

*Perceptions of Relative Wealth in a Tibetan Community: A Note on Research Methodology*¹

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Research methodology receives little attention in Tibetan Studies. A glance through recent publications indicates that methods for gathering and analyzing data are rarely discussed in an overt, transparent manner—despite the fact that such processes indisputably have a direct bearing on the results reported in academic writings. Anthropological studies can be singled out in this regard, for it is common for researchers to assert findings without divulging how the information was obtained.² This tendency leaves open the potential for our work to be trivialized since there is no independent means to assess the reliability of the data, not to mention the validity of the conclusions based on that data (Kirk & Miller, 1986). When conclusions are based almost entirely on highly subjective sources of information, such as interviews with “key informants” (often marginalized members of the society) and “participant observation” [a highly problematic term, not to mention the fact that it is *not* a method (Ellen, 1984: 216-219; Bernard, 1994: 136-143)], we are left with a heavy reliance on the veracity of the ethnographer. The skilled ethnographer who has invested much time building rapport and awareness at the field site can intuitively negotiate the data reliability minefield through experience, intuition, and informal means of verification. Nevertheless, most would agree that the ethnographer’s intuition is hardly a substitute for a valid, explicit, and systematic methodology, especially if we aspire for our results to be more than quaint observations of one specific place at one point in time.

The purpose of this contribution is to exhibit how a particular methodological approach can yield potent results that are amenable to comparisons both across the Tibetan ethnographic map and cross-culturally. The focus is on the concept of wealth differentials within a specific Tibetan society, and how the indigenous manner of looking at wealth is far more than a static interpretation based on a simple enumeration of assets. I contend that by using a careful methodological approach, in this case a combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathering techniques, we can gain a well-substantiated and contextually grounded perspective on an aspect of Tibetan culture *as Tibetans see it themselves*. Since the method is easy to learn and can be done anywhere, the findings need not be restricted to a single site but can be replicated in a search for intra-cultural variability.

HOUSEHOLDS WITHIN THE RESEARCH SETTING

This study centers on the village of Sama, an ethnically Tibetan enclave in the highlands of Nepal bordering Tibet. The total population of the village in 1997 was 544 (*de jure* population), 481 (*de facto* population) of whom live there more or less permanently. Religious life of this rNying ma pa community is dominated by the married lamas (*sngags pa*) who migrated here nearly four hundred years ago and claim descent from the imperial rulers of medieval Tibet (Childs,

1998). Other religious practitioners include a few celibate monks and numerous celibate nuns. The latter of whom function more as caretakers for their aging parents than as religious practitioners (Childs, 2001a). Since much of the following analysis centers on households, I will provide a brief sketch of family systems and the household development cycle in Sama.

The villagers of Sama engage in the typical highland economy combining farming (mainly barley and potatoes—one crop per year), trans-humant herding (no sheep, only bovines), and trans-Himalayan trade. The household is the fundamental unit of production. The most basic terms for household and home are *grong pa* and *khyim*. In the majority of cases, all those who dwell under the same roof are members of the same family (*mi tshang*), so the terms *grong pa* and *mi tshang* are nearly synonymous. Within the household, the *khyim bdag* (“household head”) is the person who is responsible for his or her household’s jural and economic obligations in relation to the village. The *khyim bdag* is almost always a male, although female household heads are not unknown. Widows with adolescent children, nuns or spinsters who live alone, and women with matrilocally resident husbands (*mag pa*) can all be *khyim bdag*.

Ideally the household development cycle in Sama is characterized by oscillations between conjugal and stem phases that inevitably result in the formation of multiple conjugal households, each headed by a consanguineously-related *khyim bdag*.³ The cycle can be summarized as the following sequence of events: 1) Spouses marry and begin residing in the groom’s natal home with his parents and unmarried siblings (stem phase). 2) Once their first child is born (on average three years after marriage) the young couple inherits a portion of the groom’s father’s land and bovines. The young couple is then expected to build or renovate and move into a separate home where their own offspring set will develop (conjugal phase). 3) Alternations commence between stem and conjugal phases as successive sons marry and bring home their brides (conjugal to stem), who then establish separate residences following the births of their own children (stem to conjugal). 4) When the youngest son marries he inherits the parents’ home. The parents then commence a final conjugal phase by moving into a retirement home, usually at *Pad ma chos gling dgon pa*, the temple complex just outside of the village. As argued elsewhere (Childs, 2001b), the family system in Sama conforms to what has been termed a “hiving off” variant of the stem system (Keyes, 1975; Skinner, 1997).

Partible inheritance and the establishment of independent households by sons raises certain long-term economic concerns, first and foremost is perhaps the desire to assure an orderly transfer of property without partitioning an estate to the point of leaving children with insufficient resources to maintain their own households. Polyandry can reduce the excessive partitioning of estates. Village regulations in Sama stipulate that no more than two brothers can engage in such a union, unlike in other Himalayan communities where all brothers in a single household can marry a common bride (Goldstein, 1976; Schuler, 1987; Levine, 1988). The logic behind Sama’s two-brother polyandry restriction relates to the village tax system. Simply stated, the more households created, the larger the tax base to draw upon for funding communal rituals (Childs n.d.). Nevertheless, fraternal polyandry is a common practice among Nubri’s householders, despite

the fact that it occurs at a low intensity compared to other Tibetan societies. Another strategy that reduces estate partitioning is to send sons outside the village to be monks in Kathmandu and India. The practice effectively removes a potential claimant from his share of household resources.

WEALTH IN TIBETAN SOCIETIES

Through numerous studies we now have a fairly good picture of economic processes in Tibetan societies at the state (Carrasco, 1969; Surkhang, 1986; Tsarong, 1998), principality (Cassinelli & Ekvall, 1969), and village levels (Goldstein, 1971a, 1971b, 1986; Dargyay, 1982). In addition we can look at proverbs to obtain cultural viewpoints on Tibetan attitudes towards wealth. These confirm the inherent cultural contradiction between worldly desires to acquire wealth and the philosophical emphasis on refuting material pursuits, as evidenced in the following: “When riches are acquired, the mind is impoverished, and when the mind is under control, one is without riches” (*nor 'khug dus sems ma khugs/ sems 'khug dus nor ma khugs/*) (Gergen, 1991: 46). Furthermore, humility and poverty are valued over extravagance: “Better the happiness of the contented, than the gluttony of the rich” (*phyug po'i zas las/ mi ltogs kyi skyid dga'/*) (Pemba, 1996: 120). Wealth can be an obstacle to happiness: “The wealthy are troubled by wealth, the poor are troubled by hunger” (*phyug po nor gyis ma bzhag/ dbul po grod pas ma bzhag/*) (Pemba, 1996: 120). On the other hand, wealth and respect or social status are connected: “For the man who isn't affluent, though his words be as smooth as silk, they're of no use” (*rgyu drang pos rtsigs ma zin na/ kha dar las 'jam yang zas med/*) (Pemba, 1996: 51); or, “With wealth one becomes an [paternal] uncle's nephew, without wealth one becomes an [paternal] uncle's servant” (*rgyu yod na a khu'i tsha po red/ rgyu med na a khu'i g.yog po red/*) (Pemba, 1996: 52). These proverbs are certainly of general interest and contain insights into a culture that simultaneously expresses admiration and trepidation about the accumulation of wealth. To assume, however, that they represent an accurate or complete portrayal of Tibetan attitudes confuses the issue of cultural ideals (i.e., how people are supposed to think or act) with real behavior (i.e., how people actually think or act).

THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Instead of merely looking at articulated attitudes about wealth, the question to be addressed here is the following: What are the criteria by which the Tibetans of Sama distinguish between relatively wealthy and poor households in their village? To an outsider, it is quite easy to look at a rural Tibetan community such as Sama as an economically undifferentiated enclave where everybody is poor. This may be so, relative to global standards. However, the villagers themselves certainly do not see it that way. Depending upon the eye of the beholder, minor gradations in wealth can be viewed as major disparities.

To address the issue of perceptions of wealth in Sama, I commenced with a household survey to determine ownership of important assets, namely agricultural land (*zhing kha*) and bovines (*dud 'gro*). Unlike other villages in Nubri where local *dgon pas* have extensive landholdings that are leased out on a share-cropping basis (generally 50% of produce goes to the *dgon pa*, 50% goes to the

share-cropper), all land in Sama is held by households. With the exception of the village taxes that fund communal rituals (Childs n.d.), all products of the farm industry can be consumed or bartered by the producers themselves. Land is measured according to a unit called *'bre*. In Sama this is a cylindrical vessel with a volume of roughly 1.3 liters.⁴ One *'bre* of land is equivalent to the area upon which one *'bre* of grain is sown. In Sama this is approximately 35 m².

Another basic economic measure is the number of cattle in each household. With the exception of one household of Tibetan refugees, sheep and goats are not kept in Sama, only bovines. Herd composition is important since different animals are used to exploit different economic niches. Thus, a good herd includes bovines that can provide dairy products (*mdzo mo* and *'bri*) and bovines for transport and traction (*mdzo* and *g.yag*). Throw in a breeding bull (*glang*) and a household has a diversified herd composition to meet most of its needs. Without *mdzo mo* and *'bri* the family diet suffers, and without *mdzo* and *g.yag* trans-Himalayan trade options are limited and activities such as plowing become extremely costly since borrowing bovines entails the reciprocation of six days of human labor per beast per day.

Technically, crude measures of assets should give an indication of relative differences in wealth. In other words, if Household A has more land than Household B, then on one level it is fair to say that Household A is wealthier than Household B. Yet if Household B has more bovines than Household A, then how do we determine which is wealthier? One way is to devise a formula, for example, by comparing land and bovine prices and then determining a standardized value for both. This method is somewhat unsatisfactory due to numerous variables, not the least of which is the fickleness of the Nepali rupee that often renders today's prices meaningless tomorrow. Other problems involve the relative value of cattle and land, since neither fields nor bovines are equally productive. Finally, standardized measures of wealth are far too static for they neglect numerous issues, including household composition and the stage of the household development cycle—factors that are preeminent in Tibetan estimations of relative affluence. In other words, the formula suggested above is an etic construct that fails to account for indigenous conceptions of wealth.

To gain a better perspective on relative wealth, I turned to a pile sorting and rank ordering exercise that included paired comparisons (Weller & Romney, 1988; Bernard, 1994: 237-253). Specifically, I used a method for assessing wealth differences in small-holder communities (Grandin, 1988). In brief, the method involves using key informants to rank households in their own community based on their own conceptions of wealth. Ideally the researcher should choose three people to perform the exercise. Each should be in a position to assess relative wealth in the community. Bearing in mind that not all informants have equal knowledge or skill, the selection of key informants is a critical issue (Johnson, 1990). For this exercise I chose three elderly men who have either 1) worked for others most of their lives and hence have first-hand, comparable knowledge about households; or 2) have worked in the village administration and therefore have a good overview of the community and household assets. For comparative purposes and to uncover gender and generational biases, it would

have been best to repeat the exercise with women or with people from different age groups. This was not done.

The method involves first writing on a card the name of every household or household head (*khyim bdag*) in the community. Informants then go through the cards and rank them on a wealth scale from one to five, one being very wealthy (*'bar ro; phyug po*), two being moderately wealthy, three being in the middle (*'bring ba*), four being somewhat poor, and five being very poor (*dbul po, skyo bo*).⁵ Once the initial sorting and ranking has been completed, paired comparisons and detailed probes are made in order to gain a better understanding for why certain choices were made. Repeating this probing process generates an abundance of ethnographic data that underlies the logic behind indigenous conceptions of relative wealth.

RESULTS OF THE HOUSEHOLD SURVEY AND WEALTH RANKING METHOD

The 1997 household survey in Sama resulted in the empirical findings listed in Table 1.

Households	108 households
De Facto Population	481 people
People per Household	4.45 people/household
Total Area of Arable Land	6.735 'bres (equiv. of 231,700 m ² or 23.2 hectares)
Land per Household	58.0 'bres/household
Land per Person	14.0 'bres/person
Population Density	20.7 people/hectare
Total Bovines	1,173 bovines
Bovines per Household	10.8/household
Bovines per Person	2.4/person

TABLE 1. Basic economic measures in Sama

The economic data can be explored further by linking it with the wealth ranking method discussed above. Table 2 breaks down the measures according to how households were ranked by the informants.

Rank	Number of Households	People/ Household	Land ('bre)/ Household	Land/ Person	Bovines/ Household	Bovines/ Person
1	23	5.2	91.8	17.6	21.8	4.2
2	20	4.4	63.0	14.5	12.9	3.0
3	36	4.3	60.0	13.8	9.3	2.1
4 & 5	21	2.4	30.2	12.8	2.9	1.2

TABLE 2. Household assets by wealth ranking

Not surprisingly, there is a positive correlation between rank and all the variables (household members, land per household, and bovines per household). In other words, aggregate measures of assets show a relationship with perceptions of wealth. Bovines seem more important than land in the calculus of wealth, as demonstrated by comparing wealth rankings 2 and 3. Household sizes (4.4

versus 4.3 people/household) and land/household ratios (63.0 *'bres* compared to 60.0 *'bres*) are nearly the same. The difference is in livestock (12.9 versus 9.3 bovines). Stopping at this point of the analysis, however, could lead to the erroneous assumption that the people of Sama only consider household assets when determining relative wealth within the community. We still need to focus more on the reasons behind the ranking strategies.

Paired comparisons and in-depth probes of apparently anomalous rankings were used to delve into the reasons behind the ranking systems. Having the economic data from the household survey permitted me to ask evocative questions such as, "Household A and Household B have similar assets. Why then did you rank A as 'wealthy' (1) and B as 'middle' (3)?" Ensuing discussions revealed the logic behind the rankings. The following cases illustrate some of the guiding principles that were uncovered.

To begin with, a temporal dimension became apparent, as in the case of *bsTan 'dzin*⁶ who used to be rich but bequeathed most of his assets to his sons when they married, retaining only 30 *'bres* of land and 3 bovines for himself and his wife. The asset per person ratios in Table 2 (15 *'bres*/person, 1.5 bovines/person) should place him in the lower categories of wealth, yet he still scored a 3 since his retirement home is considered to be economically linked (albeit loosely) with the homes of his sons, and there is a remembrance of his former status as one of the wealthier households in the village. Similarly, *Tshe dbang* also ranks as a 3 with his 30 *'bres* of land and 5 bovines. He was an only son who inherited a considerable estate, but over the course of time he managed to fritter away most of the inheritance and was never able to find a wife. It is important to point out that *Tshe dbang* has no potential claimants on the assets, meaning that his asset/person ratios (30 *'bres*/person, 5 bovines/person) justify a high ranking. However, he scored a 3 due to his history of squandering wealth, his perceived lack of competence, and the fact that his entire household economy must be managed without the help of family members. Familiarity with a household's history, labor availability, and personal aptitude all figure in the calculus of relative wealth.

rDo rje has 25 *'bres* of land and 25 bovines. Everybody agreed that he is wealthy by virtue of his large herd, hence he consistently received a rank of 1. In contrast *bKra shis* has more land (80 *'bres*), yet only 6 bovines. He received a ranking of 4 since the herd is small and there are several potential inheritors in the family who are coming of age. This comparison reveals not only that cattle are valued over land in the Sama economy, but that potential claimants on assets are an important consideration when ranking the households. To emphasize the latter point, although *bKra shis'* spinster sister *bZang mo* has only 20 *'bres* of land and no animals, she consistently ranked higher than her brother by virtue of the fact that her home and land need not be shared or divided among any others.

The next example further illustrates the link between perceptions of wealth and the household development cycle. *rGya mtsho's* household has 11 members, including one son who had just married and brought his wife home, and another son who was coming of age. Household partitioning was imminent at the time of the research, which is why *rGya mtsho* received a ranking of 3 despite the fact that he had 140 *'bres* of land and 16 bovines—a considerable estate. Compare

this with sPen pa who has 100 'bres of land but only six bovines. sPen pa scored a rank of 2 because both his sons are monks in Kathmandu. If no other sons are born (his wife was in her mid forties at the time) then a *mag pa* (matrilocally resident son-in-law) will be brought in to the household for one or more of his daughters. The estate will not be divided, so the lack of potential claimants on assets resulted in sPen pa's household being ranked higher than rDo rje's household.

Three brothers, Nor bu, rGyal mtshan, and Phur bu, live in two adjacent households. Nor bu and rGyal mtshan (the eldest and youngest) share one with their common wife, whereas Phur bu (the middle brother) lives next door with his own wife. Nor bu and rGyal mtshan have 100 'bres of land and 16 bovines, whereas their brother has 60 'bres and 12 bovines. Both households have two daughters and one son, none of whom are approaching marriage age. Nor bu and rGyal mtshan were ranked as 2, Phur bu as 3. The case is interesting since it reveals that the land was divided by their parents not on the basis of household, but on the principle that each brother should receive a roughly equivalent share. By marrying polyandrously Nor bu and rGyal mtshan ended up with more assets than Phur bu, and hence received a higher ranking. However, shortly after the ranking exercise was completed both of the elderly fathers of the brothers died. Funeral expenses were very high, according to one of the brothers each funeral cost nearly 30,000 Nepali rupees⁷ (roughly \$500 at the time)—an enormous burden for the sons to shoulder given the nature of Sama's economy. According to one of the informants, the deaths of the fathers and ensuing costs would have resulted in a different ranking for both households had the exercise been performed again.

Finally, social structural factors are by no means insignificant in the calculus of relative wealth in Sama. The exercise revealed that married lamas (*sngags pa*) consistently ranked highest on the wealth scale. Lama households tend to possess more assets than their non-lama counterparts, a disparity that is due primarily to the fact that, since lamas can draw upon a larger labor force than provided by immediate family members, family composition is less of a limiting factor in their household economy. This issue will be discussed in more detail below.

PRINCIPLES OF WEALTH

Some of the patterns that emerged from the research exercise can be summarized in the following representations:

Household A		Household B	
100 'bres of land	20 bovines	100 'bres of land	20 bovines

FIG. 1. Hypothetical Household Comparison #1

In the above comparison of hypothetical households, both A and B have the same amount of land and the same number of bovines (an assumption made here is that herd compositions are identical). At this level of comparison we could conclude that, in terms of wealth, there is no distinction between the two households. However, informants would consistently agree that Household B is wealthier since they recognize the *potential* (it may not actually happen) for Household A to partition as the sons marry. Household B on the other hand will remain intact, and the entire estate will be transferred without division from one generation to the next. Household composition is the deciding factor here, since Household A has three sons and one daughter, whereas Household B has three daughters and only one son. Household B has only one claimant on heritable resources; Household A has three potential claimants. The parents of A can minimize partitioning by sending one or more sons to be monks outside of the village, and by pairing two of the brothers (but no more than two according to village regulations) as a single polyandrous unit for marriage. Nevertheless, partitioning is more likely in A than in B.





Household A		Household B	
			
			
100 'bres of land	5 bovines	20 'bres of land	25 bovines

FIG. 2. Hypothetical Household Comparison #2

The household compositions in Figure 2 are identical (mother, father, two sons and two daughters). Household A has five times more land than Household B, but only one fifth the number of bovines. Creating new fields around Sama is hardly an option since most flat areas are already under cultivation. Furthermore, purchasing new fields is difficult since most are passed along through inheritance or kept within the patrilineage. Bovine herds on the other hand always have the potential for increase. Logically one could therefore assume that Household A would be considered wealthier. However, once again the Tibetans of Sama do not see it that way, and in this case there is a cultural element to their judgment. A large herd of bovines is a sign of prestige. In the past, prior to the deterioration of trans-Himalayan exchange networks, those with large herds had the potential to vastly augment their household incomes through trade. Nobody became wealthy in Sama due to their land or herds *per se*. It was only through trade as middlemen in the exchange of lowland grains for Tibetan salt, wool, and sheep—an endeavor that required many pack animals—that one became wealthy. Despite the fact that the trade network exists today as a mere shadow of its former stature, cattle are still considered (by elderly men, at least) to be the preeminent asset when assessing relative wealth in Sama.⁸ This should come as little surprise, after all the Tibetan word for 'cattle' (*phyugs*) is etymologically related to the adjective "wealthy" (*phyug po*). Granted, the most common word for cattle in Nubri is *dud 'gro*. Nevertheless, the word *phyugs* is used

in several contexts, including as a less frequently used synonym for *dud 'gro* and in reference to grazing areas (*phyugs rtswa*). In addition *phyug po* is a less frequently used term for "wealthy". The people of Sama usually use the term *'bar ro*." Lexical distinctions notwithstanding, the elderly Tibetans of Sama still do associate cattle with wealth, a situation that may change as the economy becomes less based on barter and more dependent on cash.

Beyond household composition, other factors to consider are the social structure of the village and perceptions of individual competence. As for the latter, some members of the community are simply considered incapable of doing much with their assets regardless of how much they have at any given point in time. Households headed by people who are considered inept are ranked lower than those headed by men or women perceived to be highly competent.

In terms of social structure, the most obvious position of advantage in the village is held by the *sngags pa*. According to *dgon pa* regulations all lamas who are legitimate descendents in the *sngags pa* lineage can initiate monks and nuns. The initiated individuals receive rudimentary religious training each year under their lama, usually during the traditional retreat period (*tshams*) shortly after *lo gsar*. In return they must contribute a set number of labor days to their lama's household (referred to as *'u lag*, see Goldstein 1971b and Surkhang 1988 for more in-depth discussions of this term), the general rule being two days per year although it differs in individual cases and can be as many as four days per year. Thus, if a lama has 15 monks and nuns whom he has initiated, he can count on 30 person days of labor each year in addition to the work provided by his own household members. Furthermore, the head lama of the entire village who holds his position through right of primogeniture commands, as a hereditary privilege, two person days of labor (also referred to as *'u lag*) every year from each household in the village—an enormous labor supplement that significantly augments his household's economic potential. Finally, payment for religious services rendered by lamas, such as death rites, longevity ceremonies, and so forth, is often relinquished in the form of labor exchange (*gla'u*). A combination of the above circumstances means that a lama can call upon far more labor on an annual basis than that supplied by his household members alone. Labor is a major limiting factor when it comes to a household's herd size since cattle must be stall-fed for much of the winter. Most household activities in the autumn are thereby devoted to cutting grass for winter fodder from surrounding hills. The more grass that can be cut, the larger the herd that can be supported. A lama's ability to draw upon additional labor is certainly related to the fact that he typically has more cattle than his neighbors. Informants recognize this advantage, and list it as a major reason for why they rank lama households at the pinnacle of the economic order. In other words, the ranking does not reflect mere deference to religious authority.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how a specific methodology can generate ethnographic data that is firmly grounded in emic perspectives and thereby less dependent upon the researcher's interpretation. The approach laid out here assists in the analysis of raw economic data by supplementing the

numerical findings with qualitative data. Knowing how locals think about wealth greatly reduces the temptation to impose outside interpretations on a topic that is of central importance to many aspects of their society.

One of the more significant (but not necessarily original) findings of this exercise is that the Tibetans of Sama do not have a static interpretation of wealth at the household level. This conclusion is by no means trivial, for it links the household economy directly with the household development cycle as well as with the social structure of the community (Levine, 1988). Similar findings could have resulted from participant observation and less formal interviewing methods. However, I contend that conclusions based on such methods have the potential to be more biased by the ethnographer's interpretation as well as by the highly subjective, as well as selective, nature of the data gathering process. Although not necessarily wrong, suspicions about data reliability inevitably transmit uncertainty to the validity of conclusions. In the case of the method presented above, confidence in the conclusions is enhanced by the fact that they can be confirmed or denied through replication of the research process. Not only do the results provide a valid benchmark against which cultural changes can be assessed by using the same method in the same place in the future, but also they provide a basis for comparison with other Tibetan areas where similar data is generated.

Relative wealth is by no means the only topic that these methods can be used to investigate. This paper merely reflects a personal preference for integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. Nevertheless, one hope is that this brief contribution will inspire more research into the area of Tibetans' perceptions of wealth, especially in the context of the remarkable changes occurring throughout the Tibetan world as their economies become increasingly monetary and globalized. Studies of culture change (wherein the points of reference for assessing change are typically assumed rather than demonstrated in any meaningful way) could profit from such a systematic research procedure.

A bit more methodological rigor can only be of benefit to Tibetan Studies. I am by no means advocating a single methodological approach, nor am I making imprudent claims that we need to seek some form of "objective truth". Rather, I am simply arguing that our methodologies need to be explicit instead of implied, and openly discussed instead of consciously neglected. Regardless of where one stands on the issue of epistemology, it is difficult to deny that the means by which data is gathered has an unequivocal (albeit sometimes indistinct) influence on ethnographic analysis in every form. Unambiguous methodological statements significantly enhance our ability to debate the soundness of conclusions reported in the academic literature.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge Fulbright-Hays and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for their financial support of the fieldwork undertaken in Nubri in 1995 and 1997. I would also like to thank Richard Wilk of Indiana University for informing me about the wealth ranking method referred to in this paper. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues at the Demography Program of the Australian National University for allowing me to teach a graduate course on qualitative methods in March and April, 2001. Designing this course not only refreshed my thoughts on the need for

methodological candor, but also provided the inspiration to put those thoughts into words for public consumption. This paper was written with the financial support of a Mellon Fellowship in Anthropological Demography at The Australian National University.

2. By no means do I exclude myself from this criticism, nor do I mean to imply that many scholars lack a methodology altogether. Furthermore, I recognize that discussions of methodology are more appropriate in refereed journals of one's discipline, and have less applicability within the multi-disciplinary area studies format. A few (but not the only) noteworthy exceptions where methodological candor is on display are found in Levine (1987), Clarke (1998), and Wiley (1998). Although the studies singled out here all have a quantitative dimension, methodological transparency should not be limited to studies that rely to some extent on numerical data. Those who attended the 1995 IATS seminar in Graz may recall the late Graham Clarke's constant admonishments to participants of his panel regarding methodological rigor, data reliability, and the validity of conclusions.
3. As an analytical framework for the household, I here adopt Skinner's model of the family system (Skinner, 1997) that posits three types of families: conjugal, stem, and joint. Accordingly, a conjugal family is made up of a single conjugal unit [a conjugal unit consists of any two of the following: husband/father, wife/mother, and child(ren)], the stem family has two or more conjugal units, but no more than one per generation, and the joint family contains two or more conjugal units with at least two being in the same generation (Skinner, 1997: 54-63). From a diachronic perspective the conjugal system implies neo-local marriage, equal inheritance among offspring (or among one gender) and absence of succession *per se*, a usual sequence of co-residential arrangements in which an extended period with children is preceded and followed by the couple being alone prior to children and as "empty nesters", family formation occurs with marriage, and family extinction occurs with the deaths of the married partners. In the stem system a spouse is brought in for only one offspring in each generation, succession is to the child who has married within the household, an unequal inheritance favors a single heir, and an alternation occurs between conjugal and stem phases. Finally, the joint system means that spouses are brought in for each member of one gender, inheritance is equal for the favored gender, succession is generally absent, the domestic cycle includes conjugal, stem, and joint phases, and fissions into two or more families can occur (Skinner, 1997: 54-63).
4. The *'bre* measure is not standardized within Nubri, not to mention across other areas. For discussions of land and grain measures in other Tibetan societies, see Goldstein (1971b: 7-10), and Ostmaston & Rabgyas (1994: 122).
5. There is neither an ideal minimum nor maximum number of categories. I personally felt that five was sufficient to establish enough gradation without asking informants to make extremely minute distinctions. The terms listed in parenthesis represent how the categories were expressed in the local vernacular.
6. All names used in this discussion are pseudonyms.
7. This is only an estimate, and not a definite figure. Funeral costs include enough rice to make food offerings (*tshogs*) for each member of the community, as well as cash, food and tea for the lamas and ritual attendants (*mchod pa*) who perform the death ceremonies. Rice, the major cost, is very expensive since it must be imported from Gyasumdo.
8. This contrasts with the Nyimba perception of wealth that is based on landholdings (Levine, 1988: 233-236).
9. The term *'bar ba* is synonymous with *rgyas pa* which means "to be vigorous, to flourish, to thrive, to prosper" (Goldstein, 1975: 277; *Tshig mdzod chen mo* 1993: 1968). *'Bar ro* is also used in neighboring Skyid grong where many wealthy families

have house names beginning with the term, for example 'Bar ro 'og (Lower Wealthy) and 'Bar ro stod (Upper Wealthy). Many such house names are found in the 1958 *Skyid grong sgo khra them rgan* (see Childs, 2000).

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