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Biodiversity Conservation and Economic Development in Nepal's Khaptad National Park Region: Untouchables as Entrepreneurs and Conservation Stewards

Mary Cameron
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Introduction

In this paper I discuss the specific uses made of findings from my prior anthropological research in far western Nepal to a current biodiversity conservation project being proposed for the same area. First, however, I would like to share this experience: crossing the gulf between theoretically-based research and the pragmatic application of data to economic development is a rite of passage. After nearly two decades of assistance requests from the Nepalese in the research and project area, I was somewhat involuntarily converted from an ideological position that resists applied work, to an activism best described as giving back to the community from whom I have gained so much.

The principal investigators of a development project that links biodiversity conservation with the marketing of high-altitude medicinal plants asked me to consult as an anthropologist in November of 1993. The project is located in the vicinity of Khaptad National Park in the Seti Zone of far western Nepal, in an area where I have lived and done research for four years. Thinking my role would be conventional - that of translator and interpreter of culture in a remote region of Nepal - I returned to the United States feeling uneasy about influencing the course of events in a potentially significant way. When I was brought into the project, target groups had not yet been adequately identified. Because of my familiarity with the area and its people, my views on this issue were solicited and discussed. Soon I would experience my initial protectiveness of indigenous cultural knowledge transformed into an agenda as I argued the merits of two points: first, untouchables, and particularly women, should be involved in the project from the beginning in a fundamental way; and second, the unit of biodiversity conservation and preliminary marketing activities should be the village (and a limited number, at that), rather than an entire district. Drawing from ethnographic and historical data collected during prior anthropological fieldwork in Thalara, I will discuss how employing a specific group of people, untouchables, achieves the project's key goal: to

produce the greatest benefit for the largest number of people.

The Biodiversity Support Program and Project Objectives

The mission of the Biodiversity Support Program is to promote biodiversity management by linking it with profit-making activities, thus benefiting the environment and its stewards. In addition, the Program requires that the intellectual property rights of local people be protected, a condition conventionally unspecified or unaddressed in development programs (King 1992; Plotkin 1993; Posey 1990). The Program is funded by the United States Agency for International Development through a consortium of worldwide conservation agencies including the World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, and the World Resources Institute. The preliminary investigative phase, which took us to Nepal in November, 1994, involved many researchers: the Nepalese contingent included two botanists, a businessman, and two government attorneys; the Americans were a neuropsychologist, a physician, and an anthropologist. Others with whom we met for consultation, advice, and approval included a Hindu holy man (who has lived on Khaptad Lekh for decades and is largely responsible for convincing the King of Nepal to create a national park in the area), the Acting Secretary of Forestry, and local herbal healers, leaders, and untouchables (including leather workers, ironsmiths, basket weavers, and tailors).

There is an urgent need to support and facilitate the management of forest ecosystems in Nepal owing to the rapid destruction of biologically diverse ecosystems and arable land under cultivation throughout Nepal's middle hills. The sustainable use of ecosystems meets the dual benefits of providing income to local people, and conserving and safeguarding the genetic resources housed within them (FAO 1985). It is estimated that of the over 6,500 species of flowering plants in Nepal, 370 are endemic to Nepal, and over 700 species are reported by local people to have medicinal properties (Nepal Environmental Policy and Action Plan 1993, p.36). In many regions of Nepal, however, including

Khaptad National Park and the site of the proposed project, there exist no systematic inventories of biological diversity. The establishment of national parks, covering nearly eleven percent of Nepal's total land area, has been Nepal's greatest efforts at protecting ecosystems and biodiversity.

The first objective of the project is to support local people's management of the buffer zone surrounding the subalpine ecosystem of Khaptad National Park. Recognizing that poverty conditions prevent long-term sustainable use of ecosystems, a second project objective is to tie biodiversity conservation with income generation for local people. The community has decided upon the following strategies to achieve this: local herbal healers will work with plant collectors and cultivators, porters, and business people to market Thalara's rich ethnomedical tradition (see Cameron 1986) and Khaptad's medicinal plants to other parts of Nepal, India, and the United States.

The project's third main objective is to develop three tiers of medicinal plants: 1) topical antiseptics and insect repellents; 2) herbal teas; and, 3) pharmaceutical drugs. The first two categories of medicines will be marketed within the second year, whereas the latter category will take several years to bring to market. A fourth objective is to secure partial financial investment in the project initially from Nepali- and American-based herbal medicine and pharmaceutical companies, to ensure their cooperation with the Institute of Biodiversity in Nepal (IBN, a Nepalese-based NGO) in the screening and processing of plants, and eventually to transfer complete responsibility to these companies through their continued financial investment in the project. An important fifth objective (and one often overlooked in development projects dealing with indigenous knowledge and products) is to involve local people in the protection of their intellectual property rights through various legal, practical (medical and economic), and profit-sharing mechanisms.

The project goal of sustained harvesting and cultivation of non-timber forest products will involve local people in many different roles. Trainers will initially explain the project's goals and help develop local people's skills in the implementation of them. The expertise of herbal healers will be needed in medicinal plant identification, collection, proper preparation, and efficacious use for local consumption. Once a plant repertoire is selected, the plants will be gathered from the buffer zone or from inside Khaptad

Lekh and stored in designated collection sites by collectors. For some plant species, cultivation and harvesting may be more efficient than gathering, and therefore harvesters and cultivators will be needed. Because of bulk, most of the plants will be semi-refined in Thalara, and then transported to buyers in Kathmandu. Security guards, project managers and biodiversity regulators will also be hired from within the community.

Project Location and Population.

The units of project activity were considered from among the four districts--Bajhang, Bajura, Doti, and Accham--with their hundreds of villages that border the Khaptad region. Clearly, it was not feasible to include all, or even fifty percent of them. Several factors were considered in the final selection of three primary village-clusters, including Thalara, the area with which I am most familiar: proximity to, and familiarity with, the Park and its buffer zone; the economic needs of local people; the community's prior involvement with the management of small-scale development projects (Peace Corps; Udhaya Himalaya; Women's Development Division); levels of literacy; and established activities of local herbal healers and an herbal health post. It was to Thalara that our group went in November, joining forces with two Nepalese botanists who had been discussing the project's feasibility with members of a second buffer-zone community.

Thalara is representative of most village clusters in the Khaptad region. It has a population of just over two thousand in seven hamlets, and the people call themselves *gaunko manchay*, "village hill people." Seven lower caste groups and three upper caste groups (discussed further below) are represented in Thalara; there are no ethnic minority groups such as Sherpas or Newars, as are found in other regions of Nepal. Of the total 346 households in Thalara, 140 (forty percent) are lower caste, and 206 (sixty percent) are upper caste. Thalara's clustered hamlets of stone, wood, and mud houses dot the sides of rolling hills that peak in the western Himalaya, mountains that frame the identity of these people as hill peasants, small-scale farmers who use no mechanized or capitalized means of production, have little capital for exchange purposes, and have a high population to feed and house. From every vantage point in Thalara one is able to see steep and narrow terraced slopes, green with fertile crops of summer rice or winter wheat, and brown in the late spring and fall between growing seasons. Connecting the hamlets are a

myriad of human and animal footpaths cutting across fields and up the sides of hills, guiding people to and from their fields, their neighbors' homes, and more distant sites. Those distant sites to which the people journey include the bustling district center of Chainpur eight to ten hours' walking distance away. In Chainpur are located civilian and government offices, air transport facilities, hospitals, and banks. Other footpaths radiating from Thalara lead out of the villages, and up into the *jungal*, the region that is Khaptad Lekh.

Supporting a limited number of villages in which to develop biodiversity management and entrepreneurial activities is appropriate for several reasons. First, His Majesty's Government (HMG) of Nepal has recently recognized that local people need to be given significant and long-term roles in the management of national parks and their buffer zones, roles from which they have been largely excluded (HMG 1993). Most of Nepal's national parks are patrolled by the military at great financial and political expense to the Nepalese government. Untrained in such nonmilitary duties, military personnel have experienced conflicts with local people who are now prevented from regular access to their parks. This problem has been noted by observers to the Khaptad region of far western Nepal as well. Local people, as well, in discussing the importance of biodiversity conservation, have observed the destructive practices by large numbers of troops in the region. Villagers contrast their own conservative use of Khaptad's resources with the military's indiscriminate exploitation of timber for building nonessential structures, clearing of forested areas to enhance surveillance capability, and hunting the very animals that villagers are now prevented from hunting. While the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle, the perception by Thalara villagers towards the military on Khaptad is negative, and has been since the initiation of the Park. Their anger comes from what they perceive to be disrespect shown to the sanctity of Khaptad Lekh (discussed below), and their resentment towards the aggressive forms of control the military guardians wield is mounting. In light of the hostile relationship between villagers and the military patrol, attempts to forge a cooperative approach to conservation and sustainable use of the natural treasures of Khaptad Lekh may be difficult but certainly in everyone's interest.

Second, local people can be credited with preserving Khaptad's ecosystem over the centuries. The vast lekha region has long been recognized as a place of spiritual presences, witnessed in its beauty of lush moss-covered

forests, groves of brilliant rhododendrons, mountain streams, and the visible diversity of plant and animal species. Through the centuries, Khaptad Lekh has developed as a sacred pilgrimage site, and its geography is mapped with stone sculptures of deities, prayer flags, and short, dark shrines that house the spiritual energies of the region. In their annual and semi-annual pilgrimages, groups of villagers, kin and friend, infant and elderly, married and unmarried, hike steadily upwards along the trails snaking through the tangled forests, across streams, and around massive boulders covered with lichens. At the end of a long day, they reach the rolling plateau of brilliant green grasses and yellow subalpine wildflowers that is the centerpiece of the National Park and for which Khaptad Lekh is famous. As they hike, and throughout their 2-3 day stay at the top, people selectively use Khaptad's resources, and sanction against the unnecessary use of firewood or the removal of too many medicinal and edible plants. On more than one occasion, while journeying with fellow villagers from Thalara to the top of Khaptad Lekh, native conservation practices such as these were described to me by my companions, with the explicit goal of conservation for future generations.

At the secular level, village agriculturalists practice seasonal migration of water buffalo and cows to upland grazing stations within Khaptad. Family members stay in rough, temporary shelters for 1-2 weeks with their livestock who graze nearby; taking turns, the shepherds are replaced by other family members, but the animals remain. Users of grazing stations limit seasonal grazing of animals to between 1-3 months, thus preventing the land from being depleted through overgrazing. Hunting in Khaptad is minimal since possession of firearms is strictly prohibited by Nepalese law. Plants are collected for medicinal use by serious herbal healers in their regular practice, and amateur healers for specific family members and their ailments. However, the area's two most influential and successful healers informed us that they are now prevented from regularly collecting medicinal plants because of the military presence on Khaptad.

Third, villages are those units from which kinship-based groups of foragers are generated on an *ad hoc* basis. Such foraging may be specifically related to occupation, particularly among the lower castes. For example, before the restrictions made by the National Park, basket makers would gather bamboo from the Khaptad region on a regular basis. Family members would join with members of other basket-making

families and spend a day or two collecting. Foraging may also be for general resources needed in the home, such as firewood, in which case kin-related women and other female friends leave in groups early in the morning, and return with their bundles towards dusk. All other uses that local people made of the Khaptad region--extraction of medicinal plants, gathering of edible plant materials, collecting of firewood, and

hunting--are organized at the village level, within and/or between families. People enjoy their foraging expeditions into the cool, lush forests, to spend time with family and friends singing and composing songs as they gather. Thus, replication in the project of these prevailing methods of non-timber forest products extraction is a rational use made of people's knowledge of Khaptad Lekh.



Blacksmith at work. Photograph by Mary Cameron

Being Untouchable and Underemployed in Thalara

Caste ranking in Thalara is similar (though not identical) to that found in India and in the rest of Nepal, and is based on relative ritual purity ascribed at birth. The lower caste groups are linked through their ritual impurity relative to those above them. Although there are many arguments within caste theory about what

makes the low castes "low," locally they are labeled *nachunay* caste, "not touchable people"; *saano jaat*, "small caste"; and *talo jaay* "low caste." The historical and contemporary experience of those people called "low" and "small" is one of oppression, poverty, and relative powerlessness.

In addition to their untouchable status in relation to those of high caste, there is ranking among the low

caste groups themselves. The upper ranked and intermarrying groups among the lower castes include the following artisans and specialized laborers: basket weavers, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, masons, and former guards for the local king. These artisans, some of whom are also marginal farmers, do not touch persons of caste rank lower than themselves. The second tier of lower castes include leather workers and tailors, who do not intermarry but are of equivalent status. At the bottom of the caste hierarchy is a single group of potters, musicians, and female prostitutes, who are untouchable to all other groups above them. The highest ranked and most ritually pure group in the Nepalese caste system is the Brahmin, followed by the Thakuri and Chhetri castes.

The question I was asked to answer was this: Based on my research on intercaste labor transformations in Thalara, which groups of local people would be best suited to fill project jobs? Answering this requires consideration of many political, economic, and social factors, not the least of which is how coveted any form of employment is by local people. Families can benefit tremendously from even a single member being employed in a stable, income-earning job. The sources of cash income in Thalara are few, but its uses are unlimited -- purchase of land and farm animals, proper weddings for daughters and sons, lending to others at high interest rates, food and clothing for family members, prestigious feasting of guests, medicine, travel for religious and health reasons, and education for (usually) sons. Most upper caste families have been able to engage partially in one or many of these subsistence and prestige-bearing activities. Untouchable families have not. Indeed, the history of their low status has been built on exclusion from such activities (Cameron 1994).

My answer to the question was, then, untouchables, for several reasons. Because the project requires the greatest amount of benefit to go to the greatest number of people, employing untouchables can best achieve this objective, as I will demonstrate below. Employing untouchables can potentially diminish their economic dependence on upper castes, thus indirectly benefiting upper castes as well. It is unlikely that project people would have been able to identify these most deserving and employable persons. Local politics are such that leaders have their own agenda in development matters to satisfy the most powerful local groups--the high-caste elites.

Poverty, Caste and the History of Land and Labor Relations in Thalara

Promoting the idea of untouchables as entrepreneurs makes sense when we consider the history of Thalara's political economy and contemporary political ecology. In an area such as Hindu Nepal, such broad processes inevitably involve practices of caste hierarchy. In Thalara today, as in the past, land ownership closely parallels caste hierarchy; the poorest families in the area are the untouchables. They own little to no agricultural land, and conventionally depend on rented land to farm. Based on research conducted in Thalara in 1988/89 on fifty upper and lower caste households, upper caste families were found to own 82 percent of all registered land. The remaining 18 percent is owned by low caste families. The average size of the high caste family farm is 9.01 ropani, more than 4.5 times larger than the average lower caste family farm, at 1.95 ropani.

In addition to becoming agricultural and non-agricultural wage laborers, the main means whereby low caste families meet subsistence deficits and shelter themselves against poverty and hunger is through land tenancy, the most common form called *maatya*. *Maatya* land is given as collateral on a loan and may be used for the duration of the loan; in addition to the cash loan, labor may also be promised. The money lent in exchange for *maatya* land is earned primarily by men of low caste who regularly travel to India for employment purposes. Exchanges of agricultural and nonagricultural labor are made by women in the low caste renting family. *Maatya* land is a critical addition to the farming resources of the lower caste family. By adding modest amounts of rented land to their meager parcels of owned land, the size of the lower caste farm nearly doubles from approximately two ropani to four ropani. In almost all cases, rented land moved low caste families into a higher land holding category such that low caste people worked 32 percent of the total land farmed by the population, while 68 percent was farmed by high caste families (Cameron 1993). Clearly, lower caste subsistence critically depends on rented land. However, the uncertainty of supply of rentable land limits lower caste families' reliance on this unstable economic resource. Each monsoon season sees erosion of topsoil and the fragmenting loss of whole plots of arable farmland. Thus, landless groups like Thalara's untouchables must be assisted in locating alternate nonagricultural subsistence activities to diminish their dependency on renting land from upper castes. Controlled harvesting and marketing of subalpine

medicinal plants is a feasible employment alternative with great future potential.

A second form of intercaste dependency that could be potentially moderated, to everyone's advantage, is the local patron-client system. Integrated into the agricultural economy of Thalara (and many Hindu and multiethnic communities throughout Nepal) is a traditional patronage system called the *riti-bhagya* system. The *riti-bhagya* system of the past and the present binds low caste families to high caste families through economic need and Hindu religious ideology (Cameron 1993). In exchange for low caste products and services, high caste landowner patrons called *riti* regularly provide harvest shares called *khalo* and are expected to meet many other subsistence needs of their low caste landless dependents, called *bhagya*. *Khalo* payments from land holding *riti* families to low caste *bhagya* families serve as the economic and moral backbone of the patron-client relationship because they establish the right of each family to ask for services, food, or cash advances from the other in times of need. Thus, the *riti-bhagya* system developed as a South Asian form of feudal economy in which land holding and labor relations followed caste lines. Its Indian equivalent is the familiar *jajmani* system (Raheja 1991).

However, over the past five decades, changes in population, land availability, distribution, and registration, and commodity competition have shifted the balance of the patron-client relationship in favor of the patron over the client. These changes have left lower caste families disenfranchised and dependent on upper-caste landowners. The most dire of these changes is land scarcity. From the advent of nationalist unification of Nepal in the mid-1950s, the material base of traditional intercaste and land tenure relations has eroded due to a severe shortage in arable land. There are three main causes of land scarcity: 1) the population of Nepal has more than doubled from eight to nearly twenty million people since unification; 2) intensive agricultural production, annual monsoon rains, and natural disasters such as earthquakes have caused steady and pernicious erosion of the Himalayan foothills; and, 3) land reform has not successfully transferred land from those with plenty to those with none (Bienen 1990; Eckholm 1976; Regmi 1978; Seddon 1987; Seddon et al. 1979).

Such contemporary changes occur at the end of a long history of upper-caste control over farm land through formal registration. Brahmin, Thakuri, and later, other upper-caste families, have amassed some of

the largest land holdings in the area. One important structural change to have occurred in the last century of relations of land ownership in Thalara is the reinforcement of upper-caste patrilineal control over land by written documentation. The history of land appropriation by upper-caste patrilineal disenfranchised low caste families who did not press their own claims to informally-held land, and the prohibition against female inheritance of land became inscribed into the quasi-legal code of the area. Women who were informally able to inherit land in the past became formally barred from doing so.

The Emergence of Female Laborers

Today, upper caste patrons are less able to provide for lower caste dependents than in the past. Untouchable families are in a daily struggle for survival as they seek temporary agricultural and nonagricultural work with meager payment. Research has shown that untouchables, particularly women, have emerged as the first group of free laborers in Thalara, as the indigenous economy gradually shifts from complete subsistence to increasingly capitalized agricultural production and mass-produced commodities (Cameron 1994). Over the past century, women of low caste have experienced significant changes in the kinds of work they perform, the groups for whom they work, and the types and quantities of remuneration they receive. The history of low caste women's labor has been a gradual replacement of primarily artisan-related production with a variety of paid agricultural and nonagricultural work. The negative consequences of becoming free laborers in the agricultural economy include the breakdown of secure intercaste patron-client relationships, and their replacement by informal and daily wage labor in the context of increasing poverty.

Women of lower caste, therefore, are available to work in the project without creating conflict with other labor responsibilities. Unlike upper caste women, who must farm their husbands' land, lower caste women have a variety of work experiences. They may work on their own small family plots, assist upper caste patrons in agricultural and nonagricultural work for in-kind wages, produce commodities specific to their caste alongside husbands and sons, or fulfill labor reciprocity (called *parma*) for kin and friends. For much of this work they receive in-kind and cash payments, a practice prohibited for women of upper caste. But in spite of these many work roles, lower caste women do not spend as much time in productive work as their upper caste

counterparts, primarily because of the lack of such work, and in turn, they spend more time than women of upper caste in reproductive and leisure activities. Though they search, work is not to be found on a regular basis. The vast majority of women are not literate and are never considered for the rare "professional" job that presents itself in Thalara. And because of their untouchable status, entrepreneurial endeavors such as operating a tea-shop, restaurant, or store is futile because their clients would be few. Thus, women of lower caste are an ideal group to focus on in the project because they are free and willing to work.

Conclusion: Untouchables as Entrepreneurs and Conservation Stewards

Although people of lower caste have little direct experience in development projects beyond portering, they have other extensive work experiences that, combined with the training they would receive in the biodiversity project, make them ideal candidates for project participation. For generations, women and men of lower caste have negotiated work contracts with other upper caste landowners, either in traditional patron-client exchanges, or in daily wage labor. They themselves, as well as upper caste local leaders, recognize their abilities in these areas.

Biodiversity conservation and the collection and marketing of medicinal plants is a project suited to the needs of lower caste people. Up until now, the majority of rural development projects which produce direct economic benefits (this excludes health care projects) have focused on improving agricultural productivity through the introduction of stronger seed varieties, or the building of cement irrigation canals. But untouchables farm only minimally, and when they do, it is on land they have rented from upper castes. When untouchables have been involved in development projects, it is usually as porters of building materials, and not as planners, managers, or marketers.

The political ecology of lower caste families' use of the environment is linked to the broader processes that structure the social and physical environments in which they act (Peluso 1991). The history of such intercaste labor and land holding relations described above come to structure the prevailing (though now curtailed) ways in which untouchables have come to use the resources of Khaptad. These practices can serve to increase their potential as project personnel. The informal uses made of Khaptad resources by Thalara's lower caste families are varied, and include planting small plots of high-

altitude crops such as millet and wheat on land in the buffer zone; collecting raw materials necessary for caste-specific artisan production, such as bamboo, naturally-occurring chemicals for tanning leathers and gold- and silver-smithing, and raw materials for crafting tools for themselves or upper-caste patrons; foraging for firewood and fodder for animals; and gathering of edible and medicinal plants. Thus, low-caste people's long-term claims to the resources in and around Khaptad has developed their knowledge on the best ways to forge an extractive and conservationist relationship to the forests. Supporting untouchables as entrepreneurs is just compensation in exchange for their indigenous knowledge of conservation practices.

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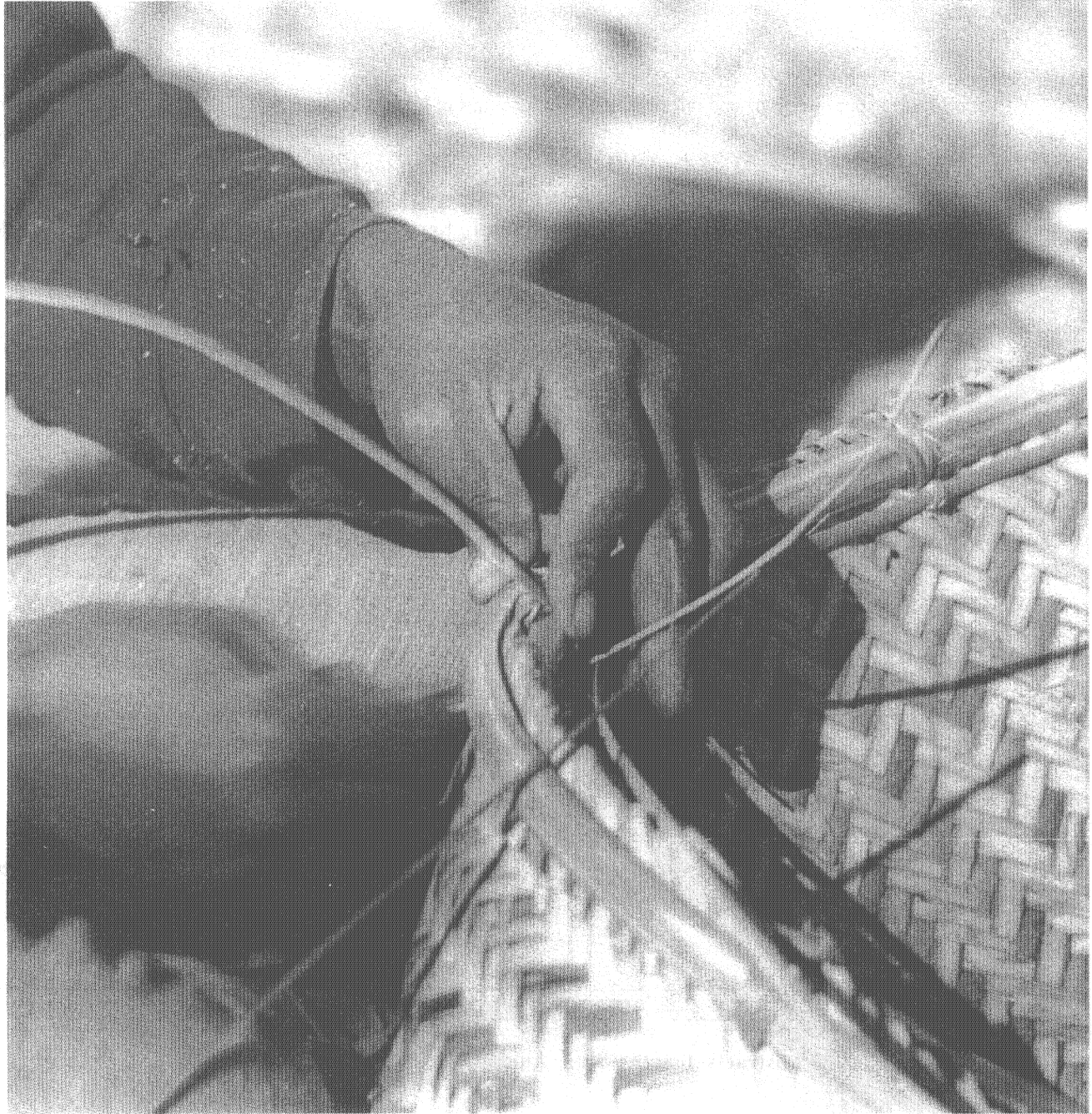
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Basketmaker. Photography by Mary Cameron