ A *phepe* is a father and his children; a *mheme* is a mother and her children. Obviously, what we think of as a nuclear family stems from both parents at the same time--both the parents as a couple and their children. For the Tamang, this is not one unit, but two--the children with, on the one hand, their father and, on the other, their mother. Margery Wolf has given us the name 'uterine family' for the maternal *mheme*-unit (of a woman and the children of her womb).⁸ Among Tamang, we also need a symmetrical name like 'seminal family' to designate the paternal *phepe*-unit (of a man and his biological progeny).

⁴This paper was first prepared for the 18th Annual South Asia Conference Madison, Wisconsin, November 1989.

⁵Individual social, psychic and sexual identities may of course, vary--as in any society--but Tamang logics give little scope for not marrying or not reproducing. Individuals sometimes spoke of not desiring marriage, but they usually meant 'not now': Tamang do recognize the possibility of celibate monastics, but there were none in the region where I worked. Similarly some women, especially younger women, said they did not want children, usually because of fears of childbirth or because of the messy work children involve, but I knew no one who voluntarily had no children at all, even though birth control is today widely practiced to limit and space children. Non-heterosexual erotic configurations appear either more unimaginable or not important; I'm not sure which, but no one spoke of any but heterosexual sexual attachments and reproduction. Although there is ample evidence that many of most people's most intimate affective ties were probably with same-sex individuals, these were invariably represented as 'friendships.'

⁶See also Holmberg (1989) *Order in paradox: myth, ritual and exchange among Nepal's Tamang*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

⁷These terms are by no means esoteric; they are heard in dozens of daily contexts. They can be applied not only to humans, but also to animals and their offspring. *Mheme* and *phepe*--and the embeddedness of these two smallest units in larger ideas of the family--are explicitly represented in some interesting ways in formal Tamang family portraiture.

⁸See *Women and the family in rural Taiwan* (1974). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Like the uterine families of Wolf's Taiwanese experience, the attachments of both the Tamang *mheme* and *phepe* are intensely personalized and deeply emotional. Both *mheme* and *fop* are primarily ego-centered units in which personal love and loyalty outweigh all other ties, whether, in the Tamang case, of the larger patriline or of wider cross-cousin marriage relations. Patrilocal marriage outside one's own patriline gives sexual asymmetry its particular form among the Taiwanese, so that women are outsiders in their own marital homes. Wolf shows how women must create uterine families to secure for themselves a position in their husbands' patrilineal families. Among the cross-cousin-marrying Tamang, women, unlike their Taiwanese⁹ counterparts, do not have to invest in their children as their only insurance. Tamang women have other ties in their martial homes besides those they create through their children. The mother-in-law who may be such a bitter rival in the Taiwanese case, is often the bride's own father's sister in the Tamang case. Or, it may be that the senior man in the house, the bride's father-in-law, is also her own mother's brother. And, again, as these ties play themselves out generation after generation, other in-married daughters-in-law in a bride's new home, or neighboring houses, are likely to be her clansisters and girlhood friends who have come to the same community in marriage. In these and other ways, then, Tamang women do not arrive in marriage strangers or alone.¹⁰

Nevertheless, tensions of hierarchy and asymmetry remain in Tamang households between those who are 'bigger' and those who are 'smaller.' In general, those who are older, those who are affines, and those who are men are 'bigger' than those who are younger, those who are of one's own patriline, or those who are women.¹¹ Domestic tensions are probably greatest during the early years of marriage, when men and women can no longer claim a child's dependent refuge in their parents' shadows, yet still have parents and parents-in-law who are not yet prepared to relinquish their domestic authority. The Tamang practice of multi-generational households,¹² puts adult children and children/nieces-in-law in the same household with parents and parents/aunt/uncles-in-law long before the senior generation is ready for retirement, but long after the junior generation is eager to establish itself. 'Bigger' and 'smaller'--by age, marital relation, and sex--all must cohabit and negotiate a fundamental shift in their relative 'bigness.' Regardless of the specific interpersonal relations in any particular household--and they, of course, vary greatly--there is a fine balance between the centrifical and centrifugal forces at play in households at such times.

In this climate, where 'big' and 'small' are so centrally at stake, although it is not usually an atmosphere of outright hostility or alienation, both Tamang women and men find a vital emotional satisfaction with their young children. Both men and women gladly play with their children, especially their young children. Both hold, carry, feed, entertain, instruct, and chastise. Both express great concern for children's development. Both are deeply touched by children's illness or death. And both are physically and outspokenly expressive about their love for their children. Except where wage labor takes men out of the village or where the needs of nursing children put them in their mothers' arms with more pressing regularity, Tamang fathers and mothers both have extensive intimate relations with their children. It is not an uncommon tease to ask children, "Are you your mother's child or your father's child?" Either answer brings much adult laughter and juvenile embarrassment; children soon learn not to choose.

Still, Tamang describe the bond children have with their mother and that they have with their father differently. The difference lies not in the intimacy or intensity of its affection, but in the special

⁹Or, for that matter, Hindu Parbatiya Nepalese; see Bennett *Dangerous wives and sacred sisters* (1983). NY: Columbia University Press.

¹⁰See also March (1979) *The intermediacy of women: female gender symbolism and the social position of women among Tamangs and Sherpas of highland Nepal*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms.

¹¹Needless to say, complex, but predictable, rules govern the interactions among these principles for basic social hierarchy, but those are not particular concern to us here.

¹²At least through the early years of marriage.

poignancy seen in the mother's ties to her children. I am speaking, here, not of motherhood as the universal biological experience we sometimes presume it to be, but as it is imagined and made meaningful for and by Tamang. The Tamang cultural climate of mother is quite unlike that which has emerged in the West.

A Tamang mother's bond with her children is thought to be most unlike the father's because her suffering is seen as more likely and more immediate. Some of her suffering is thought to arise in the physical trials of childbearing, as they are interpreted in Tamang belief. Unlike the efforts that have become fashionable in the West to celebrate the joys of what is called 'natural' childbearing, Tamang emphasize the hazards and potential for pain, loss and death. My argument here is not statistical:¹³ it is not (or not just) that more Tamang women suffer or die in childbirth or that more children are separated from their mothers or die; it is that where modern Western discourse about motherhood increasingly avoids discussion of maternal or infant pain, the threat of pain and loss is central to Tamang constructions of childbearing and motherhood. Although Tamang women appear to derive more or less the same range of pleasures from their children as do women in the West and they suffer largely the same range of physical childbearing afflictions as do women anywhere, but Tamang talk does not highlight the pleasurable, instead, it says that women as mothers suffer uniquely.

Pregnancy is not announced in any way. It is watched for, and often noted from very subtle cues such as a slight shift in eating or sleeping patterns, or a tighter-fitting bodice. But it is not acknowledged publicly. "We don't say anything. We don't tell our own mother even. We don't tell our father. We don't tell our elder sister either. It could end up in embarrassment; what could you say? We don't even tell our own husband," says Mhojyo in a personal narrative.¹⁴ "...we never talk about it. Why should you? It's hard, but it's your own private trouble and, well... (short laugh) ... it's not going to go away. Why talk about it?"

Some pregnancies are, of course, more welcome than others. Tamang readily recognize that young women who have children only shortly after marriage do not get to "dance" at festivals, go on pilgrimages, or generally enjoy adult freedoms without the encumbrances of children. Similarly, they know only too well the toll of too-frequent pregnancies or pregnancies of hungry or sick women, while a pregnancy where there have been no children or where there have been only boys or only girls is especially welcome. They know, too, that for some women and for some pregnancies, things go more easily; for other, less so. But all pregnancy--"desire" or "not", "easy" or "difficult"--is viewed with trepidation and discussed, if at all, within the frame of embarrassed uncertainty and suffering, and these themes dominate all the childbirth narratives I heard.

Few women talk about easy deliveries. Even Purngi, who delivered her many children without assistance and who returned to work remarkably quickly after their births, does not comment positively on her relatively successful childbearing. Although she is proud that she was strong enough to have done what she did, she talked about the isolation within which she gave birth and the strain of returning to a full work load so soon afterwards. Mhojyo, in her particularly poignant account, is well aware that her luck has not been as good as that of some: she had had two children already, but only after very long and difficult labors. She is extremely outspoken about her fears for her impending third delivery, but her words and anxieties are widely shared. From her personal narrative:

MHOJYO: It's a personal plague, this illness, this childbearing. For this plague, there is nothing that can be done. They can work on the various spirits that attack you, but that's the only medicine there is.

KSM: Others...some people have children without any trouble at all...

¹³See Fricke (1986) *Himalayan households: Tamang demography and domestic processes* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press) for more detailed demographic information in some neighboring Tamang regions.

¹⁴This and the several following extended quotations from Tamang women are extracted from the manuscript of my *Words and worlds of Tamang women* (forthcoming).

MHOJYO: ...yes some others have no trouble...I...I have a lot... (Squeezing my hand and, apparently, the child's as well, for her daughter cries out and tries to squirm away.)

KSM: (Holding her hand in both of mine) ..a lot...

MHOJYO: (Her daughter is fussing loudly in her mother's grasp, but Mhojyo doesn't appear to notice, talking very intensely, if quietly) ...a lot of hardship. That's all you can think of...you know you are pregnant and then as soon as you are pregnant, that's all you can think about...hardship. All night long...worry and suffering come to mind. You try to sleep, but you can't...

(She begins crying very softly, but doesn't let go of my hand or stop talking) ...you try to do your work, but you can't. Others speak to you harshly; they scold you. You keep thinking about it and only anguish comes into your mind. It's your own personal anguish...it's very hard.¹⁵

As difficult as childbearing is thought to be, never to have had children is the greater sorrow, even failure. To be "Mother of" somebody is essential not only to adult naming practice but to developing an adult identity. As "Mother of so-and-so" a woman acquires an important facet to her identity, to add to the names she had before--her personal name, her name as "Daughter of so-and-so" and the ritual nickname given by her group of girlhood friends. Insult terms for women focus on barrenness with considerable attention to detail: they differentiate women who have never visibly conceived (among which one of the more colorful is "mother of farts"), from women who have only given birth once, women who have only stillbirths and women all of whose children have died. Although women who are not mothers still have many avenues for social recognition and personal fulfillment because of their other work, ritual and kin roles, mother hood is certainly vital to most women's self-definition and satisfaction.

Mothers, in Tamang construction create their children in suffering from their own bodies and nourish them from their own flesh. Ritual invocations pay the highest respect to, on the one hand, "the ancient teacher-lamas of one's own line" and, on the other, to "the mother of one's own body" (*Dinjen phamo*). Tamang owe a very special debt, a birth-debt (*Din*) to the woman who gave them birth. Minimally, that debt is recognized in the special foods, favors, and release from heavy labor accorded to newly delivered mothers. But, say all Tamang, a mother's birth-debt can never be fully repaid, no matter how conscientious one is. Women not only give birth, they also feed children, from their own flesh. The rules of incest apply to children born of the same mother, but also to children nursed by the same woman. Nursing is emblematic of maternal love and sacrifice for both mothers and children. Mother's milk is exceptionally potent stuff. To say of someone that she is "the mother who gave me birth" or "the mother who nursed me" is to announce the deepest ties of love and gratitude the Tamang imagine.¹⁶

To say, however, those ties between mother and child are forged early and irrevocably is not to say they cannot be broken. Death, divorce and remarriage tear children away from their mothers with distressing frequency. When children die, both fathers and mothers suffer, but with children most likely to die in their first days and months, it is often their mothers' grief that Tamang recognize most outspokenly. When mothers themselves die, the children, especially the youngest children, too, are at risk. It is virtually impossible for newborns of women who die in childbirth, or before their children can be weaned, to be cared for adequately; they must usually die with their mothers. Mothers worry greatly about their children's dependence upon them: "If I die," they often say, "who will care for my orphan children?"

Indeed, to be orphaned is considered such a sorrowful fate that it is among the most poetic Tamang metaphors for sorrow and suffering. "Who will listen to me, an orphan bird?" sings a line in a old man's

¹⁵Indeed, her third labor was difficult; and, although she had a third girl, her husband got a vasectomy to protect her from the dangers of further pregnancies.

¹⁶Co-wives who nurse each other's children are thereby creating an uncommon bond between themselves and among their children.

personal lament song.¹⁷ At one point, assisting me in transcribing the women's narratives that I have compiled into a current book-in-process, one young man decried the persistently grief-stricken tone of one: "We should title this book, *A Tale of Orphans*," he said; "Everybody always calls themselves an 'orphan' or grieves because they've left orphans behind somewhere..." Women, in particular, describe themselves not only as orphaned by their parents' deaths, but also say they find themselves "orphaned of children" when those children die.

In general, however, there is not censure but rather a great deal of empathy for women who do not have or have lost children. Although few women have no children at all, with an overall childhood morality rate approaching 50% among those women of Stupahill¹⁸ who had completed their childbearing, most have lost at least some of their children; some have lost all. Especially, too, since miscarriages and stillbirths count as lost children, the number of mothers in mourning is even greater. More important, though, than raw numbers, in understanding the meaning of motherhood to Tamang women and men, is the place given to such losses in people's talk. Childbearing loss is a silently borne pain for most contemporary Western women; many of us may never have realized how common, in the U.S. for example, miscarriage (as many as 1 in 3 pregnancies), stillbirth (as many as 1 in 80 term deliveries), and infant death (approximately another 1 in 100) are. In this regard, Tamang women are not silent. Ask a Tamang woman how many children she has and she will answer accounting not just for her living children, but for all the miscarriages, stillbirths, and other deaths in between. These losses undoubtedly touch Tamang fathers deeply. One man said he became a *lama* because he couldn't recover from a child's death. But Tamang generally speak of such losses, especially those of pregnancy and very young infants, as having an even more profound impact upon the mothers.

Women also lose children at their husbands' deaths or with divorce. The pressures on Tamang women to remarry when widowed or divorced are great, but remarriage forces them to leave behind any children. That she can be separated from her children not only by her own death or the children's, but by their father's death or divorce is perhaps a Tamang mother's greatest vulnerability. When both she and her children survive, knowing their bond, but cannot live together, their pain is uniquely poignant. When Tamang mothers remarry, following either their husbands' deaths or divorce, they must relocate to their new husbands' homes; the children, however, must remain with their patriline. Ideally, the children will be raised by a close patrilineal kinsman—a father's brother, or an older brother. In this way, children's inheritance and martial rights are protected. But their ties with their mother is broken. Their mother will visit when she can; and children may visit their mother in her new home. Both recognize that children have no future in the house of another patriline, and mothers, little future in a house without a husband. Yet both also recognize their abiding tie to one another with moving lamentations at each meeting.

Tschirto describes herself as an "orphaned bird" because her mother left her to remarry after her father died. She says she tried to follow her mother on many occasions, but her brothers would drag her back to their deceased father's home.

TSCHIRTO: I wasn't allowed to stay. I'd follow her for a moment, but it wouldn't have done to stay in someone else's house a lot. She'd tell me, even if we didn't have our father, what could we go looking for in someone else's father's house. "You're too little; you're too little," she'd explain. And that way, I'd turn around and come back down. I was a worn out rag of a child. I'd cry; I'd cry. I cried so much; no one has cried more.

Her mother, Tikiri, although remarried, never forgot the sorrow of leaving her children from the first marriage behind:

¹⁷See below.

¹⁸Pseudonym for the locale where the personal narratives which have informed much of this paper are drawn.

TIKIRI: All those children were way down there; their mother¹⁹ was here, and the children were still down there. After that happened, I cried. I'd think about those children and I'd cry. I'd say, "I've begun to forget," then I'd remember those children again, and as soon as the memory would arise, I couldn't even eat. I couldn't work. I lived like that: I'd cry; I'd stay; I'd cry; I'd stay on.

The heartache of mothers and children separated by the commandments of patrilineality and patrilocality puts them at an emotional impasse very like the one women experience when marriage pulls them away from their fathers' and brothers' homes. In both cases, theirs is a uniquely female pain; men will only know it through empathy with their sisters, former wives, or brothers' wives. Just as wifehood is intrinsically marked for Tamang with a sister's pain at separation from her own natal family, Tamang women become mothers knowing that they can lose their children not only through inadvertent death but, as well, through the dislocations of remarriage. The pain of the latter sometimes appears even more acute in people's memories, perhaps since it cannot be lessened by whatever oblivion the former at least accords.

Even without such loss, Tamang motherhood forms a structural ephemeron within the perduring patrilineal and patrilocal relations. The developmental cycle of mothers' uterine ties with sons within patrilineal and -local families is well documented by Wolf and has clear echoes in the Tamang case. In childhood, some are as much, if at times not even more, a part of the *mheme*-circle (literally, in Tamang, the *mheme khor*) drawn around them, their mother and their mother's other children, than they are of their father's *phepe*. As boys mature, their identification with father and father's patrikin and place develops in an unbroken line, although the transference of property and other rights rarely moves along that line in a totally unproblematic fashion. The wider connections that boys find through their mother's will bring in their wives and make claims to take their sisters away. Tamang women come and go; kin relations do not fix women's places geographically the way they do men's. No matter how close the woman--mother, sister, wife--a woman will move whenever she marries or remarries. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that men see a kind of alterity in all these women, of whom they have intimate knowledge and with whom they share a deep affection, without direct continuous identification.

For girls, the contrast between paternal and maternal ties develops somewhat differently. Women work had to maintain their patrilineal relations with fathers, brothers, and sisters. Even when marriages separate them from one another physically, their relations endure. The brother-sister tie is ultimately reaffirmed in the cross-cousin marriages of the next generation. Among sisters and, especially, between daughters and mothers, however, exists another kind of tie: with few public jural rights or obligations, their relation is entirely rooted in personal attachment and concern; and that attachment is imagined to be so pure in its motivations that it is often described as more devoted than that of sons.

When Nhanu told how she took care of her mother through her many illnesses, she laughed when she was asked how well her brothers had paid back their *Din*-birth-debt to their mother: "And," said the other, "I gather they haven't exactly paid it back, even now, have they?" Everyone present laughs, and Nhanu replied, laughing, "Hardly! In fact, they didn't do much to repay that debt when Mother fell sick again more recently. I alone took Mother to the hospital that time." One time, Nhanu carried her all the way to a curative hot springs high up in the mountains:

NHANU: After carrying her in that way, after doing all that, after staying those many days up there, after providing all the care she needed, and after bringing her back down home, then, once again, after putting her up her at my house for one month, after saying I would feed her whatever appealed to her to build up her strength, I gave her whatever I could.

Nhanu's mother's case is widely known, and thought to be particularly poignant since she had so many sons, but is now largely dependent upon her daughter for care. In this way, the affection that Tamang imagine lies in the bond between parent and child can be found in its purest form in the relations between mothers and daughters, where much is given but nothing can be demanded.

¹⁹Herself.

Children, childbearing and parenting, especially mothering, then, have a vital place Tamang imagination and in Tamang lives. To be a Tamang child is still to live in the shelter of parental love. But the perceived dangers of childbearing and the transience of childhood highlight for Tamang the preciousness of that love. Tamang children and parents all too soon confront their isolation and, even, opposition in the more complex realities and affective ambivalence of adult life. In the following lines extracted from the *bomsang*²⁰ of one Tamang man--but common to many *bomsang*--the poignancy of birth, parental heritage and suffering are sung, in large part, as a lament to "one's own mother" (*Dinjen phamo*):

Hey, hai! The orphaned bird hears the crying of the world.
But, is anyone aware when I, an orphan, too, cry?

Hey, hai! Gather round, boys and girls, sons and daughters.
Hey, hai! It seems that supreme happiness was born;
/the burden of sorrow was born.
Once the thought of the burden of sorrow came to consciousness,
/might I not have chosen to be born in my mother's body?
Like the horse that lost its foot falling into a hole,
humans, without the dawning eye, cannot know the reason for their birth.

Sit down and listen. Sit down and listen.
Mother of earth, sacred mother; father of sky, sacred father.
For what reason have I come to birth in this lifeform? Why did I survive
Oh! *Dinjen Phamo*! Oh! To be born was My Own Mother born.
Is it only to survive that my body has survived?
As my body survived, so supreme sorrow was born. Oh! My Own Mother!

The heart-and-mind doesn't realize it is born;
/the body doesn't realize it will die.
If knowledge of dying were known, why be born?
Like human men and women²¹, I was said to be born to the supreme happiness, but is it not
birth to burdens of sorrow?
Everyone realizes when the fire burns in the forest;
when fire burns in my orphan's heart, who realizes?

For women and men, the special situation of daughters, sisters, and mothers underscores these threads. To be a Tamang daughter and sister is to be torn away from the patrilocal home and love, to

²⁰A type of Tamang song that is a personal, if not strictly autobiographical, lament, composed by older men and women as they contemplate their own deaths and sung to arose sadly reflective thought in their listeners.

²¹The tape and meaning, here, are not clear.

suffer, the separation of marriage.²² To become a Tamang mother, first, then, gives a woman and adult name and place in the husband's community which complements her place in her own natal home. Tamang mothering is, however, much more than a strategic compensatory play for new social allies to replace those lost in a patrilocal marriage: Tamang mothers (re)create for themselves and their children and affectionate sanctuary through their own suffering; themselves all 'orphaned' by the separation from their own parents as well as potentially 'orphaned of children' by death and/or remarriage, Tamang mothers represent these ideals of both love and suffering. Regardless of the actual purity of any individual Tamang woman's maternal devotion, Tamang imagine that mother love is uniquely powerful. At the same time, they speak of it as uniquely fragile: based in love and not right, motherhood is alienable; it can, and will, be taken away from all.

²²See also Holmberg (1983) "Shamanic soundings: femaleness in the Tamang ritual structure" (*Signs* 9.1:40-58) for evidence on the association of these female images of rupture and suffering in Tamang shamanism.