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# GUNS AND GARLANDS: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC MIGRATION THROUGH MARRIAGE<sup>1</sup>

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In the context of the ethnically diverse middle hills of East Nepal, the mention of 'migration' to 'other' places probably brings to mind destinations such as the distant British Gurkha barracks in Hong Kong or acres of fertile farmland in the Tarai. However, there are as many levels or types of 'others' as there are contexts in which an individual can imagine himself or herself. Thus, while some women from East Nepal may accompany their husbands or families to distant parts, they most often deal with the more localized migration and 'otherness' of inter-village and inter-ethnic marriages. This paper focuses on courtship and movement through marriage as experienced by many women in and around Tamaphok, East Nepal. Such a micro-level description of movement and ethnic difference in marriage is reduced in most ethnographies of Nepal to the merest mention of its occurrence and studies rarely touch on the complex essence of its experience.<sup>2</sup> My work in Tamaphok suggests that as well as a more commonly seen dislocation and peripheralization associated with the movement women make from their natal homes to the stereotypically inhospitable homes of their grooms, there is a positive, creative, adventure-filled, incorporative side to courtship and marriage for most women. The ethnographic details which follow may help us better to understand the ambivalence of their experience.

Tamaphok is a village in southern Sankhuwasabha district in the Koshi Hills of East Nepal.<sup>3</sup> From the 'center' of Tamaphok it is approximately a four hour walk up several thousand feet to the road head town of Basantapur, or a nine hour walk northwest to the Newar ridge town of Chainpur. Tamaphok is the heartland of the Yakha, a Kiranti group of Tibeto-Burmese extraction numbering between five and ten thousand. The Yakha identify themselves as culturally and linguistically distinct from all their neighbours, but if asked would say their closest Kiranti brothers are the Limbu, followed then by all the Rais. In fact, the Yakha have often been inaccurately termed 'Yakha Rai' in the literature.<sup>4</sup> Settlement in Tamaphok is dispersed with over 180 Yakha households and a smattering of Damai, Kami, Gurung, Tamang, Brahmins and Chetris spread out on a steep north-facing slope between 3,000 and 7,000 feet. It is interesting that the village across the valley called Madi Mulkharka also contains a large Yakha community, but that most of the Yakha there speak only Nepali, whereas the Yakha of Tamaphok speak their own language as well as Nepali.

Inter-linguistic and inter-ethnic marriages take place in both directions. As well as in-migration of non-Yakha-speaking Yakha women from Madi and other communities, Limbu and Rai women from elsewhere also marry into Yakha-speaking families in Tamaphok. Conversely, Yakha women often marry non-Yakha or non-Yakha-speaking men who can live up to several days' walk away from Tamaphok. These sorts of marriages happen frequently and are often preferred.<sup>5</sup> A third of all the Yakha households interviewed in Tamaphok had at least one inter-ethnic union and there is no evidence to suggest that this pattern is a recent phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> The notions of 'boundary', 'ethnic group' and 'other' we have developed in anthropology help to explain the dislocation and peripheralization felt by incomers such as these to a linguistically and culturally distinct community. However, these do not tend to allow for the sometime dissolution of boundaries and active inclusion of incomers which I observed in Tamaphok.<sup>7</sup> The migration that a woman will make for marriage is at once dislocating and incorporating, frightening and enthralling. It isolates her as an outsider and envelops her as an insider. Our theories have not let these paradoxes and contradictions of experience remain just that. So here I will focus on the often neglected mechanisms of incorporation and cultural and linguistic flexibility visible in the marriage process amongst the Yakha: the garlands that go with the guns at the wedding ceremony.

Let us begin with a short description of a common venue for courtship which often leads to marriage: the Ranke Bazaar in Basantapur. This annual event takes place in July in the middle of the monsoon season, and is seen by the Tibetan hotellers and high-caste Hindu shop-keepers of the town as very much a Kiranti event.

During the day people of many groups from all over the region attend a market in the nearby hamlet of Chitre, but towards evening Brahmin and Chetri families can be seen heading for home carrying their provisions with them. Young Kiranti men and women, by contrast, walk to the main street of Basantapur donning their best clothes to sing and dance the 'rice dance' (*dhān nāc* - N. / *chabak lakma* - Y.) with their *solti* and *soltini* (N. - literally their eligible affinal relatives but in reality a much larger and often ethnically mixed group). Dancers hold hands in a circle, often ankle deep in mud or sheltering from monsoon rains in the covered entrances of shops. In the weak light of kerosene lamps they sway back and forth and circle counterclockwise singing a repetitive song about love. Partners are chosen by either men or women. Yakha may dance with other Yakha, as long as they are not within the same clan group (*thar* - N. / *choñ* - Y.), or they may dance with other Kiranti. Some Yakha women to whom I spoke had very set ideas about only wishing to dance with members of a particular ethnic group.<sup>8</sup> The friendships which participants develop during these dances may fizzle out afterwards, or they may be the first step towards elopement or marriage.

Frequently, the pleasure of dancing is disrupted at a later stage in the evening. Women scuttle into teashops and 'hotels' and the doors are shut by anxious owners as violent fighting breaks out in the streets between gangs of drunken men. This looks spontaneous but is apparently part of the annual tradition, the fights stemming from pre-arranged challenges sent in writing by the youths of one village to those of another. Surely, an ethologist could make much of this aggressive display, but I was more impressed by the way in which the contrast of machismo fighting and genteel dancing fit the image of huge antique guns firing into the air and beautiful garlands draped around the groom's neck at a wedding: the juxtaposing of violence and beauty, war and love. Like a gun blast, the fighting at the bazaar dissipates as quickly as it arises, and the streets fill once more with dancers and song.

As others have noted, Kiranti women seem to have a great deal of control over their choice of dance and marriage partners.<sup>9</sup> They often express preference for marriage with men of other groups. For example, one Yakha woman told me that Limbu husbands give much more gold to their wives than Yakhas do and that this was why she wanted to find a nice Limbu man. Some Yakha girls suggested that it is best to marry a Limbu who lives far away because you have an excuse to go back to your natal home for longer periods of time. The Limbu language is sometimes admired and some of its vocabulary and elementary syntax acquired by Yakha girls who are thinking of marrying a Limbu. "I like the sound of the Limbu language, don't you?", a female Yakha informant said to me once. The general aesthetics of the language are frequently commented on, and it also becomes a great game to identify words which have an innocuous meaning in Yakha but mean something quite different and rude in Limbu (and vice versa).<sup>10</sup> I was told by older members of the community that in their youth, rice dance verses were almost exclusively sung in Limbu and they learned the language through learning the songs. Now, Nepali features in many of the verses.

While stylized courtship at the bazaar is a predominantly Kiranti custom, it tends to synchronize with the Hindu system of arranged marriages. Many people who said their marriage was arranged by their parents also said they initially met their future spouses dancing at the bazaar. Whether the parents or the children made the initial selection is unclear. There is a great deal of ambiguity in how partners are chosen. On the one hand daughters are given as a commodity to carefully chosen men to establish or bolster alliances with other families or villages. At the same time the unmarried daughter has some independence and expresses her opinions.<sup>11</sup> The preferences voiced by women, and the frequency of linkages with men of other Kiranti linguistic groups, suggest that such unions are desirable at both the family and the individual level.

But why is this so? An outward focus encouraged by the proscription of marriage within one's clan and ideally up to seven generations back with members of other clans must be an important explanation. For the numerically small Yakha, this may limit the number of appropriate marriage partners possible within the group and make marriage outside more desirable.<sup>12</sup> In addition to social rules, I would argue that the intrigue felt and shared for matches with the 'other' also contributes. Preference for the 'other' is visible in Yakha mythology. One story, for example, explains why there are very few rice dance verses in Yakha. Once upon a time there was a competition between the Yakhas and Limbus, held by the gods at the bazaar. At a given moment, the gods threw all the possible verses from the sky. The Limbu held out a *thunse* (N. - a large, finely woven basket used for washing millet, pronounced *thumse* locally) and caught a large number of verses. The

Yakha held out a *Doko* (N. - a large, loosely woven open basket), and almost all their verses fell through the holes and were lost. What young woman would not want to marry a descendant of the cleverer of those two?! Perhaps a Limbu scholar could explain why, conversely, Limbu women may be attracted to Yakha men.

When the migration of a bride to her future husband's home first takes place, she leaves her parents and walks to her new home with a group of young female friends and relatives called the *lokondi* (N.). A few low-caste musicians with their horns and drums, and usually a few young male relatives accompany them. The distance between the bride's old and new homes often involves more than a day's walk, so the departure of the bridal party is timed to ensure its members arrive the evening before the wedding ceremony. On the path there is much merriment visibly enjoyed by all but the bride who is expected to look serene and beautiful or to look miserable and pouty, depending on one's perspective. When the party approaches the groom's village, the bride and *lokondi* are made comfortable under a long bamboo shelter in a field, or on the balcony of a house well away from the groom's home. Large guns are shot into the air - two consecutive shots indicates to people far and wide that a wedding is taking place. The *lokondi* are well provided for with spicy pickles, rice, buffalo meat and *thuñba* (N. - a millet beer sipped from wooden pots with bamboo straws).

They sit up most of the night eating and drinking and making jokes in their language about the looks, wealth or manner of the groom, or about the quality of the victuals compared to what they would be given at home. As gunfire continues to echo in the hills, in the wedding house the groom's mother places a beautiful garland of flowers around her son's neck and a blessing of pink-coloured rice on his forehead. If the groom can afford it -for example if he is a soldier in the British Gurkhas or the Indian army - he might have acquired a sound system which blares anything from thematic Nepali film songs such as '*Behuli*' (N. -bride) to selections from Michael Jackson's hit album '*Thriller*'. At the same time, the first of the drum dancers begin their slow steady circular dance and drumming in the front of the wedding house -more and more will accumulate into the night.

At an agreed time in mid-afternoon, the bride and her party get up and hurry to a spot further away from the bridegroom's house. The *lokondi* stand in a tight circle around the bride and cover their heads with tartan wool shawls. Inside this small dark space, the bride changes into the blouse piece, petticoat, and sari that the groom had tailored for her. Guns are fired into the air as the groom and his party come out to meet the bride. The bride emerges from her human changing room and tosses another garland of flowers and grasses over the groom's head. Then the bride and groom move together in procession towards his house and to the wedding feast of buffalo provided by the groom's family. The wedding rituals are far from complete, but the bride's initial migration ends as she enters the kitchen of her new home and sits with her new husband, surrounded by her *lokondi* and many of her affinal relatives.

The following day the bride and groom and all her party go back to her *māiti-ghar* (N. - natal home). The bridegroom carries pig meat and bottles of *raksi* (N. - liquor) to give to her parents, and further celebrations take place. Then the bridal couple return alone to his house and begin to settle in there. The settling-in process is different in every case, but I want to look at the general pattern derived from speaking to and watching non-Yakha-speaking women who had married Yakha men and come to live in Tamaphok.

The initial period almost always seems to be lonely and difficult, no matter how friendly or helpful the groom's family are to the new bride.<sup>13</sup> The new family do their best, generally, to include and instruct the incomer. They begin this by speaking to her as well as to others in her presence in Nepali, the lingua franca of Nepal. To some extent this is done purely out of the necessity to communicate so that fields can be properly worked and meals appropriately served. As time goes on, if the linguistic competence of the bride is such that she learns to understand the Yakha language rapidly, the rest of the family speak more and more Yakha to her to the point where all family speech around the kitchen fire travels to her in Yakha and is replied to in Nepali or, after a period of years, in Yakha. People in Tamaphok consider that eight to ten years is a sufficient length of time for incomers to master their language (so heaven help the anthropologist trying to do the same thing in 21 months!). However, an incomer lacking the ability to learn to speak Yakha is not dismissed as a lost cause, but through amazingly complex linguistic gymnastics in both Nepali and Yakha, she is pulled into conversations and kept there.

Perhaps because of the skill and confidence with which the two languages are manipulated for the benefit of incomers through marriage, Yakhas do not complain that such adjustments are diluting or killing their language. The virtual death of the Yakha language in communities such as Madi Mulkharka is, rather, ascribed to local attitudes whereby Yakha is seen as deleterious to Madi children's education. Those people in Tamaphok who fear their indigenous language may follow the same path to extinction say that this would be due to parents not encouraging their children to speak Yakha at home. The potential effect of a large number of non-Yakha-speaking brides coming to Tamaphok is not considered detrimental in any way. This is a significant point which illustrates how such incomers are always in the process of growing proto-roots in the community. The Yakha language is always gently but persistently on offer to them and they quite often accept it and help to pass it on to their own children.

Of course the incoming bride is not a blank slate. She also brings her 'otherness' with her. One of the most fascinating of her potential imports is a spirit from her natal home. Certain households have spirits in them which accompany daughters to their new homes upon marriage (e.g. *pokta cyān*, *talā cyān*, *atani cyān lahare cyān* and *baramānsir*).<sup>14</sup> These differ significantly from the spirits normally found in a Yakha house both in character and the demands they make for offerings. For instance, the *lahare cyān* is a Limbu spirit commonly brought by women into their new homes. It is renowned for its expensive needs in sacrificial offerings which involve killing a buffalo, a sheep and 16 chickens once every three to six years. Some unmarried Yakha men have told me that they would probably try to find out what spirits a prospective wife had in her family - for cost reasons, this might affect their choice of partners. It is worth noting that non-Yakha spirits may reside in households in which every living female member identifies herself as Yakha. These spirits would have been brought to the home by female ancestors. Further research might reveal how outside spirits are incorporated into the Yakha pantheon in ways paralleled by the incorporation of the non-Yakha brides that bring them.

Likewise, one should note the way in which such spirits constitute continuing ties with their places of origin. These spirits do not migrate as much as they undergo fission to expand their domains - a spirit brought to Tamaphok from a Tehrathum (a neighbouring district) *māiti-ghar* still also lives in the *māitighar*. The way in which these spirits move may be seen as representative of the ambivalent push and pull of the bride's new and old homes.

Many spirits, however, do not migrate - they are space-specific - especially the wild and generally harmful spirits of the jungle. An incomer is as vulnerable to their powers as is any other resident of Tamaphok. If she is threatened or harmed by one of them, a Yakha shaman has to be called upon to remedy the problem. The way in which the community acknowledges an incomer's vulnerability to the local spirit world is part of the process of acceptance as a member of that community.

On the whole, incorporation is a gradual process, but there is evidence to suggest that in some respects it happens more quickly for women marrying into Yakha society than for women marrying out into other groups. A woman marrying a Yakha man takes the clan name of her husband at the time of the initial marriage ceremony, whereas a woman marrying into a Limbu household, by contrast, will keep her maiden clan name until the final bridewealth payments are made. This can take ten to fifteen years, according to Limbu custom.<sup>15</sup> The Yakha were also said to make the final bridewealth payments (known as *bhatāhā* - N.) relatively quickly, generally before the woman has had any children. After these final payments, the bride's natal family is no longer responsible for conducting her death rituals, and in the event of her death the burial and funeral ceremonies will be performed by her husband's family according to the Yakha tradition. Since funeral rituals demonstrate the greatest variation of all the main life-cycle rituals amongst the different hill tribes of East Nepal, the time when an incomer is treated in death as an insider may be of particular significance.

Of course integration is only part of the story. Migration through marriage often entails a wrench from the happy and familiar into the unknown and hostile; a move from loving mother to demanding mother-in-law; a move from comfort and comprehension to difference and dislocation. When husbands and their homes and families are unbearable, women may escape through adulterous affairs and elopement, or they may return to their parents' home. When men are unhappy with their wives for not bearing children they often bring second

wives into the house. Conflicts such as these, when experienced within inter-ethnic marriages, may serve to reinforce a sense of boundary which conventional anthropological analyses support at the theoretical level. But a paradigm based on the boundedness of culture does not describe the whole picture.

The bulk of the material I have sketched out in this paper shows that intermarriage is often actively sought by the Yakha of East Nepal. With intermarriage we have seen that there is a strong effort made to include the incomer and replace many signs of difference - her language and name, for instance - with signs of sameness. The ethnic boundaries visible one moment (such as when a bride returns to her *māiti* and may complain about Yakha customs and speech), disappear the next as when, without a sense of contradiction, she expresses a certain joy at the challenges of making a place for herself in her married home. 'Boundaries' as we know them do not account for the ambiguities or contradictions of experience which accompany in-migration through marriage: the guns that go with the garlands, the fighting that goes with the courtship dance, the misery of leaving home for an arranged marriage in a 'foreign' place preceded by an active courtship of the desired 'foreign' 'other'. The Yakha have a certain pride and awareness of their distinctiveness which is not seen as threatened by the long term incorporation of difference through intermarriage in their community. Incomers are not automatically peripheralized in their constantly shifting assessment of 'self' versus 'other'.

## Notes

1 This is the revised version of a paper presented at the American Anthropological Association meetings in New Orleans on 29th November 1990 in the session 'Rethinking Commonplaces: Place and Identity in Nepal'. My thanks are due to Prof. Mary Des Chene for organizing the session, and to Prof. Kathryn March for her helpful comments as discussant.

2 See, for instance, Jones and Jones (1976:65), Bennett (1983:10), Dahal (1985:89), Fisher (1990:128,167), and Caplan (1975:138-146).

3 I returned from Nepal in October 1990 after 21 months of post-doctoral research in Tamaphok with my husband, Andrew Russell. His paper on migration in this issue should be read as a complement to mine.

4 Andrew Russell's paper in this issue outlines the multiple and contextually changing identity markers used by the Yakha.

5 Some writers downplay the sense of difference in these intra-Kiranti unions. For example, Jones and Jones suggest that, for the Limbu, "marriages to the Rai, especially the neighboring Yakha Rai, are the most common of all intercaste unions in Limbuan (9 percent of recorded marriages) and are legitimate and enduring alliances. The Rai are 'brothers' to the Limbu, speak closely related languages and practice similar eating habits, religious beliefs, marriage practices, and bride-wealth payments" (1976:65). While in 'etic' and macro-terms the Limbu and Yakha are culturally and linguistically related, the languages are mutually unintelligible and there are many significant differences in religious and other cultural spheres of which the Yakha are keenly aware. The 'emic' sense of difference felt by women experiencing such unions should override our externally derived conceptual terminology which often lumps 'related' others and reserves all comment on difference to extremes and exceptions (such as marriage between high-castes and untouchables).

6 The majority of these marriages are between Yakha and Limbu, followed by unions with Rai. The Yakha say that they used to regard the Rai as lower than them in caste terms. However, now marriage with a Rai is perfectly acceptable. This illustrates how rules and notions of hierarchy, where they exist, are negotiable and open to change amongst many of the ethnic groups of the Himalaya (cf. Horowitz 1975). For the present, Yakha intermarriage with untouchables or high-caste Hindus remains, in general, unthinkable. Marriages with Gurung and Magar are likewise rare since the Gurung and Magar have tended to see themselves until now as 'higher' than the Yakha, Limbu and Rai in caste terms.

7 Barth (1969), in his seminal discussion about ethnic boundaries does allow for individual incomers to cross ethnic divides without endangering them, but what this process entails (e.g. to what extent the migrant experiences ambivalent attachments) and why some boundaries are more permeable than others is unclear. More contemporary studies (e.g. Cohen 1985) emphasize the constructedness and symbolic nature of boundaries, but the ability of an incomer and her hosts to underplay their significance (while not incompatible with such models) is rarely considered.

8 Cf. Caplan's description of dancing at an annual fair in Ilam in which the Limbus "segregated themselves in one section of the grounds and had no contact with members of other groups" (1970:193). This apparent difference probably reflects both the time of Caplan's fieldwork (not so long after the Limbu uprising discussed by Kate Gilbert [Gilbert: 1990]) and his focus on the cleavage between caste Hindus and Limbu.

9 See, for example, Bista (1987:39), McDougal (1979:101), and Jones and Jones (1976:72-73).

10 For example, 'to pour water' in Yakha is *mañcuwa likma* (N. - *pāni sarnu*), whereas *likma* in Limbu means 'to enter into an opening' (van Driem 1987: 458), a word with obvious sexual connotations.

11 It was very interesting to be in Tamaphok in the months following the 'revolution' of April 1990. The communists who swiftly organised a local campaign to rally support for the future elections pushed for major societal changes and captured these issues in public speeches and in cartoon-like posters at the Tamaphok school. At meetings held in the school courtyard, a great majority of the speakers were Brahmin and Chetri while the majority in the audience were Yakha. Whenever speakers brought up the party line which encouraged love marriages over arranged marriages, the Yakha would laugh amongst themselves and comment upon how the Yakha already have a tradition of love marriages. Several grumbled about how the party should better gear its speeches for local audiences. One Yakha woman turned to me in a meeting and whispered "Listen to that - we never wash our mother-in-law's feet!"

12 Cf. Caplan's suggestion that one major incentive for inter-caste marriages in the Belaspur bazaar town he studied in the far West was a dearth in rural villages in the district of eligible partners of the same caste (1975:139).

13 Cf. Bennett (1983:180-186) on the experiences of high-caste Hindu brides in their married homes.

14 *Cyān* (Y.) - 'spirit'; *pokta* (Y.) - 'hanging shelf in kitchen'; *talā* (N.) - 'house loft or attic'; *lahare* (N.) - 'in a line'

15 See Jones and Jones (1976: 64) for more details on Limbu gift exchange rules in marriage.

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