



The Tibetan stem family in historical perspective

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of scholarly interest in the Tibetan marital practice of fraternal polyandry, very little is known about how the Tibetan family system operated in historical contexts. This study, based on a 1958 household register from Kyirong, a former district in Tibet, reconstructs nuances of family dynamics through the aid of interviews with people who were listed in the document. Kyirong's family system is shown to be very flexible. Although patrilocality was preferred, matrilocality was a viable contingency, and although polyandry was favored, monogamy and polygyny were acceptable. Despite the heterogeneity of Kyirong's family households, case studies demonstrate how people strove to achieve the monomartial stem family through polyandrous marriages in successive generations. Because polyandry created a surplus of marriageable women, joint families often arose, at least in form, when unmarried women remained with their natal families and had children, or when men discontent with their polyandrous unions moved into an adjunct house with a partner of choice. However, the offspring of these people had no rights of inheritance and thus were not integral to family continuity, so joint families in form functioned more like stem families in practice. Therefore, a discrepancy between etic definitions of form and emic understandings of process emerges when family typologies developed to facilitate cross-cultural research are incompatible with the way people actually understand rights and privileges associated with succession. The data and analysis demonstrate that Kyirong represents a unique version of a stem family society with an unambiguous stem family ideology.

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1. Introduction

Since Frédéric Le Play's seminal study in the 1800s scholars have considered the stem family a strategy in predominantly agrarian societies for managing the intergenerational transfer of household wealth through inegalitarian means (Szołtysek, 2016, p. 502). Viewed as an intermediary between joint and nuclear family types, the stem family typically involves the vertical transmission of family property to a single chosen heir (usually a son) who marries and remains with the parents in the natal household. The heir's siblings can either remain in the household on the condition they do not marry, or they can move out and fend for themselves (Fauve-Chamoux & Ochiai, 2009; Goody, 1996; Hajnal, 1982; Saito, 1998). In contrast, all offspring in a nuclear family system disperse to

form their own families, while in the joint family system some or all offspring of the preferred gender marry and bring spouses into the household. Although stem families vary in detail across time and space, they are generally characterized as non-egalitarian because heirs fare better than non-inheriting siblings who are likely to marry later, have fewer children, be less wealthy, and die younger (Das Gupta, 1999; Fauve-Chamoux, 2006).

Despite the welcome inclusion of non-European societies into the scholarly debates (e.g. Engelen & Wolf, 2005; Fauve-Chamoux & Ochiai, 2009), the unusual Tibetan family system has not received much attention. This article, based on a household register from 1958 and retrospective interviews with people listed therein, explores family dynamics under Tibet's pre-1959 political system by asking the following questions. How should we evaluate a society that appears to have a patrilineal joint family system in which several sons marry, remain in the same household with parents, and inherit their father's property, except they do so by taking a common wife through the marital custom of fraternal polyandry? How does the presence of unmarried or informally married sisters and their children further complicate the evaluation of such family households?

Historically, Tibetan families were distinct from their neighbors in India and China where, ideally, a joint family was formed when each son married his own wife and they all lived together with aging parents before dividing the family property to form independent households (Cohen, 1992; Das Gupta, 1999; Lee & Campbell, 1997; S. Li et al., 2003; Niranjana et al., 2005; Wolf, 1985). The Tibetan family system more closely resembled the Japanese one where the head of household position passed, typically from father to son, at some point between the marriage of the younger generation and the passing of the elder (Saito, 2011). However, as operationalized in most research (i.e. only one child remains in the parental home after marriage) the stem family definition does not quite describe Tibetan polyandrous marriages because two or more sons marry one woman, prompting Goldstein (1978, p. 209) to coin the term 'monomartial stem family' to differentiate it from the more common version favoring a single heir. But what complicates the situation is that many unmarried or informally married daughters and their children remained residentially attached to their parents and brothers thereby forming three-generation households that appear, at least in structure, to be joint.

The objective of this article is to contribute new perspectives on historical family households by presenting the case of Kyirong in the 1950s, a Tibetan society where polyandry was normative among a specific socioeconomic class.¹ The first section describes the research site, data source, and customs concerning marriage and household succession. Afterwards, the analysis explores tensions between form and function to highlight the perils of using static data on family compositions to assess diachronic processes, and to demonstrate that emic perspective on family dynamics are more reliable for understanding nuances of past family households than etic constructs.

2. The research site, data source, and context

Kyirong, formerly a district-level administrative unit (*rdzong*) under a Tibetan administration, lies at the border of China and Nepal in what is today the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Although China asserted control over Tibet in 1951, in 1958 Kyirong still operated under Ganden Phodrang, the Tibetan government in Lhasa headed since the late 1600s

by successive Dalai Lamas. Kyirong was one of 69 districts governed by District Commissioners (*rdzong dpon*), positions held jointly by a lay official and a monk official drawn from the country's hereditary aristocracy and one of three large monasteries near Lhasa (Goldstein, 1989, pp. 6–10; Petech, 1973). District Commissioners' duties included collecting tax revenues, administering justice, and keeping a detailed record of the population under their jurisdiction.

Most of Kyirong's residents were classified as legally bound subjects (*mi ser*) who incurred the responsibility of supporting the Tibetan government through a tax system that shaped many dimensions of village-level social organization. Subjects were divided into two broad categories. 'Taxpayers' (*khral pa*) held a formal land tenure document referred to as a 'tax basis' (*khral rten*) granting them a heritable right to farm a specified amount of land. Taxpayers could lose that right by failing to fulfill tax obligations which included an annual grain payment and corvée labor (Dargyay, 1982; Goldstein, 1971b; Surkhang, 1966, 1986). The other main category, 'small householder' (*dud chung ba*, literally, 'small smoke'), did not hold a tax basis. They had few if any tax obligations yet lacked the long-term security of land tenure. Small householders could obtain non-heritable leases for parcels of land or support themselves by working for taxpayer households in exchange for food and shelter. Because of the heavy tax burden on taxpayers, the labor of small householders was highly valued (see Thargyal, 2007 for an analogous situation among Tibetan pastoralists).

Every third year District Commissioners in pre-1959 Tibet were required to update records of taxpaying subjects under their jurisdiction by compiling a 'household register' (*sgo khra them gan*) (Surkhang, 1966). According to a former Kyirong resident,

A household register lists how many people there are, how many have died, how many were born. It was made by the representative (*lding dpon*) of our own village. He would call us to his home where he would record each household's residents. Then the representative had to go to district headquarters where they would compose the household register.

The 'Earth-Dog Year [1958] Household Contract Being a Census [of Land and People] in the Nine Divisions of Kyirong District' was completed, witnessed, and sealed in early July 1958.² It records the names of 2,845 individuals living in 30 villages. The tally only includes people classified as government subjects and therefore does not enumerate the entire population of Kyirong.³ Nevertheless, the register lists individuals by village, household of residence, name, age, and relationship within the household. This study only centers on the 2,500 individuals living in taxpayer households because the 345 small householders are listed together at the end of each geographical sub-division which makes it difficult to distinguish relationships and co-residence.⁴

The household register was compiled at a time when Tibet was on the verge of dramatic transformations. After China asserted control over Tibet following a period of de facto independence from 1913 to 1951, it left the governance of areas administered by Lhasa more or less intact, so District Commissioners such as the one in Kyirong continued to compile data on subject households. After a failed uprising against China's rule in March 1959, the Dalai Lama sought refuge in India and the Tibetan administration in Lhasa was disbanded. Many Kyirong residents fled to neighboring Nepal in the early 1960s as China's land reforms and religious persecution began in earnest. Thus, the 1958

household register was completed eight months before Tibetan socioeconomic life was subjected to radical and traumatic changes.

To make better sense of families enumerated in the register, in 1999 and 2000 the author interviewed as many people as possible who were listed therein. Although denied permission to conduct research in Kyirong, interviewees were not hard to locate; a large percentage of the population was living in exile in Nepal and India. A total of 198 middle-aged and elderly people were interviewed. After locating the interviewees name in the register, they identified other household members and discussed marriages, divorces, people who moved out, and other family-related issues. They also provided details on neighboring households. Most interviewees, aided by the document, retained vivid recollections of their families as they were constituted in 1958, presumably because this was just before the political upheaval of 1959 that led to their flight into exile. Through the interviews it was possible to acquire direct information (i.e. from a member of that household) or indirect information (i.e. from a relative or former neighbor) on 70% of all the households listed in the register. The resulting data, combined with demographic analysis, has been used to advance the study of Tibetan historical demography (Childs, 2003, 2008). In this article, the qualitative data from interviews is used to illustrate how particular family structures were preserved or transformed over time.⁵

2.1. Household, family, and marriage in Kyirong

The taxpayers of Kyirong had a very clear notion of what constitutes a house (*khyim*; *khang ba*) and a household (*grong pa*). Houses had distinct names that endured through time and derived from geographical reference points such as Ridge Top (*sgang thog*) or physical attributes such as Slate House (*g.ya' khang*). Residents of the more prominent houses strongly identified with their house names, for example, White House (*khang dkar*) was home to a renowned lineage of physicians. Even in exile in India a former resident was known as Lobsang Dolma Khangkar in her publications on Tibetan medicine. The term for household (*grong pa*) was more expansive; it referred to the house and all associated structures, its residents, and property that was managed by the head of household (Childs & Choedup, 2019; Mills, 2000; Ramble, 2019). Every person recorded in the 1958 register as a member of a Kyirong household was part of a domestic unit that was collectively responsible for production, reproduction, and tax obligations.

In Kyirong, most household residents are family members (*nang mi*). Nevertheless, the concepts of household (*grong ba*) and family (*mi tshang*) should not be used interchangeably because the former is a subset of the latter which also includes offspring who have moved out of the household either through marriage or monastic residence, as well as an array of paternal and maternal kin (*pha spun* and *ma spun*) with whom people maintain various social and economic relationships. As Seccombe (1992, pp. 25–29; see also Szotkysek, 2015) points out, households are porous social units that are best understood in relation to broader kin networks and through a family-cycle approach that centers on transitions. These include how people gain access to means of production and living spaces, become eligible for marriage, acquire assets through inheritance, bear and raise children, and provide for the elderly. This article uses the term family household to refer to a domestic group comprised of affinal and consanguineal family members and adopts

a family-cycle approach to describe how people sought to achieve or maintain stem family living arrangements.

The land tenure system provided taxpayers a strong incentive to practice fraternal polyandry because they had access to set amounts of land that could be inherited but not expanded. Taxes, including *corvée* labor, were assessed on a household basis regardless of how many family members lived together. The more adults in the household, the more able they were to fulfill tax obligations and engage in diverse economic activities such as farming, herding, and trade. Through polyandry taxpayer households adhered to a 'monomartial norm', meaning one marriage within the household per generation. Two conjugal families headed by males of the same generation were considered unstable because they could generate competition, conflicts, and precipitate the division of property. In contrast, small householders had almost no heritable assets and few means to secure a livelihood other than working for others in exchange for food and shelter, so they almost always married monogamously (Childs, 2008; Goldstein, 1971a, 1978). Kyirong was a two-tiered peasant society in which the family system was shaped differentially by socioeconomic conditions imposed by landowning institutions (e.g. Berkner & Shaffer, 1978; Kertzer & Hogan, 1991; Plakans & Wetherell, 2005).

Norms of patrilineal descent and patrilocal marital residence meant that parents preferred to keep sons at home and send daughters out in marriage. A family with three sons and three daughters would, ideally, find one bride for at least two of the sons (the third could join the marriage or become a monk) while trying to send each daughter to another household in marriage. Those who did not have a male heir could bring in a matrilocally-resident husband (*mag pa*) to marry one of the daughters. Although polyandry was the preferred form of marriage, monogamy was common in households with only a single son or daughter, and polygyny could occur in households with no sons but several daughters if the matrilocally-resident husband decided to include his wife's sibling in the marriage.

Household succession in Kyirong involves the transmission of wealth (inheritance) and authority (status) and resembles what Augustins labelled a 'lineage system' because both pass primarily to one gender, in this case males. Contrary to Augustins's (2002, pp. 341–342) assertion that, in a lineage system, solutions to avoid land fragmentation must be found 'outside the sphere of kinship', in Kyirong the solution remained firmly within the consanguineal kin group, namely, polyandrously marrying brothers. Using Seccombe's (1992, pp. 42–43) terms for Hajnal's original distinction, the timing and modality of succession partially resembles the 'strong-stem [family] variant' whereby the son(s) and wife live with his parents after marriage. However, succession ideally occurs before the father's death. This is clear from both interviews and the register which contains a separate listing for each household that begins with the name of the household head who is identified as 'holder [of the land lease]' (*dzin mi*). All other residents were then listed by name, relationship, and age. For example,

CD, holder [of the land lease], age 68; ND, son, age 36; TD, son, age 34; SC, wife, age 35; PB, son, age 5; LZ, daughter, age 8.

In this household the widower CD was still identified as household head even though his sons were married and well into their 30s. Based on the age of LZ the granddaughter, ND

and TD had been married to SC for nearly a decade if not longer. Compare that to another household.

JP, holder [of the land lease], age 44; TD, age 32; SN, wife, age 35; ZP, father, age 77; LP, mother, age 72; PS, daughter, age 23; TD, son, age 11.

JP is identified as the household head so his father, ZP, had passed the position while still alive. In accord with Buddhist tenets on compassion and reincarnation, it is considered appropriate for an aging man to withdraw from worldly activities that are often harmful to sentient beings so he can concentrate on prayers and ritual activities to ensure a favorable rebirth (Childs, 2008). While still alive he should ideally pass to his son the responsibilities of managing the labor force, representing the household at community meetings, and ensuring that tax obligations are met.⁶ Although the authority vested in household head status passes to one son only (JP in the case above), all his brothers are co-inheritors of the estate so long as they remain together. Therefore, a younger brother (like TD in the case above) benefitted from the arrangement because he shared the economic security associated with land tenure and taxpayer status even though he did not hold the authority vested in the household head position. But that could change if his elder brother died, became incapacitated, or left the household. The presence of one or more younger brother therefore ensured that the premature death of the household head did not precipitate a void in leadership and reproduction.

Polyandry creates a situation whereby there are more potential brides than households into which they can marry, which correlates with a high frequency of female non-marriage (Goldstein, 1976). In Kyirong, 50.6% of women aged 20–49 were not formally married into taxpayer households. The acceptability of informal unions and relatively permissive attitudes toward out-of-wedlock childbearing meant that non-marrying women could and often did have children, albeit they experienced a lower total fertility rate than their married counterparts (2.2 vs 6.2 births per woman, Childs, 2008).⁷ Residential options for such women were limited. While some became nuns, the more common solution was to move into a separate room or dwelling that was still considered a part of the household, thereby creating an emic distinction between a ‘one hearth’ (*thab gcig*) household in which all family members resided together and cooked over a single fire, and a ‘two hearth’ (*thab gnyis*) household which included the main house and an ‘adjunct house’ (*zur khang*). In many instances retired parents preferred to live with an unmarried daughter in the adjunct house if they had a dispute with their son(s) and daughter-in-law, or if they sought a quieter environment for retirement and end-of-life religious activities. Maintaining separate hearths did not prevent unmarried women from participating in the household’s productive activities. In fact, retaining them had tangible benefits such as enhancing the labor force and caring for aging parents.

Many women in adjunct houses were childless. Others were single mothers who were not in stable relationships, or women who resided with men in long-term unions based on mutual affection. Their partners were either small householders or men who split from polyandrous unions. An important distinction needs to be drawn here between formal marriages and informal yet socially recognized unions. A formal marriage (*chang sa*; literally ‘drinking gathering’) among taxpayers was arranged between families and moved a bride from her natal to her marital family. Marriages were elaborate affairs involving rituals, feasting, and the exchange of goods between families. Those who did

not have the opportunity to formally marry often lived together and had children. Informal unions typically stemmed from relationships based on mutual affection (*khatugs*; literally, 'meeting of mouths') that could be socially recognized through a truncated ceremony performed by a village leader. Women and their children living in adjunct houses, but not the men with whom they resided, were classified together with the main household for tax purposes and remained important contributors to the household.

3. Data and analysis

3.1. The approach

Historical studies of the family that are based on household enumerations have evolved since the pioneering work of Laslett and colleagues in the Cambridge Group (Laslett & Wall, 1972). For example, Ruggles recently pointed out that demographic factors play a significant role in limiting the prevalence of stem families. Due to late marriage and short lifespans many people in historical Europe did not live long enough to co-reside with their married offspring. Focusing on households with elderly residents therefore yields a more realistic picture of norms and preferences (Ruggles, 2009, pp. 252–254, 2012, pp. 431–437), and reveals that stem families were more common in European history than previously recognized (Ruggles, 2010).

Ruggles (2010, p. 566) analysis of family types more or less follows Le Play's original distinctions by defining the stem family as 'multigenerational families with no more than one married child' and joint families as 'multigenerational families with two or more married children'. He acknowledges that these definitions have shortcomings, for example, many data sources obscure what are functionally joint or stem families because of the stipulation that people must co-reside. In some historical European societies an elderly person could retire and move into a small house on the family property. Although enumerated separately in a census, for all intents and purposes they remained a single family household (Berkner, 1972; Moring, 2003; Sogner, 2009). Nevertheless, Ruggles (2010, p. 566; see also Fauve-Chamoux & Ochiai 2009, pp. 3–4) argues that the definitions are simple and easily replicable across data sets, and thus amenable to comparisons across space and time.

Although Ruggles' focus on family households with elderly members is a welcome departure from previous research, the methodology still has shortcomings. Gruber and Szołtysek (2012, pp. 116–119) note that family categories based on current marital status miss those that are 'truncated' by death or divorce. To compensate they construct a typology based on the 'conjugal family unit' (CFU) which includes the husband-wife relationship as well as the parent-child relationship. Doing so reveals a higher frequency of stem and joint families in some European societies than previously documented.⁸ Their method aligns with Skinner's (1997) fundamental building block of family typologies, the 'conjugal unit' (CU), which consists of at least two individuals from two or more of the following categories: husband/father, wife/mother, and child(ren). A conjugal unit can be small, such as a husband and wife or a single mother and her child. It can also be larger, such as a husband and wife and their several children. Skinner's typology is appealing because, in addition to capturing conjugal units emerging from marriages disrupted by death and divorce, it accounts for out-of-wedlock childbearing which was quite common

in Tibetan societies (Childs, 2006; Goldstein, 1981b; Haddix, 1999). The three family household types in Skinner's scheme are, (1) conjugal (i.e. nuclear) consisting of only a single conjugal unit; (2) stem consisting of two or more conjugal units, but no more than one per generation; and (3) joint comprising two or more conjugal units with at least two being in the same generation (Skinner, 1997; see also Gruber & Szołtysek, 2012, pp. -116–117).

Also following Skinner, the term 'family system' is used here as 'the normative manner in which family processes unfold,' which includes marital forms, coresidential arrangements, and succession (Skinner, 1997). As mentioned above, the term family household (coresident domestic group in Hammel and Laslett's terms) refers to a domestic unit comprised of affinal and consanguineal family members. Whereas a family household as recorded in a population register represents a snapshot at one point in time, a family system signifies diachronic processes that can generate nuclear, stem, or joint phases. The distinction is important because the normative family system may not be the statistically dominant type at any point in time (Ruggles, 2009; Szołtysek, 2016).

3.2. Structure: the prevalence of family household types

Hammel and Laslett (1974, p. 77) point out that people are not grouped arbitrarily in a population register. Membership in a household is determined by a locational criterion that they share a space, a functional criterion that they share certain activities, and a kinship criterion that they are related through blood or marriage. Through the interviews it is apparent that almost all household entries in the Kyirong register are based on these three criteria. The shared space includes the main house and adjunct house (if one exists) that are bound together through ties of kinship and economic activities shaped by heritable land rights and associated tax obligations. Family members who are sent out in marriage or to monasteries and nunneries are not included in the register because they fit neither the locational nor functional criterion. Regarding non-kin residents, only two people enumerated in taxpayer households are identified as servants (*g.yog*) and only one household's listing includes small householders. That happened to be the largest landholding household in Kyirong, and according to a former resident,

It was as if there were a hundred people in our home [42 appear in the register]. Most of them were our workers. They were small householders (*dud chung ba*), but they were considered like family members (*mi tshang*). We had one hearth and one house. We ate together and worked together. However, they all had separate quarters for sleeping.

This household was an anomaly, more akin to what Hammel and Laslett (1974, p. 78) would label a houseful.

The analysis of Kyirong's family households begins with Ruggles' suggestion to focus only on those containing elderly residents. Demographic factors impacted intergenerational living arrangements in Kyirong. High levels of infant and childhood mortality reduced life expectancy to roughly 35 years. A relatively small proportion of the taxpayer population (8.2%) was aged 60 and above, probably because of difficult living conditions and rudimentary medical care. The proportion would have been smaller if not for a modest total fertility rate of 4.2 births per woman that was tempered by the low fertility of never-married women (Childs, 2008). Many households did not have elderly residents

because they died before the marriage of their offspring. However, two factors worked in favor of multigenerational households. The first is polyandry because the presence of two or more brothers increased the potential for one to live long enough to co-reside with married children. The second was a relatively young age at marriage. Although it is impossible to determine the average age at marriage, there are some 18- and 19-year-old women identified in the document as married, and some married men (monogamous unions and elder brothers in polyandrous unions) aged 21 to 23 suggesting that early marriage was permissible and perhaps common.

The 1958 register lists 204 individuals aged 60 and above (115 females, 89 males).⁹ One or more elderly person lived in 153 of Kyirong's 397 taxpayer households (38.5%). Most of the elderly lived in three generation households (68.3%) with smaller proportions in four (7.3%), two (23.8%), and one generation households (0.6%). The elderly typically lived in large households with an average of 7.4 co-resident kin members and 5.3 descendants (1.6 sons, 1.1 daughters, 2.6 grandchildren). [Table 1](#) displays the proportions who lived with daughters and sons.

Before enumerating family households by type, some cautionary remarks are in order because an analysis based solely on data contained within a population register can be misleading. Consider, for example, Household SL9 as it is listed in the register ([Table 2](#)).

Without interview data, reconstructing relationships would entail some guesswork. LT and NL seem to be the senior married couple. The age difference between LT and NL suggests LT was a younger and only surviving brother from a polyandrous union. Their sons appear to be PT and GP. The age difference between the two is quite large, but since GP is in the household, we can assume that he is part of a polyandrous union with his brother PT and their wife RS. They appear to have two daughters (LP and ZG) and two sons (KD and NS). KZ, GK, and PC seem to be daughters of LT and NL, and thus sisters of PT

Table 1. Percentage of elderly living with sons and/or daughters.

| | Kyirong |
|--------------------------------|---------|
| Neither son(s) nor daughter(s) | 7.9% |
| Son(s) only | 30.5% |
| Daughter(s) only | 15.2% |
| Both son(s) and daughter(s) | 46.3% |

Table 2. Household SL9 as enumerated in the register.

| Name | Sex | Age | Relationship |
|------|-----|-----|-------------------------|
| LT | m | 57 | <i>pha</i> (father) |
| NL | f | 69 | <i>dman</i> (woman) |
| PT | m | 44 | <i>bu</i> (son) |
| GP | m | 21 | <i>bu</i> (son) |
| RS | f | 35 | <i>mna' ma</i> (wife) |
| LP | f | 10 | <i>bu mo</i> (daughter) |
| KD | m | 0 | <i>bu</i> (son) |
| NS | m | 14 | <i>bu</i> (son) |
| ZG | f | 17 | <i>bu mo</i> (daughter) |
| KZ | f | 41 | <i>bu mo</i> (daughter) |
| GK | f | 49 | <i>bu mo</i> (daughter) |
| ZC | f | 36 | <i>bu mo</i> (daughter) |
| PC | f | 1 | <i>bu mo</i> (daughter) |

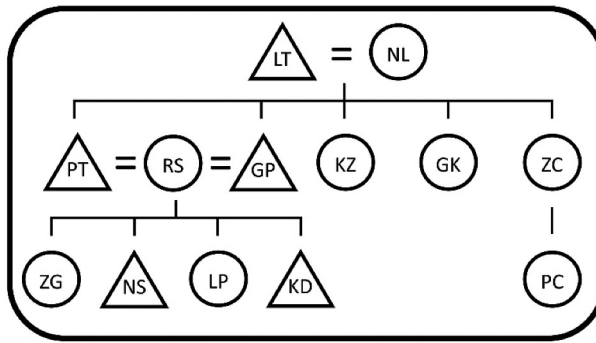


Figure 1. Household SL9 estimated reconstruction. **Key to Figures** The figures use standard kinship symbols to indicate gender, marital status, and descent. ○ Female △ Male. A line through either shape indicates the person is deceased. = indicates marriage ┌─┴─┬ indicates descent.

and GP. Because PC is listed after ZC, it is reasonable to assume that she is the daughter of ZC, most likely born out-of-wedlock. Based on these assumptions, the reconstructed household is presented in Figure 1.

Interviews with former residents of SL9 reveal that some of the above assumptions were correct. LT had two deceased elder brothers who were part of the polyandrous union; KZ, GK, and ZC were PT's unmarried sisters; and PC was the illegitimate child of ZC. However, interviews also revealed that GP was PT's son, not his brother. In fact, PT, ZG, and NS are the children of PT's first wife, who died. RS, his second wife, is the mother of LP and KD. Furthermore, PT's sisters resided in an adjunct house. The actual reconstruction of the household looks somewhat different after corrections (Figure 2).

Despite cooking over separate hearths and inhabiting separate spaces, residents of the adjunct and main houses were enumerated as a single unit and considered as such for tax purposes. They were collectively responsible for fulfilling tax obligations and worked together to subsist from the same resource base. In terms of composition, SL9 resembles a stem family using Ruggles' categories, but a joint family using Skinner's classification because the daughter ZC and her child comprise a second conjugal unit. Such households were by no means rare. From the register and interviews it is possible to identify

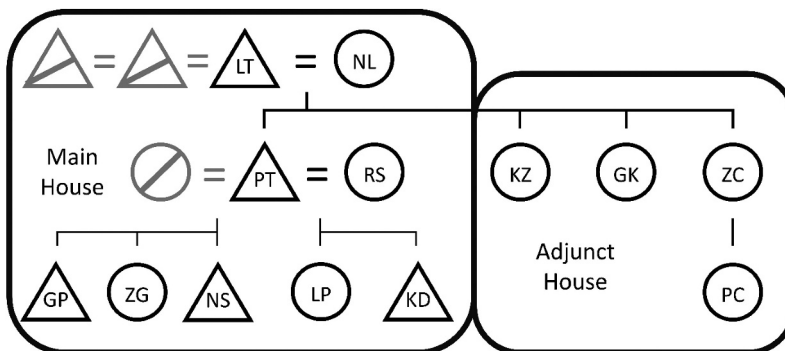


Figure 2. Household SL9 actual reconstruction.

Table 3. Family types in Kyirong 1958.

| | Type 1 | Type 2 |
|---------|--------|--------|
| Nuclear | 28.8% | 16.3% |
| Stem | 66.7% | 62.1% |
| Joint | 4.6% | 21.6% |

unmarried daughters and their children living in the main or adjunct house in 26 of the 153 households with elderly residents (17%). Many others had co-resident unmarried daughters, but it was difficult to establish with certainty whether some had children, so the percentage could have been higher. Joint family households consisting of two or more separately married brothers, on the other hand, were uncommon. Only seven could be identified. They were considered problematic because a heritable land lease was difficult to divide, so a brother who decided to marry on his own rather than remain in a polyandrous union would either move into another family's adjunct house occupied by one of their unmarried daughters (Figure 6) or live in an adjunct house attached to his brothers' home (Figure 8). In either case his children were ineligible for inheritance. Only one known case involved two brothers who married separately, divided their land, and established separate households (Figure 9).

Table 3 illustrates how the different definitions affect the prevalence of family types in Kyirong. Type 1 represents the definitions used by Ruggles and others, whereas Type 2 is based on Skinner's definitions which align with those used by Gruber and Szoflysek. In both cases the percentages of stem families lie at the high end of the range of 100 populations analyzed by Ruggles (2012). However, Skinner's approach yields a far higher frequency of joint family households. Kyirong's 62.1% stem and 21.6% joint families under Type 2 resembles the proportions found in some historical Eastern, Central, and Southeast European populations (Gruber & Szoflysek, 2012).

Which method of enumeration is more accurate? Is it better to consider family households like SL9 as joint based on composition? Or stem based on the processes of inheritance and the transfer of authority? The answer to these questions will be settled by turning to specific case studies and focusing on how the residents of Kyirong tried to achieve and maintain a stem family household from one generation to the next.

3.3. Process: how to achieve the monomartial stem family ideal

The monomartial stem family ideal is illustrated in Household DP1 in Figure 3. NC came as a bride for five brothers; three were still alive in 1958 (NI, GT, and DA). Two of their sons (NB and BD) took one wife (DW). A third son, born between NB and BD, is not listed in the household register. As the middle of three sons, he had been sent to be a monk at a nearby monastery and thereby eliminated from the inheritance equation. Meanwhile, NB, DW, and BD had one surviving daughter and five sons (out of eight births) ranging in age from five to 14. The eldest son stated in an interview that he grew up assuming he and one or more of his brothers would marry polyandrously, a plan that was scuttled when they fled to Nepal in the early 1960s.

Some families exhibited considerable patience to achieve the ideal. For example, the main house of Household LK2 in Figure 4 contained the remnant of the senior polyandrous union and a newly constituted junior one. PT and his wife CP were 61 and 64 years

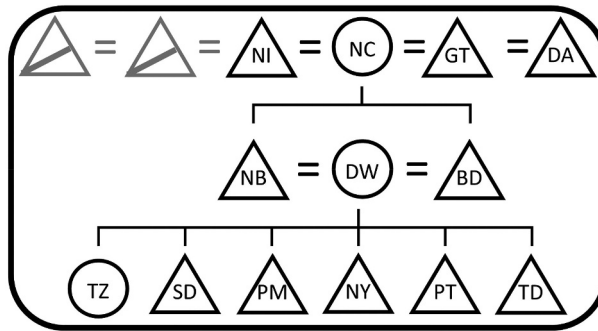


Figure 3. Household DP1.

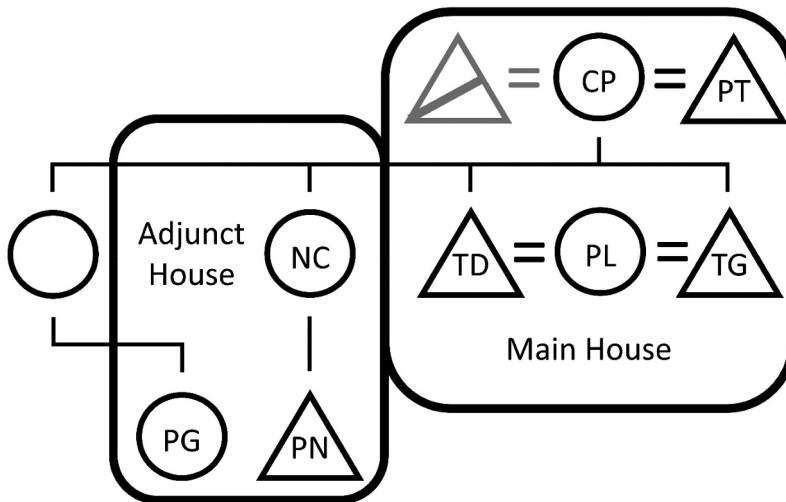


Figure 4. Household LK2.

old, whereas their sons, TD and TG, were 21 and 16. A former resident of this household reported that TD was the first son to survive, and TG was the last child born. They had five elder sisters. The parents' desire to have a son is evident in the names of daughters four and five, Shichog and Ngachog (*bzhi chog*, Four [Girls] are Enough; *lnga chog*, Five [Girls] are Enough), a naming convention meant to influence the chance that the next born child would be a boy. Because of the forty-year age gap between parents and sons, the family was forced to wait decades to achieve their succession plan. Once TD and TG were married, the unmarried daughter NC moved into the adjunct house with two children born out of wedlock, her own son (PN) and her elder sister's daughter (PG) who was left behind when her mother married into another household. The existence of the conjugal unit NC and PN makes this a joint family household in composition. However, PN, despite being male, would have no claim on household assets which would be inherited by the yet-to-be born children of TD, TG, and their wife PL.

A threat to continuity arises if no sons are born or survive to marriageable age. In such a case a *magma* (*mag pa*; matrilocally-resident husband) could be brought in to marry the

family's daughter(s). Although a magpa would not be considered the legal heir to the estate, his sons would be, so the next generation could return to the patrilineal norm and, with multiple sons, polyandry. Matrilocal marriage could provide family continuity in the absence of sons (see C. Li et al., 2020, for a similar example from Taiwan).

The family in Household GR3 (Figure 5) had a main house occupied by the widower PT and his elder daughter CZ. PT and his deceased wife did not have any surviving sons, so he brought PS into the home as a magpa for CZ. With two surviving grandsons (ST and LP) approaching marriageable age, they were on track to become a patrilineal polyandrous family household in the next generation. Meanwhile, the younger daughter LB did not join in her sister's marriage but lived in the adjunct house with her son, LT, who was born out-of-wedlock (the father was not PS). Although the conjugal unit of LB and LT made the family household joint in composition, LT did not hold any rights to inherit because the legitimate heirs were ST and LP.

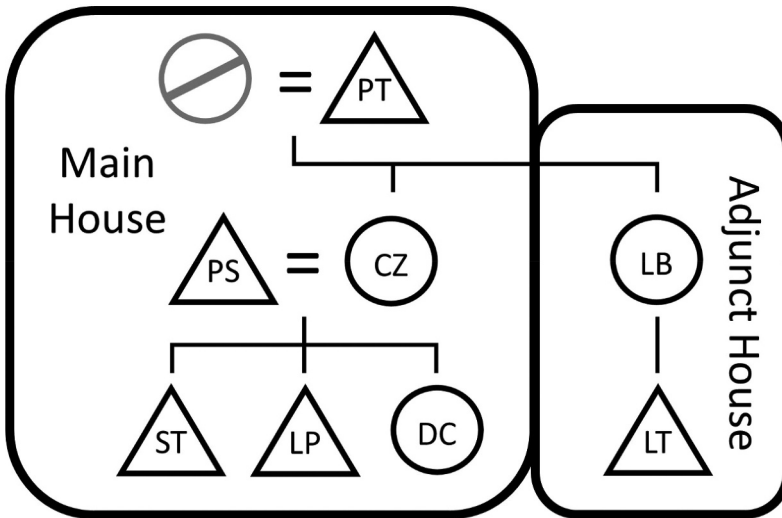


Figure 5. Household GR3.

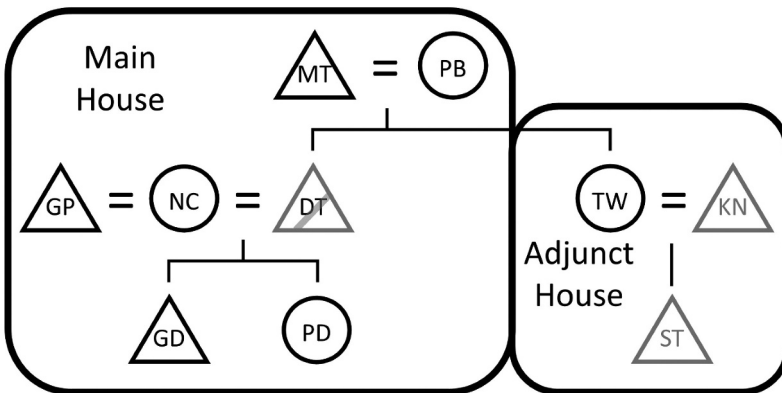


Figure 6. Household KZ33.

KZ33 in [Figure 6](#) illustrates an unusual means by which a magpa was brought into a household. MT and PB had only one son (DT) and one daughter (TW). DT married NC, but then died leaving his wife a widow with two young children (GD and PD). Because the children were young, GP was brought into the household as a magpa for the daughter-in-law NC with the agreement that GD, DT's son, was the future heir. Meanwhile, the daughter TW moved into an adjunct house. In an interview she reported residing with KN, a taxpayer who fled his polyandrous union. Although living with TW in the adjunct house (as pictured in [Figure 6](#)), in the register KN and son ST were listed in KN's natal household which is where they were beholden for tax purposes. ST was ineligible for inheritance in either household because his mother was not in the line of succession in KZ33, and his father relinquished any future claims in his natal household by leaving the polyandrous marriage.

Another threat to family continuity is infertility or the untimely death of a bride. This was often solved through the sororate, a custom whereby a man brings in a sibling of his wife as a replacement (in the case of death) or second spouse (in the case of infertility). For example, in Household KZ50 in [Figure 7](#), LP originally married TZ. After giving birth to two daughters, she never again became pregnant. Lacking a male heir, LP brought TZ's younger sister PZ into the household as a second wife. In 1958 she had one surviving daughter. LP's sister DT bore BT out of wedlock so for a time the family was joint in composition until DT married into another household and left BT behind. If LP and PZ produced a male heir, he would be the family's successor. If not, they would find a magpa for any of the daughters except for BT who would not be considered a legitimate successor because her father was an outsider to the household.

Note that the joint family households discussed above ([Figures 4–7](#)) became joint when an unmarried or informally married daughter had a child, the most common way for them to form. Only seven cases were documented in which an adjunct house was occupied by a brother who opted out of his polyandrous union. In one of those, Household GP21 ([Figure 8](#)), GP was the eldest of three brothers who married LG. The middle brother TN did not get along with the common wife, so he moved into an adjunct

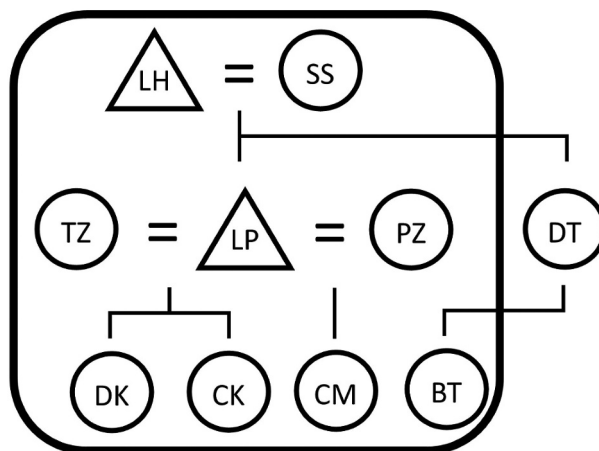


Figure 7. Household KZ50.

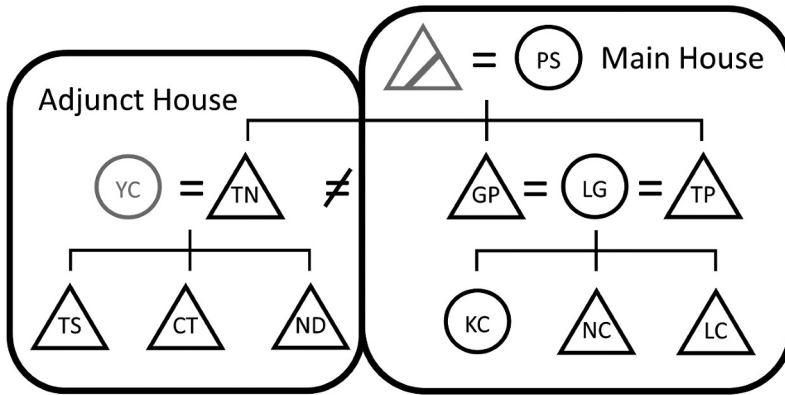


Figure 8. Household GP21.

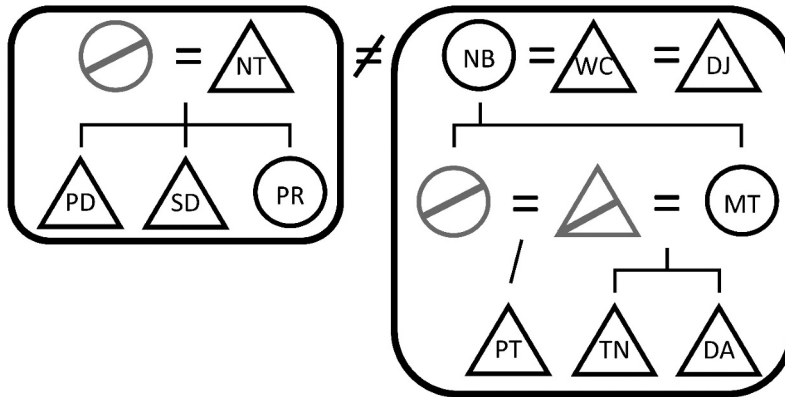


Figure 9. Households MG3 (left) and MG1 (right).

house with YC, a woman he fell in love with. YC was not listed in this household indicating that their relationship was informal, albeit it was socially recognized according to former residents. Despite the split, the brothers continued worked together and were considered a single unit for taxation. Thus, although cooking over two hearths, they constituted a joint family household because of two marriages within a single generation. However, from the perspective of inheritance and continuity, only NC and LC were considered the rightful heirs. The sons of TN stood to inherit nothing.

In only one documented case did brothers divide their land lease so that they could pursue separate marriages and households. Household MG1 in Figure 9 was prosperous and politically influential. Originally three brothers (NT, WC, and DJ) married NB. But NT was discontent, so he moved into an adjunct house with a woman he fell in love with thereby creating a joint family, but only temporarily. Because the household held rights to a large amount of land, NT was able to legally obtain some (i.e. divide the tax basis) and form a new household (MG3) that was a separate entity for tax purposes. This was an unusual situation because most families did not have access to sufficient land to divide their tax basis when discord arose, and typically invoked every means possible to avoid

partitioning (Goldstein, 1978). NT's family was nuclear in 1958, but with two sons approaching marital age it was destined to become stem with a polyandrous marriage. Meanwhile, WC and DJ had two daughters who married polygynously with a matrilocally-resident husband. He and one of the co-wives died prior to 1958. Their three sons were also approaching marital age and would have married polyandrously had they not fled Kyirong in the early 1960s.

The final example illustrates how family continuity could be compromised. CG12 in Figure 10 was a nuclear family household headed by the elderly widower TP. The family had recently been stem, but when TP's only son died his daughter-in-law remarried across the border in Nepal. She left her daughter, SD, behind. TP and his unmarried daughter SP were the only conjugal unit in the household. SP, at age 32, was relatively old for marriage so the household was on track to dissipate unless they could find her a magpa or wait for SD (aged 7) to mature and bring in a magpa for her. If neither of those possibilities materialized, their tax basis with associated land rights would transfer to another family. This would often entail elevating a small householder to taxpayer status, a rare opportunity for socioeconomic mobility.

As for the 24 other nuclear family households with elderly residents, 18 resembled Household LK2 in Figure 4 except that their children had not yet married. In other words, they had the potential to become or were in the process of becoming stem. Only six, including Household CG12 in Figure 10, seemed in danger of dissolving. The other five consisted of an elderly widow with two sons in their 40s who were described as 'deaf mutes' (*glen ba*) and thus unlikely to marry, an elderly couple whose only daughter was described in similar terms, and three with elderly residents whose children had died.¹⁰ These six nuclear family households were on the verge of disbanding precisely because they were unable to achieve or maintain the stem family ideal.

The households presented above highlight multiple pathways for achieving the stem family ideal, some of which create joint family households in form more than function.

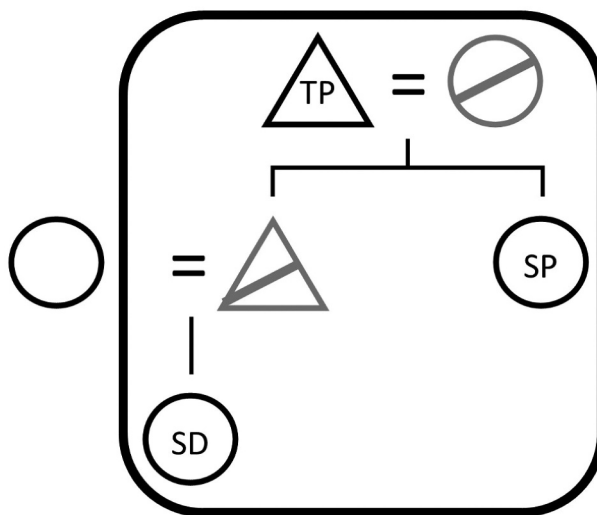


Figure 10. Household CG12.

When the above case studies are assessed against the prevalence of Type 2 joint family households in Table 3, inconsistencies between synchronic form and diachronic process become apparent, the topic of the concluding section.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The family system of Kyirong's taxpayers was flexible and adaptable to demographic and social circumstances. Although patrilocality was preferred, matrilocality was a viable contingency, and although polyandry was favored, monogamy and polygyny were acceptable. Amid Kyirong's heterogenous family households was an underlying constant that people strove to achieve – the stem family with polyandrous marriages in successive generations. Families could get off track in one generation but then realign in the next. In the meantime, joint families often arose, at least in form. Most came about when unmarried or informally married women remained with their natal families, or in a few cases when a man relinquished his and his children's right to inherit by marrying apart from his brothers and moving into an adjunct house.

The Kyirong case highlights the problematic nature of prioritizing etic definitions over emic understandings. Doing so can create dissonance between structure and process, a tension that has been apparent since the publication of Laslett and Wall (1972) *Household and Family in Past Time*. In that volume, Goody (1972, p. 370) reasoned that determining the size and composition of family households was less interesting than how they organized production across the developmental cycle. Hammel (1972) focused on the development cycle rather than the numerical prevalence of family types reasoning that the complex Balkan household is 'not a thing but a process'. Berkner (1975, p. 738) agreed and concluded his review of *Household and Family in Past Time* by asserting, 'Valid statements about family structure require an analysis based on the function of kinship ties, the developmental process, and rules of behavior, not on the composition of narrowly defined residential groups'. Seccombe (1992) argued that using co-residence as a definitional requirement for a family household is misleading and advocated for a family-cycle approach that centers on transitions. Nowadays, the recognition that static household typologies are insufficient for determining how a family system actually operated is more widely accepted (e.g. Augustins, 2002; Hedican, 2005; Kinoshita, 1995; Szoltysek, 2016).

To enumerate family household types based on structure, the conjugal unit approach makes sense for Kyirong because out-of-wedlock childbearing was common. This led to the finding that joint families in form were quite prevalent (21.6%, see Table 3). Ironically, the logical choice of using conjugal units could generate a misleading impression about the importance of the joint family in Kyirong society. The discrepancy between an etic definition of form and an emic understanding of process becomes evident when adding a processual element to the definition such as, 'a domestic unit of production and reproduction that persists over generations, handing down the patrimony through non-egalitarian inheritance' (Fauve-Chamoux & Ochiai, 2009, pp. 3–4). The structural definition of the joint family household (comprising two or more conjugal units with at least two being in the same generation) does not account for the way Kyirong's residents understood non-egalitarian rights and privileges associated with succession. The conjugal unit of an unmarried or informally married woman and her child living within her brothers'

household created a family that is joint in form (from an etic vantage point) but not in function (from an emic perspective). The same is true of a man who opts out of his polyandrous union and resides with a partner of choice in an adjunct house. Kyirong's two-hearth joint family households could replicate in form and keep assets intact from one generation to the next but only through exclusionary measures that lock specific members out of the inheritance equation.

Based on the evidence, it is preferable to think of Kyirong's two-hearth family household as a stem family (the main house) with an offshoot nuclear family (the adjunct house). The two are linked through economic production in the short-term but separable through inheritance in the long-term. The additional conjugal unit is an unintended but acceptable consequence of the monomartial stem family ideal, not an intentional strategy rooted in a joint family ideology. One could argue that, despite appearances, there were no joint family households in Kyirong. All seven classified as joint under Type 1 in [Table 3](#) (i.e. based on marriages) excluded children of the brother living in an adjunct house from succession. Even though the register recorded two women as 'wife' (*za zla* or *mna' ma*) in several of these households thereby giving them an official veneer of being joint, only the children of the wife inhabiting the main house stood to inherit. Therefore, despite the presence of structurally joint family households, Kyirong represents a unique version of a stem family society with an unambiguous stem family ideology.

4.1. Postscript

Although Szoltysek (2016, p. 521) makes a convincing argument that 'judging the "process" through analysis of the "structure" may not be entirely misleading', the Kyirong study demonstrates that one can identify the process with a higher level of confidence with data that extends beyond the confines of a household register. This is not a novel insight. Gaunt (1983) analyzed retirement contracts and Moring (2003) court documents to reveal intergenerational conflicts associated with retirement, and Collomp (1988) accessed marriage contracts to better understand residential arrangements. Unfortunately, it will be very challenging to document similarities between Kyirong's family system and other historical Tibetan communities. Polyandry under parallel socio-economic conditions certainly existed elsewhere in Tibet (Aziz, 1978; Dargyay, 1982; Goldstein, 1971a). The novelty of the marital form even drew the attention of eighteenth-century European travelers (Filippi, 1937/1995; Turner, 1800/1991) so we know that this unique version of a stem family system extended across time and space. However, only one other household register has been analyzed thus far, a much smaller one of monastic subjects in Kyirong (Schuh, 1988), even though thousands must have been produced between the late 1600s and 1959. A more major research impediment is that, given how critical the interviews proved to be, very few people are now alive who can recall who was who within any household register that may come to light. When interviewing former Kyirong residents in 1999 and 2000, those who had been in their 30s in 1958 were in their 70s and retained remarkably good memories about who lived in an adjunct house, which brother split from a polyandrous union, which children were born to an unmarried daughter, and other details that are crucial for understanding the family structure and system. If alive, they would now be in their 90s, so the opportunity to gain first-hand

accounts of pre-1959 Tibetan households is fading quickly if not already gone. Sadly, another study of this kind is no longer feasible.

Notes

1. Early studies described Tibetan polyandry as a strategy for maintaining agricultural landholdings and other assets intact from one generation to the next, especially among households that held secure land tenure (Goldstein, 1971a; Peter, 1963), while later studies focused on why such unions fracture (Fjeld, 2008; Haddix, 2001; Levine & Silk, 1997). Goldstein (1981a) hypothesized that changing economic conditions would prompt a decline in polyandry as people became less dependent on the family farm for subsistence, which occurred in an ethnically Tibetan region of northwestern India (Crook & Crook, 1994) and in a Tibetan refugee farming resettlement community in south India (Goldstein, 1971a). However, more recent studies found a resurgence in polyandry in Tibetan regions of China where it continues to be a viable strategy for maximizing household labor, managing the inter-generational transfer of assets, and preventing the fragmentation of a family's farmland (Ben Jiao, 2014; Childs et al., 2012; Fjeld, 2007).
2. *Sa khyi lo'i skyid grong rgya dgu'i sgo khra them gan*. The date in the document's heading is the twenty-third day of the sixth month of the Earth-Dog Year. Because there were two twenty-third days of that particular month and year (see Schuh, 1973, p. 235), it remains unclear whether the document was completed on the eighth or ninth of July 1958. For a full analysis of the document, see Childs (2008).
3. The government was not the only landlord in Tibet; it granted land tenure privileges to monasteries and the nobility who were entitled to collect their own taxes (Surkhang, 1986). Every district in Tibet could contain a patchwork of government estates (*gzhung gzhis*), aristocratic estates (*sger gzhis*), and monastic estates (*chos gzhis*). Even villages could be divided with some of its land belonging to the government and some to a monastery. Neighboring households often incurred different tax obligations depending on whose land they farmed. Because the document analyzed here enumerates a population of government subjects, this study does not pertain to monastic or aristocratic estates which may have shaped households, demographic processes, and family life in slightly different ways. In Kyirong, subjects of Samtenling Monastery were enumerated in household registers of 1939 and 1949 (Schuh, 1988).
4. In a retrospective study of Samada, a village in Tibet, Goldstein estimated that only 14% to 18% of people lived in taxpayer households (Goldstein, 1971b). In contrast, the Kyirong register categorized 88% of the population as taxpayers. The reason for the difference is unknown.
5. As caveats, the data set from Kyirong's 1958 household register is small compared to research conducted by historians studying European and other Asian families, and thus possibilities for more fine-grained statistical analysis are limited. Also, the case study only pertains to one socioeconomic stratum of Kyirong's population, taxpayer households. Similar to two-tiered peasant societies in Europe (Berkner & Shaffer, 1978; Kertzer & Hogan, 1991; Plakans & Wetherell, 2005), small householders lived under an entirely different set of circumstances. Furthermore, Kyirong should not be considered representative of Tibetan societies which are diverse. For example, matrilocal marriage is normative in Phenbo to the north of Lhasa (Wang, 2018), and polyandry was not very common among nomads (Thargyal, 2007).
6. The second or third eldest son could also ascend to the head position if his father deemed him more capable than the eldest, which was rare but not unknown. A widow could also hold the position until her children came of age.
7. Each female's ever-marital status is clearly indicated by specific terminology. Ever-married women are listed as bride (*mna' ma*), wife (*za zla dman*), or woman (*dman*). Those listed as bride are always currently married, whereas those listed as wife or woman could be currently married, divorced, or widowed. Never-married women are always listed as girl/daughter (*bu*

mo) regardless of age. A high level of non-marital fertility was also found by Goldstein (1976) in Limi, a Tibetan society in northwest Nepal.

8. In a more recent article Szołtysek and colleagues developed a slightly different classification system consisting of three residential circumstances for an elderly person. These are 'living with one ever-married descendant' (similar to the stem family), 'living with 2+ ever-married descendants or ever-married lateral kin' (similar to the joint family), and 'living without any relatives' (Szołtysek et al., 2020, pp. 91–92). Because their approach centers on ever-married individuals rather than conjugal units it is not used here.
9. Sixty years of age was selected as the operational definition of elderly based on the author's research in other culturally Tibetan settings. Through interviews people indicated that one is considered old around age 60 because that is when a male head of household is usually contemplating or commencing the process of handing the head of household (*khyim bdag*) responsibility to his heir. This signals a retreat from active economic engagement and an increase in time devoted to prayer, pilgrimage, and other religious activities in preparation for death and rebirth.
10. All of these could have brought an adoptive son (*bu tshab*) or daughter (*bu mo tshab*) into the household, a viable solution throughout the Tibetan world where the adoptee is typically the child of patrilineal kin who becomes the household heir, as is common in Japanese and Chinese societies (Kurosu & Ochiai, 1995; Lee & Feng, 1999; see also Bedreag, 2014 on Moldova). Interviewees confirmed the existence of such a custom in Kyirong but detecting actual cases within the register was difficult because an adoptee would simply be listed as son (*bu*) or daughter (*bu mo*). In any event, there is no indication that these households had considered adopting an heir.

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