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NAMAS (*MNA' MA*) AND NYELUS (*NYAL BU*):  
MARRIAGE, FERTILITY, AND ILLEGITIMACY IN TIBETAN  
SOCIETIES

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OUTLINING THE ISSUE

Let's start with two numbers: 4.4 and 1.7. Each of these represents a Total Fertility Rate (TFR)<sup>1</sup> for two different Tibetan societies. The first, 4.4 births per woman, was the fertility rate during the mid-twentieth century for Kyirong (Skyid grong), formerly a district-level administrative unit (*rdzong*) in Tibet (Childs 2003). The second, 1.7 births per woman, was the fertility rate in 2001 calculated from an unpublished household survey of Tibetan exiles living in India and Nepal (Childs *et al.* 2005).<sup>2</sup> The discovery of two considerably different TFRs among a single ethnic group should come as no surprise, since reproductive behavior is rarely uniform across time and space. Reasons behind the discrepancy involve a complex matrix of economic, political, and cultural factors that influence reproductive decision-making processes. Fleshing out all these causes is beyond the scope of this paper. The more limited objective is to investigate one contributing factor, namely, the divergent levels of illegitimacy in Kyirong and the exile communities. Data will be introduced to support the argument that the status of the bastard (*nyal bu*; pron. *nyelu*)<sup>3</sup> in Tibetan society has undergone a

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<sup>1</sup> A TFR is an estimate of the average number of children that would be born to each woman in a population if current age-specific fertility rates remain constant.

<sup>2</sup> Research on Kyirong and in the exile communities of Nepal and India was facilitated by an Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in Anthropological Demography at the Demography Program of the Australian National University. I would like to thank Kunchok Tsundue and Namgyal Chonzom of the Planning Council, Dharamsala, for permitting me to work with the unpublished data from their office's 2001 Socioeconomic Survey. My understanding of demographic trends in the exile communities was greatly enhanced through conversations with these two scholars. I take full responsibility for all views expressed within this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Illegitimacy in Tibetan societies can be defined in one of three ways: children born to unmarried mothers; children resulting from an affair between a married woman and a man who is not her husband; children of an incestuous union. This paper focus-

significant transition for the worse. Whereas relative tolerance for out-of-wedlock childbearing resulted in a high level of illegitimacy that helped maintain a robust fertility rate and a modicum of population growth in Kyirong, the low level of illegitimacy in exile contributes to an anemic fertility rate and possibly to population decline. This paper focuses on a cultural transformation that has discernable demographic implications.

Unlike neighbouring India and China where marriage was traditionally a prerequisite for childbearing and premarital sexuality was closely monitored (Das Gupta 1987; Lee and Wang 1999), out-of-wedlock births in many Tibetan communities are common. Although empirical data to support this claim is scant, a glance at the ethnographic record does provide some evidence. Aziz, who did not have recourse to statistical data, characterises the illegitimacy rate in the trading town of Gangar as being 'high' (Aziz 1978: 38). Schuler estimates that 9 per cent of all Chumik Tibetans are illegitimate (Schuler 1987: 127). Goldstein reports that married females in one Tibetan community of western Nepal had an average of 3.3 living offspring, while unmarried females had an average of 0.7 living offspring (Goldstein 1976); 6 of 51 (12 per cent) of the births between 1973 and 1977 were to unmarried mothers (Goldstein 1981). In at least two settings the magnitude of illegitimacy was enough to overcome the fertility-depressing impact of polyandry and generate a slow but steady rate of population growth (Goldstein 1981; Childs 2003). From a demographic perspective, births to unwed mothers represent a significant contribution to the overall level of fertility. In general, the frequency of illegitimacy in traditional Tibetan societies is reasonably high, and attitudes toward illegitimate children and their mothers are forbearing with some exceptions (see Levine 1987). Evidence of contrary attitudes will be presented to argue

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es exclusively on out-of-wedlock childbearing. Jäschke equates *nyal bu* (son resulting from copulation) and *nal 'phrug* (incest-child) with 'bastard' (Jäschke 1972: 187, 304). He also cites the colloquial version *nal le* (*ibid.*: 304), which is rendered as *nya le* by Chopel (Chopel 1996: 16). Another dictionary defines *nal bu* and the synonym *nal phrug* as "a child born as the result of a relationship between a man and a woman who do not conduct themselves in a proper manner", which I presume refers to an unmarried couple, and "a child born from the union [of a couple] of the same bone", which connotes an incestuous relationship (*Tshig mdzod chen mo* 1993: 1523). Goldstein cites *byis phrug* for 'illegitimate child' (Goldstein 1999: 146), which is etymologically distinct from *phyi phrug* (outsider-child), a term used in Kyirong to distinguish between *nang gi bu* (insider-son; son of the household) and *phyi'i bu* (outsider-son; son not of the household).

that the same generalisations do not hold among exiles living in India and Nepal.

*Case 1: Illegitimacy in Kyirong*

Kyirong society during the 1950s is used here as an example of out-of-wedlock childbearing in a traditional Tibetan setting that will provide points of contrast with attitudes and behaviours that are now evident in exile. By 'traditional', I do not mean to imply that the people of Kyirong were cut off from the rest of the world and existed in some pristine state of cultural coherence. Kyirong was not immune from the impacts of social, economic, and political forces that swept the region. Nevertheless, Kyirong was more traditional than the exile communities in the sense that the inhabitants engaged primarily in an agro-pastoral subsistence strategy, were governed through an indigenous administrative system at both the village and regional levels, had not been exposed to modern secular education, and were not privy to the usages of modern contraception.

Kyirong was formerly a district-level administrative unit (*rdzong*) of Tibet bordering Nepal. My study of Kyirong historical demography has been facilitated by a household register (*sgo khra them gan*) that was compiled in 1958 for tax purposes.<sup>4</sup> The document lists all 2845 government subjects in Kyirong by village, household, name, age, and relationship within the household (Childs 2003). In the course of research I interviewed roughly 180 elderly exiles from Kyirong in order to reconstruct their household structures and domestic processes. The overall objective is to situate statistics derived from the household register into a solid ethnographic context in order to better understand the various processes that go into shaping demographic outcomes such as the fertility rate.

Kyirong society was divided between those who held heritable land titles from either the government or a monastery, and those who did not. The former were designated as *khral pa* if they farmed government

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<sup>4</sup> The full title of the text is *Sa khyi lo'i Skyid grong rdzong rgya dgu'i sgo khra them gan*. I am indebted to Tashi Tsering (Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamsala) for informing me about the existence of the document, Lobsang Shastri (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala) for his generous support in locating and facilitating access to the document, and Jamyang Tenzin (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala) for his painstaking efforts in generating a typeset copy.

lands and *sger pa* if they farmed monastic lands. The latter were referred to as *dud chung ba*, and represented a class of landless agricultural laborers who worked the fields of *khral pa* in exchange for food (see Goldstein 1971).

The colloquial term for an illegitimate child in Kyirong is *nyelu* (from *nyal bu*), except in the Lende (La ldeb) valley where they are called *arken*.<sup>5</sup> Legitimate children of *khral pa* fathers were themselves *khral pa*; legitimate children of *dud chung ba* assumed the status of their fathers as well. The illegitimate child of a *khral pa* woman, regardless of the status of his or her father, was eventually relegated to *dud chung ba* status. As such, the male *nyelu* stood no chance to inherit his father's land and animals. According to one informant,

We did not consider it that bad to have children without being married. *Nyelu* themselves could get married, but they did not receive inheritance (*pha gzhis*). They would become *dud chung ba*. There were many *nyelu*. The father would not have to give anything [to the mother or child].

Although little social stigmatism was attached to the *nyelu*, the same cannot be said about an unmarried pregnant woman. In Kyirong, such a woman was banned from entering the households of others without undergoing a brief purification ceremony. In some cases she was not even permitted to reside at home, but would inhabit a small structure built beyond the village boundaries so that her defiled condition would not negatively affect the health and welfare of humans, bovines, or crops. According to one man,

A woman [who was pregnant with a *nyelu*] could not even come under the eaves of our roof. She had to stay outside. If she were a girl of our own household, we would not allow her to stay within the house. We would send her outside to another house. There were small houses for this purpose.

Numerous instances of illegitimacy were encountered in the 1958 household register. Table 1 summarises how one household appears in the document:

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<sup>5</sup> The etymology of this term is unclear. Brigitte Huber, who has completed a substantial linguistic study of the Lende dialect (Huber 2002), suggests that it could be spelled *ar mkhan* and may be related to the term *ar gon* (personal communication), identified by Jäschke as a Ladhaki term meaning "an offspring of parents not having the same rank, nor the same religion, and not belonging to the same nation" (Jäschke 1972: 606).

Table 1: Spang zhing #10<sup>6</sup>

NAME	SEX	AGE	RELATIONSHIP
Norbu	M	71	<i>'dzin mi</i>
Pelmo	F	74	<i>mna' ma</i>
Dawa	M	25	<i>bu</i>
Zangmo	F	25	<i>za zla</i>
Drolma	F	44	<i>bu mo</i>
Purbu	F	24	<i>bu mo</i>
Sonam	F	20	<i>bu mo</i>
Pelchor	M	10	<i>bu</i>
Migmar	F	5	<i>yang bu mo</i>

According to a former resident of this household:

Norbu was the grandfather (*mes mes*). Pelmo was not his wife; she was his elder sister who lived in Norbu's home after her husband died. Dawa was Norbu's son, Zangmo was Dawa's wife. Drolma was Dawa's elder sister. She did not get married; she just had *nyelus* [Purbu and Sonam]. Pelchor and Migmar were also Drolma's children, but they were not *nyelu*. They had a father who was from Spang zhing. He died. He and Drolma did not marry, but just stayed together after falling in love. He was *dud chung ba*.

In this case Drolma did not marry but remained in her natal household. Two of Drolma's children were considered *nyelus* (Purbu and Sonam), whereas the other two were not (Pelchor and Migmar). The key distinction seems to be the fact that Drolma lived together with the father of the latter two, and hence their union was socially recognised even if they had not undergone a formal marriage ceremony.

Although listed in the document as members of their natal households, unmarried women did not necessarily reside together with their married brothers. Kyirong residents distinguished between one-hearth (*thab gcig*) and a two-hearth (*thab gnyis*) households. The latter were those households that had divided for various reasons (e.g., one broth-

<sup>6</sup> All names have been changed since many of the people listed in that document are still alive. The heading above the table designates the village where the household was located. A number is assigned to each household for the purpose of keeping the data organised.

er in polyandrous marriage took his own separate wife; dispute between elder generation and daughter-in-law), although they were still considered to represent a single household for tax purposes. Two-hearth households generally consisted of the main house (*grong ba*) and an adjunct house (*zur khang*); the latter was also often referred to as a *rgan tshang* (residence for the elderly) when used as a retirement home for the senior-most generation.

Although Tibetans generally consider a son's filial obligation to include care for his parents in their old age, in reality old-age care was often provided for by unmarried daughters in Kyirong who resided with their parents in a *zur khang* (see also Schuler 1987).<sup>7</sup> Table 2 summarises a household that had entered the latter stage of its development cycle:

Table 2: Gra #8

NAME	SEX	AGE	RELATIONSHIP
Migmar	M	62	<i>khyo</i>
Kyipa	F	63	<i>za bzla</i>
Zangpo	M	43	<i>bu</i>
Rabten	M	30	<i>bu</i>
Norbu	M	30	<i>bu</i>
Pema	F	19	<i>bu mo</i>
Dawa	F	34	<i>mna' ma</i>
Tenzin	F	13	<i>bu mo</i>
Sumchog	F	37	<i>bu mo</i>
Kunzang	M	5	<i>bu</i>

Migmar and Kyipa's children were, in descending order of age, Zangpo, Sumchog, Rabten, Norbu, and Pema. The three brothers had a common wife, Dawa; only one child of theirs was alive in 1958 (daughter Tenzin). Sumchog had never married, and therefore was still listed as 'daughter' (*bu mo*) despite her relatively advanced age. We know from

<sup>7</sup> In the ethnically Tibetan village of Sama in Nubri, Nepal, parents often designate one daughter to be a nun. She does not reside in a convent, but in her natal home until the time when her parents retire to a small house on the grounds of the village temple. The nun-daughter moves as well, cares for her aging parents, and then inherits the temple home after they pass away (Childs 2001). This is another way in which daughters end up as the primary caretakers for elderly parents in a Tibetan society.

her name that she was the third born daughter in the family.<sup>8</sup> Whether her elder sisters had died or married into other households is not known. According to a close relative of this household,

Sumchog was the mother of Kunzang. She did not have a real husband, but stayed in a separate residence with her mother Kyipa. She did not go as a *mna' ma*, but gave birth to a *nyelu* and then stayed together with her mother.

The fate of illegitimate children in Kyirong was mixed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many died young, perhaps an indication (but certainly not proof) that they were not cared for as well as their legitimate counterparts (see Levine 1987). The main disadvantage of being illegitimate was economic. As stated by one former Kyirong resident,

*Nyelu* would not get *pha gzhis*. They would stay with us [in the *khral pa* household]. When they got older they would not go out of our houses, but would remain and work with us. If they had children we would not throw them away, they stayed together with us as well.

In this respect illegitimacy assured a steady supply of labour to some households through the continual creation of *dud chung ba*. They were not cast aside to fend for themselves, but were retained within the household where their labour contributions were highly valued. Due in part to the heavy burden of tax obligations, labour was at a premium in Kyirong.

Having a *nyelu* reduced, but did not eliminate, a woman's marital potential. If a woman did marry subsequent to having a *nyelu* she often left that child behind when she moved to her husband's household. Numerous cases of *nyelu* abandonment were uncovered during the course of research. The reasons behind the practice are not entirely clear, but presumably relate to issues of inheritance and succession. The household in Table 3 had one such case:

<sup>8</sup> Sumchog (Gsum chog) means 'Three is Enough'. The fact that many high parity females bear the names Sumchog, Zhichog (Bzhi chog; 'Four is Enough'), and Ngachog (Lnga chog; "Five is Enough") is related to the fact that it was difficult to find marital partners for such women, so they were likely to remain spinsters and have illegitimate children. Parents who did not want to have a surplus of daughters made their preference clear through this naming custom.



Table 3: Skyid zhol #50

NAME	SEX	Age	RELATIONSHIP
Zangpo	M	36	<i>khyo</i>
Pasang	F	36	<i>za zla</i>
Yangdzom	F	24	<i>dman</i>
Drolma	F	11	<i>bu mo</i>
Dawa	F	10	<i>bu mo</i>
Tsering	F	17	<i>bu mo</i>
Wangmo	F	0	<i>bu mo</i>

According to a former member of this household:

Zangpo had two wives; they were *a ji nu mo* (siblings; elder sister and younger sister) [Drolma and Dawa were Pasang's children, after having them she presumably suffered from secondary infertility; Wangmo is Yangdzom's child]. Tsering was a *nyelu*. Her mother had her, then later left her in her brother's home and went as a *mna' ma* [to another house in Skyid zhol].

A more subtle form of abandonment was to send the child off to a monastery. Although instances of such a practice were documented, their frequency is unknown.

Not all *nyelus* suffered economic hardships. As one person noted, "Nyelus could inherit land if there were no other [sons]. It was up to individual choice. He was permitted to go as a *mag pa* or to bring a *mna' ma* [into the household]".

Consider the following case, presented in Table 4, of the *mag pa* Tenzin:

Table 4: Gyes phug #19

NAME	SEX	AGE	RELATIONSHIP
Nyima	F	32	<i>dman</i>
Tenzin	M	34	<i>go mag</i>
Tashi	M	8	<i>bu</i>
Dolma	F	6	<i>bu mo</i>
Purbu	F	2	<i>bu mo</i>

According to a former neighbour:

In the past there was a *jo mo* (nun). She gave birth to Tenzin. He had no inheritance since his father was separate [from his mother; i.e. not married]. Nyima had a brother who died. Then Nyima [a daughter of a household and sole inheritor] brought in a *mag pa*. He was the *nyelu* [Tenzin] who went as a *mag pa* and got land.

Although more details of his life history are unclear, one thing is certain—Tenzin was able to rise above his illegitimate status. By marrying into a taxpayer household he was elevated from *dud chung ba* to *khral pa* status.

In summary, the Tibetans of Kyirong did not consider *nyelus* to be outcastes. There was little overt stigmatism associated with their illegitimate origins. Although most *nyelus* were automatically relegated to the socially and economically inferior status of *dud chung ba*, they could attain a higher status through marriage as a *mag pa* or by becoming a monk or nun. As for their mothers, a woman while pregnant with an illegitimate child was deemed to be spiritually polluting, and hence had restrictions placed on her movement and contact with other members of the community. Any defilement associated with illegitimacy was removed once she gave birth and she and the child underwent appropriate purification rituals. Although her marital chances were negatively affected, having a *nyelu* did not disqualify a woman from betrothal.

Illegitimacy in Kyirong was tolerated, but was it frequent? The answer to this question is difficult to quantify with absolute certainty, yet an estimate can be derived from a statistical analysis of the 1958 tax document. As pointed out elsewhere (Childs 2003), relationship terms in the tax document indicate whether or not a woman had ever been married. Those listed as *mna' ma* (bride) or *za zla* (*sic: bza' zla*, wife) were currently married. Those listed as *ma* (mother) or *dman* (woman; wife) were either currently married or had become unmarried through divorce or the death of their spouse. Those women listed as *bu mo* (daughter) had either yet to marry and still had the potential to become betrothed (e.g. women in their 20s), or were likely to be lifelong spinsters (e.g. women in their 30s and above).

As mentioned above, the Total Fertility Rate for Kyirong during the 1950s was about 4.4 births per woman. This figure was arrived at through the use of an indirect method of fertility estimation (the own-children method, see Cho, Retherford and Choe 1986; see Childs 2004

for a full methodological discussion with respect to the Kyirong data). To estimate non-marital fertility the women were separated according to marital status. The following assumptions were made: (1) all children born to women identified in the document by the relationship terms *mna' ma*, *bza' zla, ma*, and *dman* are legitimate, (2) all children of a woman listed as *bu mo* were born outside of a formal marriage and therefore are potentially (but not definitely) illegitimate. Before presenting the results of the analysis, it is necessary to clarify these assumptions.

For the most part the first assumption is an accurate assessment of marital fertility among the taxpayer (*khral pa*) population for the simple reason that all women identified by the above terms were, or had been, married within such a household. It is possible that some women labeled *dman* bore illegitimate children after they had divorced or been widowed, or that some women labeled *mna' ma*, *bza' zla, ma*, and *dman* bore illegitimate children prior to getting married. Missing such children, who are difficult to detect given the nature of the data source, results in a slight under-enumeration of illegitimacy.

With regard to assumption number two, I have intentionally refrained from claiming that all births to women labeled *bu mo* are *nyelu* for the simple reason that an informal marriage convention existed in Kyirong. Many 'nonmarried' women resided in stable and long-term relationships with men who had either been born as *dud chung ba* or who had forsaken their *khral pa* status in a polyandrous household in order to form families of their own with those women who were unable to marry into a taxpayer household. According to one former Kyirong resident:

*Nyelus* were born in our village. My father was the '*thus mi* (village representative), then there were two *rgan po* (village elders). There were many women who did not get married. A particular round stone would be wrapped in a cloth and then sealed. Each month all [unmarried] girls had to see if they were the same as the stone, to determine whether or not they were pregnant [i.e. if she was the same as the stone then she was not pregnant since stones do not give birth]. If the girl said she was not the same as the stone, they would ask her to bring forth the father. If the father admitted [to paternity], and if the couple had a wish to get married, then the '*thus mi* and the *rgan po* would give *g.yar kha* (sp?, ceremonial butter placed on the forehead). By getting *g.yar kha* in this brief ceremony, they became married.

Some (but not all) women who underwent this truncated marriage ceremony were listed in the tax document as *bu mo*, yet their children were socially recognised as being legitimate. For this reason the level of fertility estimated for women labeled *bu mo* represents births to all women who were not formally married within taxpayer households, and therefore is different from a true measure of the illegitimacy rate. Therefore, it should be read as the absolute upper limit of illegitimacy in Kyirong.

Analysis of the data contained within the 1958 Kyirong household register reveals that those women who were not formally married gave birth to roughly one-third the numbers of children as their formally married counterparts. Married women were experiencing 6.2 births each, a level of marital fertility that is consistent with a pre-transitional, non-contracepting population wherein children were highly valued for a variety of reasons (household labour contributions, continuity of lineages, old-age care, establishing or maintaining social networks through marriage, etc.). Nonmarried women gave birth on average to 2.2 children each. To put it into a different quantitative perspective, of the 233 children aged 0-4 who are listed in the document, 61 (26 per cent) were born to non-formally married women. Even if half of these were born to women in stable yet informal marriages, the rate of illegitimacy would still be very high.

Summing up the evidence, illegitimacy in Kyirong was both widespread and tolerated. Whether or not this was the case in other Tibetan areas during the same time period remains to be seen. My unsubstantiated suspicion is that Kyirong was not unique in this regard.

### *Case 2: Marriage, Family Planning, and Illegitimacy in Exile*

In 1998 the Planning Council, a branch of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA, a.k.a. the Tibetan Government-in-Exile based in Dharamsala, India), completed the first-ever demographic survey of Tibetan Exiles living in India and Nepal (henceforth 1998 TDS) which was followed in 2001 by the Socioeconomic Survey (henceforth 2001 SES). Data from the latter was used to determine that the Total Fertility Rate for exiles in 2001 was 1.7 births per woman (Childs *et. al.* 2005), which is below the level of fertility that a population needs to replace itself. To place this figure in context, consider that the bulk of the refugees live, marry, and reproduce in Nepal where the national TFR

was 4.6 births per woman (Pradhan *et. al.*, 1997) and in the Indian states of Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh where the TFRs were 2.9 births per woman and 3.0 births per woman respectively (PRC and IIPS 1995a; PRC and IIPS 1995b). By international standards the Tibetan exiles would be classified as a society having a low fertility rate, comparable to the 2004 rates of China (1.7), Sweden (1.7), and the U.K. (1.7) (PRB 2004).

Data on illegitimacy obtained from the 1998 TDS is indirect, but nevertheless revealing. Among women of reproductive age (15-49), only 47 of 21,220 (0.2 per cent) are classified as 'single mothers' (Planning Council 2000b: 202). The manual that instructs the enumerators in how to carry out the survey defines single parents in the following terms:

SP [single parent] includes those who have become mother/father without undergoing the process of marriage as recognized by law or society. Such respondents need not be probed further and marital status as reported may be recorded.<sup>9</sup>

The published data does not tell us how many births there were to single mothers. Nevertheless, the fact that single mothers represent a statistically insignificant minority of the female population who are of reproductive age (15-49) is compelling evidence that illegitimacy is either very rare, or instances of illegitimacy have been underreported.

The following discussion will wind its way toward illegitimacy via the topics of marriage and birth control in relation to political and religious ideologies. Demographic statistics compiled by the CTA will be analysed in conjunction with my own data from in-depth interviews and from an anonymous, self-administered, bilingual survey of married and unmarried women in Dharamsala, India (henceforth Dharamsala Survey).<sup>10</sup> The objective is to highlight the relationship between public

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<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Namgyal Chonzom for providing this information.

<sup>10</sup> The survey was conducted in the autumn of 2000 at my own initiative and expense, and benefited from the advice and assistance of Namgyal Chonzom and Kunchok Tsundue (Planning Council, CTA), and Jamyang Tenzin (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives). The survey does not cover a scientific sample of the population, so all generalizations based on the results are tentative. My intent was not to use the survey as an instrument to quantify the level of certain behaviors, but rather to document the range of responses to open-ended questions about marriage and family planning. In this regard the survey was a success. Ever-Married: n = 130, mean age = 35. Never-Married: n = 392, mean age = 19.5.

discourse and private behaviour in order to better understand the topic of reproduction among Tibetans living in exile.

To start with, the low TFR among Tibetan exiles is related to the marriage pattern. Table 5 compares marriage by age for Tibetan women in exile (1998) with women in Kyirong (1958) and, for an additional comparative perspective, with women in Nepal (1996).

Table 5: Never-Married Females (per cent) by Cohort

AGE	TIBETAN EXILES (1998)	TIBETANS IN KYIRONG (1958)	NEPAL (1996)
15-19	98.8	96.5	56.0
20-24	78.9	81.1	14.8
25-29	43.8	57.3	4.6
30-34	18.1	49.5	1.9
35-39	8.7	35.1	1.5
40-44	5.1	31.1	1.1
45-49	4.5	28.6	1.4

(Childs 2003; Planning Council 2000; Pradhan *et al.* 1997)

The marriage pattern for exile women falls between that of 'traditional' Kyirong and contemporary Nepal, where many exiles now reside. In Nepal marriage is early and universal: nearly 85 per cent of women are married before the age of 25 and nearly 98 per cent by age 30. Marriage is also nearly universal for Tibetan exiles. Only 5 per cent remain single by age 45. This represents a major departure from the pattern in Kyirong, where nearly 30 per cent of women had never engaged in a formal marriage by the time they were approaching the end of their reproductive potential. Yet, similar to Kyirong and in contrast to Nepal, a large proportion of exile women delay marriage until well into their 20s and 30s.

Monogamy has become the marital form of choice in exile, which probably accounts for the fact that a low percentage of women remain permanently unmarried compared to Kyirong (compare the 40-44 and 45-49 year old age groups in Table 5). Nearly universal marriage dimin-

ishes the potential for out-of-wedlock births, and thereby helps explain the lack of illegitimacy in exile. However, universal marriage does not account for why there are so few *nyelus* born to women *prior to marriage*. The data in Table 5 shows that a large percentage of women in their 20s were unmarried at the time of the census (the mean age at marriage for women was roughly 27), so clearly the potential for widespread illegitimacy exists. Do most exile women remain sexually inactive before marriage? Or are pre-marital pregnancies averted through contraception and other means?

Any attempt to answer these questions is complicated by current attitudes toward reproduction and family planning. For the past several decades Tibetan exiles have been forming families amidst a pronatalist discourse (see Goldstein 1978; Nowak 1984), one that is in part guided by the perception that Tibet is being depopulated through coercive birth control policies and demographically swamped through migration (e.g. Kikhang 1997). One consequence is that much of the discussion about family planning occurs not in reference to the refugee's current socio-economic conditions, but in reference to the future of Tibet and the Tibetans. For example, in a position paper outlining an envisioned polity for a liberated Tibet, the current prime minister of the exile government writes:

Birth control may not be immediately necessary [in an independent Tibet] keeping in view the small population of the country at present; however, other issues related with family planning, e.g., minimum age for marriage, gap between two children, etc., will be resolved through legislation, if necessary (Samdhong Rinpoche 1997: 32-33).

Sandhong Rinpoche's recommendations are in line with a long-standing pronatalist discourse in the exile communities. In the 1980s, one anthropologist noted:

As a result of this threat [the perception that genocide is underway], Tibetans of all ages feel a deep responsibility to keep their culture alive, a goal that underlies the Tibetan government's encouragement of endogamy [marrying only within the Tibetan community] and a high birth rate.... But the constantly reiterated slogan of the Indian government's birth-control program—"A small family is a happy family"—does, if only verbally, challenge the Tibetan government's desire for a high birth rate among its people. Yet the students in the Tibetan schools, though exposed to innumerable radio commercials, billboards, and posters, all extolling the benefits of limiting family size, nonetheless have their way of thinking already decided in the other direction before

they graduate. As one eleventh grader put it, "Family planning may be beneficial for Indians because there are so many of them. But our people are being killed in Tibet, so we should be increasing, not limiting our population" (Nowak 1984: 95).

This same message was reiterated in some of the responses to the Dharamsala Survey. Women were asked how many children they would like to have. Several responded in the following manner:

Three to five [ideal number of children], because we would contribute to the Tibetan population (age 47, carpet weaver, married mother of five).

Two boys and two girls, as we have very less population as compared to our land and also we are in great danger of losing our human resource (age 27, administrator, unmarried).

Four, to raise the population of Tibet (age 21, student, unmarried).

Three, because our Tibetan population is very low and Tibet needs more citizens (age 23, teacher, unmarried).

Only girls because girls will help increase the population of Tibet (age 30, secretary, unmarried).

I will give birth to as many as I can because I wish my people to increase (age 22, seamstress, unmarried).

Not only is the ideology of procreation for ethnic salvation alive and well in Dharamsala, but also its proponents pose obstacles to the provisioning of reproductive health services through the CTA-administered community health system. Recent attempts by the CTA's Department of Health (DOH) to provide family planning services for the refugees were met with opposition from various sources within the exile communities.<sup>11</sup> As a result, no contraceptive methods other than condoms could be provided by the DOH during much of the 1990s. The distribution of condoms was permissible not as a means to prevent pregnancy, but as a way to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. However, Tibetan exiles live in two countries, Nepal and India, which have well-publicised family planning programs and where many forms of contraception are readily available. The CTA has a monopoly on neither the information about nor the means for preventing pregnancies. In fact, many Dharamsala

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<sup>11</sup> Personal interview, January 2000, with an official of the Health Department; name withheld.



Survey participants responded to the ideal number of children question by writing Indian family planning slogans, such as “*hum do humare do*” (we two, and our two), and “a small family is a happy family”.

Although the ideal of having a small family seems acceptable to exile women, achieving that goal through the use of contraception is another matter due, in part, to ambivalent cultural attitudes. For instance, Monro found that many women in her research area consider the use of contraception to be ‘sinful’ (*sdig pa*) (1999: 175-82). She quotes the thoughts of a female CTA official on this matter:

Tibetans are devout Buddhists who hold reverence for all life forms and specially so for human life which is believed to be very precious. This is because of their belief that to be born a human being is to get a chance to attain enlightenment. To practice abortion is to deprive a human being of that opportunity and to submit to sterilization is to prevent a person who deserves to be born from being so born. Therefore, the act of performing abortions and sterilizations is considered sinful and it is particularly offensive to Tibetan women, since the killing of a sentient being is a sin (Women’s Desk of the CTA’s Department of Information and International Relations, 1995; cited in Monro 1999: 175).

The Dharamsala survey reveals similar sentiments. Several women responded to the question on their opinion about contraception (*skyes ’gog*—the most commonly used term) by simply writing ‘*sdig pa*’ in Tibetan or its English equivalent ‘sinful’. One even alluded to the Buddhist philosophy that all actions have future consequences:

In religious view, contraception is not good. Most of the people who use them will have future problems (age 23, student, unmarried).

Contrarily, in a personal interview, another woman defended the use of contraception by referring to the cultural concept of when life begins. According to the Buddhist viewpoint, the consciousness principle (*rnam shes*) of a person enters the nascent fetus the instant that sperm meets egg (Khangkar 1986: 83-117). By this reasoning:

This [contraception] is not sinful because he [the potential fetus] has no *rnam shes*. If the soul has not arrived, the child does not exist.

Perhaps the term that Tibetans have adopted for contraception contributes to the moral ambiguity. The most common term is *skyes ’gog*, which in a verbal sense means ‘to prevent a birth’—not to prevent a conception. The term is actually a contraction of the more technical term *skyes sgo ’gog thabs*, which translates as “means for obstructing

the birth canal". On the Dharamsala Survey several women confounded the term with abortion, which to Tibetans is an unambiguously sinful act (Tsomo 1998). For example, one wrote,

A child is god's gift to us; we have to accept it happily. We don't have right to kill a child. That child has its own life and hasn't seen the world. We must never use this bad method to kill a child (age 18, student, unmarried).

Not all respondents to the Dharamsala survey expressed negative opinions about contraception. Several unmarried women recognised the benefits of birth control for those engaging in premarital sexual activities:

It is very important to each and everyone to know about this [contraception] in case you meet someone with whom you don't spend your life (age 22, worker, unmarried).

In a way, it's helpful. But again on in another way it spoils the character of the female these days, as they go for sex thinking they can always use contraception (age 21, administrator, unmarried).

Clever to use to prevent or delay pregnancy if you're not fully matured or not fully settled by yourself (age 28, administrator, unmarried).

Good because many times, out of ignorance or being cavalier, there occur unwanted pregnancies which may ruin a woman's life (age 19, student, unmarried).

It's ideal if you don't need the baby before marriage (age 18, student, unmarried).

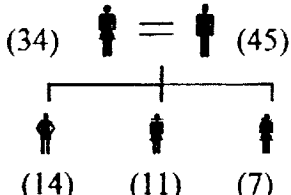
The Dharamsala Survey asked respondents to list contraceptive methods that they knew or had heard about. Most women listed more than one method, with IUDs, the pill, and condoms figuring most prominently in their responses. Yet only 23 of 131 (18 per cent) married respondents admitted to *ever using* (not just current usage) any form of contraception since marriage.<sup>12</sup> This finding should not be interpreted to indicate low contraceptive usage among the surveyed population. Such a conclusion would be contradicted by the low fertility rate which can only be accomplished through abstinence or a high level of contraceptive usage, with the latter being the more likely scenario. The lack

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<sup>12</sup> In deference to ethnical concerns, unmarried women were only asked to state their general opinions about contraceptive usage rather than to report on their actual behaviour.

of positive responses should be interpreted as evidence that women feel inhibited to admit usage, which should come as no surprise given the sensitive nature of the topic. Researchers working on family planning issues in other areas have found that people are often reluctant to report behaviors that may conflict with social expectations (e.g. see Bleek 1987; Helitzer-Allen, Makhamberra and Wangel 1994), or to verbalise thoughts about proscribed topics (Castle 2001). Results from the Dharamsala Survey highlight the sensitive nature of contraceptive usage in exile since many women were reluctant to admit using birth control even in the format of an anonymous, self-administered survey. Evidence that some women were not forthcoming in their answers can be gleaned from apparent contradictions between self-reported behaviors and reproductive outcomes. The following is not an anomalous example of how a woman, in this case a 34 year-old wife with three children, responded to the questions on ideal number of children and birth control usage.

Table 6: Discrepancy between Stated and Actual Behaviour?

Family Members (ages)	Woman's responses to survey questions
 <p>(34) = (45)</p> <p>(14) (11) (7)</p>	<p>Q: Ideal number of children? A: 3</p> <p>Q: Have you ever used contraception? A: Never used contraception.</p>

If this 34-year-old woman does not suffer from secondary infertility, or if her 45-year-old husband is not impotent, then the couple has either ceased engaging in intercourse or they use some method to prevent conception. The recurrence of similar examples prompts the conclusion that a combination of pronatalist discourse, cultural ambivalence toward birth control, and the very private nature of family planning compromise the validity of survey data that seeks to quantify the level of contraceptive usage among Tibetan exile women.

Whereas survey results show low contraceptive usage among married women, frank conversations with women whom I have known for years and who trust me enough to engage in an open dialogue lead me to believe that knowledge about contraceptive methods is extensive and usage is high (see also Monro 1999: 174). Some married women regu-

late birth spacing by using the pill, IUDs, diaphragms, hormonal injections, or the rhythm method. The famous physician Dr Lobsang Dolma even tried to develop a Tibetan version of the birth control pill (Maiden and Farwell 1997: 18). Others resort to more permanent solutions such as tubal occlusion after they have achieved a targeted family size. Although exile women are aware of the pronatalist discourse, they are just as concerned with the pragmatic economic equation of raising children. For example, one woman who felt that having two children is sufficient, stated:

I think that education is more important than [the] population [issue]. If children receive a good education, and if Tibet gains freedom in the future, then they can do whatever is possible up there [in Tibet]. It is not just a question of how many people there are.<sup>13</sup>

The political and cultural discourse on birth control has a direct bearing on the issue of illegitimacy. As mentioned above, a mere 0.2 per cent of women aged 15-49 are classified as 'single mothers' in the 1998 TDS. The apparent lack of *nyelus* can be interpreted in one of three ways: (1) unmarried women refrain from most if not all sexual activity; (2) unmarried women who are sexually active take measures to prevent pregnancies or terminate pregnancies should they occur; or (3) illegitimate births were under-enumerated in the 1998 TDS for the simple reason that people are reluctant to admit to them in face-to-face interviews with survey staff members.

The answer is probably a combination of the three. Although chastity and modesty are culturally valued traits for exile females (McGuckin 1996), many young people live in schools or work in places far away from the social controls imposed by their families. That, combined with the pattern of delayed marriage, means that the potential for illegitimacy certainly exists. The high level of knowledge about contraceptive methods, combined with their availability in Nepal and India, means that exile women are fully capable of preventing pregnancies. On the other hand, if and when unplanned pregnancies occur, it is certainly possible that the outcomes—whether prematurely terminated or brought to bear—may be concealed from the prying eyes of public administrators.

Abortion, from a Buddhist perspective, is tantamount to murder (Tsomo 1998). Any Tibetan woman who chooses to undergo such a

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<sup>13</sup> Personal interview, December 2000, 35-year-old mother of 4; name withheld.

procedure would have to do so in the utmost secrecy in order to escape moral rebuke. In an interview about contraceptive usage among Tibetans in Nepal, one woman gave the following response to the topic of abortion:

If you make a child within your womb, you must bear the child. This is because we are Buddhists. In the Buddhist religion if you extract that child it is a great sin. My opinion is that it is better to bear that child and to avoid sin. I am unable to say [whether any Tibetans in Nepal have abortions] because those who do it do it in secret. If a woman admits to this [having an abortion] she will be scorned by others. They will say, "You had a child within you, and you took that child out. That is dreadful". Therefore it is done in secret. I am unable to say whether or not many Tibetans do this. But it is possible. That is because many young people do not know the thoughts of old. If a woman has a husband she will not get an abortion. However, some women have sex before marriage, and they would be the ones to have an abortion. They think that if they have a child, then in the future they will have a worse chance of getting a husband. Thoughts like this are very bad.<sup>14</sup>

The above testament should not in any way be interpreted as proof that Tibetans in exile undergo abortions. Nevertheless, abortion is legal and available in India, where its usage has risen concomitantly with the introduction of prenatal sex-determination technologies as a means to prevent the births of unwanted female offspring (Das Gupta and Mari Bhat 1997). Abortion was illegal in Nepal when the above interviews were conducted, yet was readily available in urban areas such as Kathmandu and Pokhara where the majority of Tibetan exiles live (Thapa and Padhye 2001).<sup>15</sup> Regardless, the fact that abortion is considered morally reprehensible by many Tibetans provides adequate incentive for women to act clandestinely. Although it is possible that some premarital pregnancies are terminated by exile women, firm evidence to support this allegation does not exist.

There is also a strong possibility that the status of those *nyelus* who are brought to term is not openly admitted to officials who gather statistics in the exile communities. The current attitude toward illegitimacy is a topic that has not been studied in depth, yet sufficient anecdotal evidence suggests that a very negative attitude toward out-of-wed-

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview, 12/00, 35-year-old mother of 4; name withheld.

<sup>15</sup> Abortion was legalised in Nepal in 2002. I would like to thank Ellen Bangsbo (personal communication) for pointing this out.

lock childbearing prevails among the exiles today. Through conversations with friends and colleagues I have heard that *nyelu* children are teased by their classmates; that some *nyelu* children are abandoned with relatives when their mothers subsequently marry a man who is not their father (as many were in Kyirong); and that unintended pregnancies sometimes result in rushed marriages so that the families can avoid the stigmatism of illegitimacy. As further substantiation of the current mind-set, consider a recent article in Dharamsala's first tabloid-style publication, *Mirror on Society* (*Spyi tshogs me long*). The article is entitled "The Girl Tsering Diki",<sup>16</sup> and is accompanied by a posed studio photo of a young Tibetan *femme fatale* dressed in a sari:

All sorts of purity and evil, goodness and suffering are present in every society. Even within our own society there have from former times been prostitutes and promiscuous people. Let's take the girl Tsering Diki as an example. Her father's name is Wangdu, and her mother is Pasang. The family members are dispersed. They sell shoes and small items for a livelihood. Her father customarily drinks wine and spirits, so he is always looking for something at the end of each day. Since the family did not have a place to live, they wandered about searching in all directions. Because of this life condition, the girl Tsering Diki had been led astray by age 15 when she gave birth to a child. Today the child is 3 and she is 18. Those who know her say that this is consistent with her situation. Not only has no father of the child been identified, some say that until now three children have emerged from her womb.

Recently, in August 2000, Tsering Diki's family came to Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. While there, the boy Gyurme and the girl Tsering Diki were attracted to each other. When Gyurme's family members learned of this they placed obstacles to prevent the two from meeting. A few days later the girl Tsering Diki appealed to officials in Dharamsala and to the courts of India. She knew that she was pregnant with child, and demanded 100,000 rupees. The final outcome was the court made Gyurme pay 5,000 rupees to Tsering Diki (Anon 2000: 5).

The story lays bare how some (but certainly not all) members of the exile community think about illegitimacy and unwed mothers. The beginning few lines set the tone by associating the girl with prostitution and promiscuity. Afterwards, Tsering Diki is simultaneously portrayed as a passive victim of parental neglect and as a conniving gold-digger who tries to enrich herself through carnal temptation followed by a

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<sup>16</sup> Even though the people's actual names are used in the article, I have changed them here for obvious ethical reasons.

paternity suit. The vehemence directed at an unwed teenage mother demonstrates an attitude of intolerance toward out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

### CONCLUSIONS

Reasons behind the shift from tolerance to intolerance of illegitimacy have not been investigated. As a preliminary hypothesis, I will suggest that the attitudinal change is rooted in the social composition of the exile community and in the cultural milieu within which the exiles live. Regarding the former, political and moral discourse in the exile community has been dominated by the clergy and by members of Tibet's former aristocracy. In conformity with the tenets of Buddhism, members of the clergy tend to view all procreative activities in a rather negative light given that they perpetuate the sufferings inherent in cyclical existence. Furthermore, conversations with members of Tibet's former nobility lead me to believe that there used to be a class-based dimension to illegitimacy. One man stated bluntly that moral laxness characterised the lower classes, in contrast to the upper classes who were chaste and comported themselves in an ethically sound manner. Illegitimacy, he said, was primarily a problem among the commoners. The nobility had far more at stake in terms of social prestige and family honor than did commoners, and so the sexuality of young aristocratic women was perhaps more closely regulated by their parents and relatives. If the former nobility did have a less tolerant attitude toward illegitimacy than the commoners, then their prominence in guiding the exile discourse on social matters may have led to the broad-based acceptance of what used to be a class-based ethos.

Tibetan exiles are also heavily influenced by the cultural environments in which they have lived for the past four and a half decades. To a great extent the CTA has succeeded in fostering cohesion among the refugees through a policy that is intended to limit assimilation by promoting secular nationalism (Goldstein 1978; Klieger 1992). Nevertheless, Tibetan exiles in India and Nepal are surrounded by neighbours who consider illegitimacy to be extremely reprehensible. In this respect, Tibetans may be conforming to South Asia cultural norms. Other forms of assimilation in the domestic sphere have been documented, for example Dawa Dargye (1994) notes and laments the rise of

dowries among Tibetan exiles. Boundary maintenance, although a successful strategy in many regards, does not entirely insulate Tibetans from adopting the cultural norms of their neighbours.

In summary, we know that *nyelus* were common in Kyirong (and probably throughout Tibet) prior to the 1960s, yet are comparatively rare in exile society today. The statistical evidence, albeit far from perfect, indicates quite clearly that Tibetans in exile have experienced a precipitous decline in out-of-wedlock childbearing. Qualitative evidence, introduced to illustrate the environment in which fertility decisions are now made, hints at some of the disincentives against having, or admitting to having, illegitimate children. In the past the frequency of illegitimacy contributed to population growth in Tibetan societies; today the absence of illegitimacy may contribute to population decline. From a demographic perspective, the demise of the *nyelu* has exacerbated the magnitude of the fertility decline in the exile communities. This particular instance of culture change has major implications for the future of the exile communities.

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