

# The *Zurkhang* (*zur khang*; Adjunct House) in 1950s Kyidrong<sup>1</sup>

Geoff Childs  
(Washington University in St. Louis)

## Scope and Purpose

**E**arlier studies of pre-1959 communities combined with growing attention to those who “escaped the historian’s net” have substantially increased scholarly understanding of social life in historical Tibet.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there remain knowledge gaps regarding Tibetan family and household dynamics, especially among commoners. The purpose of this article is to shed further light on historical Tibetan family households by focusing on the *zurkhang* (*zur khang*), a term that literally means ‘corner house’ or ‘side house’. In 1950s Kyidrong it referred to a separate residence within an agrarian household that accommodated family members who held no rights of inheritance. Because of its status and function as a supplementary unit to the main house, it is translated here as ‘adjunct house’.<sup>3</sup> By

---

<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was supported by a Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Anthropological Demography at the Australian National University, 1999-2002. The author is indebted to Tashi Tsering of Dharamsala for revealing the existence of the 1958 household register upon which this research is based, Lobsang Shastri for locating and facilitating access to the document in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, and Jamyang Tenzin for painstakingly generating an accurate, typeset copy of the handwritten manuscript. The author also extends a special thank you to Melvyn Goldstein for his critical reading of a previous draft of this article and insightful comments that led to substantive revisions.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Surkhang 1966, 1986; Goldstein 1971a, 1971b, 1978; Aziz 1978; Dargay 1982; Schuh 1988; Thargyal 2007; Ramble, Schweiger, and Travers 2013; Bischoff and Mullard 2017. Far more is known about the family life of Tibetan elites through their biographical writings. For a recent and exemplary analysis see Diemberger 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Zurkhang (also transcribed as Surkhang) is a documented family name among Tibet’s aristocracy. For example, the influential Surkhang family was prominent in Tibetan politics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The family got its name after moving into a house in Lhasa at the corner of the Jokhang (<https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Surkhang>, accessed June 21, 2021). General Zurkhang Sichö Tseten came from a branch family (*zur du chad pas*) of the rulers of Guge (Travers 2020, 147-148). Another twentieth century aristocrat, Tendong

highlighting the importance of the *zurkhang* as a residence for people born into taxpayer households but who were not in line to inherit, this article builds on a series of studies exploring historical demographic and household processes in Kyidrong.<sup>4</sup>

This study is based on a household register titled “Earth-Dog Year [1958] Household Contract Being a Census [of Land and People] in the Nine Divisions of Kyidrong District” which was completed, witnessed, and sealed in early July 1958. It records the names of 2,845 individuals by village, household, name, age, and relationship within the household.<sup>5</sup> To make better sense of the enumerated families, in 1999 and 2000 the author interviewed as many people as possible who were listed therein. Although denied permission to conduct research in Kyidrong, interviewees were not hard to locate; a large proportion of the population was living in exile in Nepal and India.<sup>6</sup> Most interviewees, aided by the register, retained vivid recollections of their families as they were constituted in 1958, presumably because the document was compiled just before the political upheaval of 1959 that led to their flight into exile.

### The Research Setting

Prior to 1959 Kyidrong was a district-level administrative unit (*rdzong*) under Ganden Phodrang. Most of Kyidrong’s residents were classified as legally bound subjects (*mi ser*) who were divided into two broad categories. ‘Taxpayers’ (*khral pa*) held a formal land tenure document

---

Surpa (Bkras mthong Zur pa, a.k.a. Tesur), acquired his name after separating from the main Tendong family ([http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/biography\\_248.html](http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/biography_248.html), accessed June 21, 2021). Thus, among the aristocracy the appellation *zur* connoted a family member who split from their natal house, but unlike commoners in Kyidrong they were considered a separate and independent entity rather than an appendage to the original household. This was pointed out by Melvyn Goldstein, personal communication Nov. 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Schuh 1988; Childs 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008, 53-104, and 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *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 month and year (see Schuh 1973, 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). The government was not the only landlord in Kyidrong. Samtenling Monastery also had considerable landholdings and enumerated its taxpaying households in similar documents, two of which from 1939 and 1949 were published and analyzed by Schuh (1988).

<sup>6</sup> 198 former Kyidrong residents were interviewed for this project in McLeodganj, Forsythganj, and Pandoh in India, and Kathmandu, Shebrubensi, Bridim, Tanje, and Kanjim in Nepal.

referred to as a 'tax basis' (*khral rten*) granting them the heritable right to farm a specified amount of land. Taxpayers could lose that privilege by failing to fulfill tax obligations which included an annual grain payment and corvée labor.<sup>7</sup>

The land tenure system incentivized polyandrous marriage (*bza' gsum*) because taxpayer households could not easily divide their land. Kyidrong's residents, like in many Tibetan societies, preferred to allow multiple sons to remain together rather than favoring one and casting the others out to seek their own livelihoods.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, taxes 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. 'Small householders' (*dud chung ba*, literally, 'small smoke') did not hold a tax basis. They had few tax obligations yet lacked the economic security that comes with land tenure. Small householders generally worked for taxpayers in exchange for food and shelter, and almost always married monogamously.<sup>9</sup>

Through polyandry, taxpayers adhered to what Goldstein termed a 'monomartial norm', meaning one marriage within the household per generation.<sup>10</sup> Polyandry among Kyidrong's taxpayers created large, multi-generational households. A solution to preempt or manage inter-personal conflicts was to move certain individuals into a *zurkhang*. Often *zurkhang* residents were unmarried women who were numerous due in part to the polyandry-generated imbalance between potential brides and the households into which they could marry, but also because some women chose not to marry.<sup>11</sup> Residential options for such women were limited. While some became nuns, the more common solution was to move into a *zurkhang*. Other residents included elderly retirees and men who opted out of polyandrous marriages.

---

<sup>7</sup> Surkhang 1966, 1986; Goldstein 1971a; Dargyay 1982.

<sup>8</sup> That is what happened in the system of primogeniture among much of northern Europe's peasantry, which Das Gupta referred to as a 'lifeboat ethic', whereby "the social and economic position of the farming family was effectively maintained by removing or highly circumscribing the potential claims of other kin to support from the household" (1999, 174-175).

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein 1971b, 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Goldstein 1978, 209.

<sup>11</sup> Female relationship terms in the register clearly signaled a woman's marital status. Those identified as 'girl/daughter' (*bu mo*) had never married. Those listed as wife (*bza' zla*) or bride/wife (*mna' ma*) were currently married, while those categorized as woman (*dman*) had married at some point but in 1958 could have been currently married, divorced, or widowed.

Very few people are labelled as *zurkhang* residents in Kyidrong's household register. A 59-year-old individual is identified as a 'zurkhang dwelling man' (*zur sdod khyo*). As discussed below, he was the eldest brother in a polyandrous marriage who decided to move into a *zurkhang* with a partner of choice (see Household TD4 in Figure 10). A 61-year-old man is listed as a 'zurkhang [dwelling] delegate' ('thus zur). A grandchild of this man confirmed that he was one of the village delegates ('thus mi) who moved into a *zurkhang* with the original wife of he and his two brothers after she did not give birth to a male heir; the younger brothers occupied the main house with the younger second wife. Two women are separately listed as a 'zurkhang dwelling woman' (*zur sdod dman*). One, aged 71, was a member of a large, multigeneration household and appears to have been the sister of the main house's matriarch. The other, aged 45, may have been a religious practitioner because she is also identified as *mchod pa*. In the list of one village's small householders a 12-year-old boy is identified as a 'zurkhang dwelling son' (*zur sdod bu*). No information was obtained on his circumstances. Finally, a man is listed as a 'zurkhang dwelling small householder' (*zur sdod dud chung*). His circumstances are discussed below (see Household KR1 in Figure 11).

Because the register only identified six residents of *zurkhang*, it is clear that social divisions within the household were not important from the perspective of government enumerators. Nevertheless, people interviewed for this project revealed that adjunct houses were very common and allowed family members to hive off from the main house either willingly or by compulsion. They also explained that a *zurkhang* could be a separate room within the main house or a small, detached building. Thus, the term *zurkhang* connoted an independent but not necessarily physically separated dwelling. Kyidrong's residents distinguished an undivided from a divided household by referring to the former as 'one hearth' (*thab gcig*) and the latter as 'two hearth' (*thab gnyis*). The lexical distinction highlights the importance of commensality in describing households with residential sub-units.

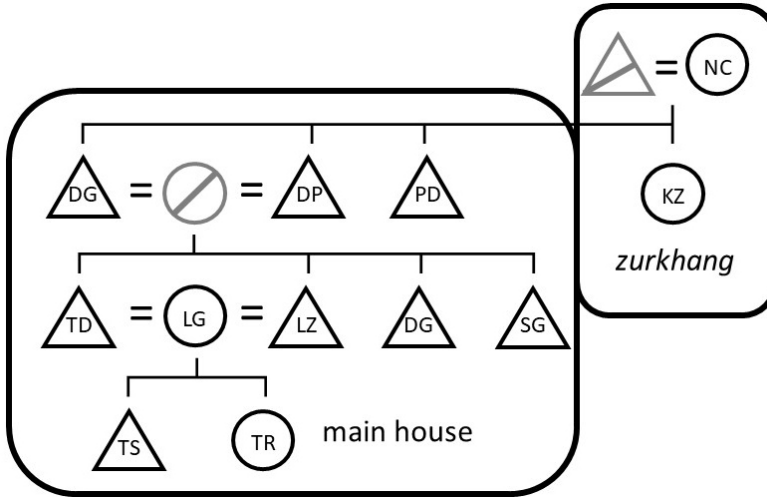
The following sections illustrate how *zurkhang* formed through different pathways: elderly people seeking a quiet setting for retirement and/or to avoid conflict with younger family members, unmarried daughters moving out of the main house when a bride arrives for her brother(s), divorced women returning to their natal households, and men leaving polyandrous unions to reside with partners of choice. The socioeconomic and demographic significance of adjunct houses is discussed in the final section.

### The Zurkhang as Retirement Abode

Many former Kyidrong residents expressed a strong sentiment that parents and adult children should co-reside, as encapsulated by one person's comment, "The parents' servants are their son and daughter-in-law" (*pha ma'i g.yog po bu dang mna' ma red*). Nevertheless, a son's marriage, the bequeathing of patrilineal inheritance (*pha gzhis*), and the subsequent populating of the home with small children could prompt the elderly to seek a quieter environment. In other cases, internal conflicts could provoke the move. As one former Kyidrong resident explained,

Some [parents of a married son] liked staying together, especially if the *nama* (*mna' ma*; bride/daughter-in-law) served them well. If the *nama* was good, they all remained together with one hearth until death. Sometimes parents preferred to live in the *zurkhang*, especially after children were born and the house become crowded. Such a house was referred to as *genzur* (*rgan zur*; 'zur[khang] for the elderly'). [In other cases], if the *nama* was not good, if she did not treat the parents well, then they moved to the *zurkhang*. The parents would take some of the implements and become a two hearth household. Some of the household's assets remained with the father and mother until they passed away. Afterwards they reverted to the main house.

Aging parents often co-resided in a *zurkhang* with a daughter. For example, all members of Household LP8 in Figure 1 were listed together in the register. The widower brothers DG and DP lived in the main house with their younger brother PD and four sons including two who were polyandrously married (TD and LZ). According to TD who was interviewed for this study, his grandmother NC was an elderly widow. Rather than residing within the crowded main house, she chose the relative quiet of the *zurkhang* where she was cared for by her own daughter KZ, who had married into another household but returned following a divorce.

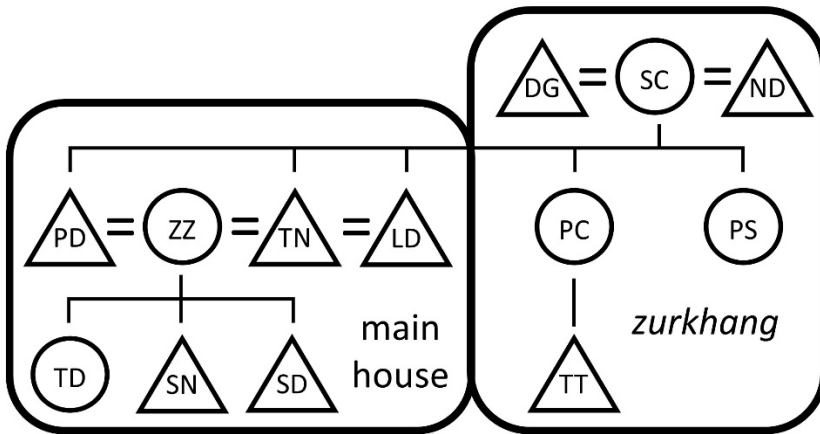
Figure 1: Household LP8<sup>12</sup>

In Household NY3 (Figure 2), the elderly brothers DG and ND lived in the *zurkhang* with their wife (SC), two unmarried daughters (PC and PS), and a granddaughter (TT) born out of wedlock to PC.<sup>13</sup> The parents moved into the *zurkhang* with their daughters after the *nama*, ZZ, arrived as a bride for their sons PD, TN, and LD. The daughters PC and PS were 42 and 37 years old and thus very unlikely to marry. Retaining daughters within the household so they could provide caretaking support for aging parents was common in Kyidrong. However, the child of an unmarried daughter (TT in the case below) was ineligible for inheritance and would be reclassified as a small householder when older. The preference for patrilineal inheritance meant that this household's rightful heirs were SN and SD.

<sup>12</sup> The figures use standard kinship symbols to indicate gender, marital status, and descent.  $\triangle$  is a male;  $\circ$  is a female; a line through either shape indicates the person is deceased. = signifies marriage;  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{---} \\ | \\ \text{---} \end{array} \right.$  signifies descent.

<sup>13</sup> The colloquial term for a child born out of wedlock in Kyidrong is *nyelu* (from *nyal bu*), except in the Lende Valley where the child is called *arken* (spelling uncertain). Interviewees did not hesitate to identify which people listed in the document were *nyelu* / *arken*.

Figure 2: Household NY3

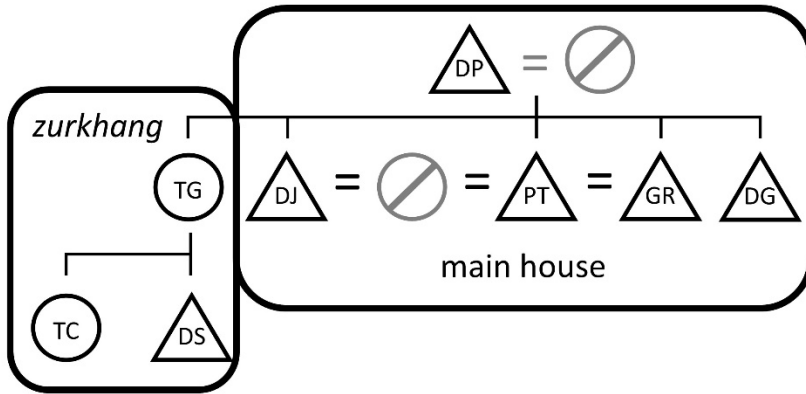


Households LP8 and NY3 illustrate that the retirement *zurkhang* (a.k.a. *genzur*) was a residence for the elderly and other members of the family, most commonly unmarried daughters and their children who, although ineligible to inherit, were valued for their social and economic contributions to the entire household including farm labor and care-taking for aging parents.

### Nonmarriage, Informal Marriage, and the Zurkhang

Women living in *zurkhang* were typically unmarried, divorced, or resided with men in long-term unions based on mutual affection. It was customary in Kyidrong for unmarried daughters to move into a *zurkhang* to preempt potential conflicts with their brothers' wife. For example, Household GL5 (Figure 3) was named Tresar (Khral gsar; New Taxpayer). The widower DP was a former small householder who was given the tax basis for this household after the previous holder failed to produce an heir (*mi rgyud ched*; the lineage was severed). TG, DP's eldest child, moved into the *zurkhang* with her two children born out of wedlock when a bride arrived for her brothers DJ, PT, and GR (the young *nama* died shortly before the register was compiled). Although DS (the illegitimate son of TG) was the only male of the next generation, he would not inherit the estate because his uncles, ranging in age from 31 to 16, were the rightful heirs who would no doubt remarry and pass the possessions to their children.

Figure 3: Household GL5



Some women lived in *zurkhang* because they refused to marry. For example, Household KZ46 in Figure 4 was one of the wealthiest in Kyidrong. Five brothers took one wife (PS) who gave birth to 12 children, but only three survived. KZ, a son and the eldest, was the designated heir. The second son was sent to nearby Samtenling Monastery<sup>14</sup> to be a monk and therefore was not listed in the register. The third child, YS, lived in the *zurkhang*. She had been sent to another household to marry a local leader, a man much older than her, but as YS explained,

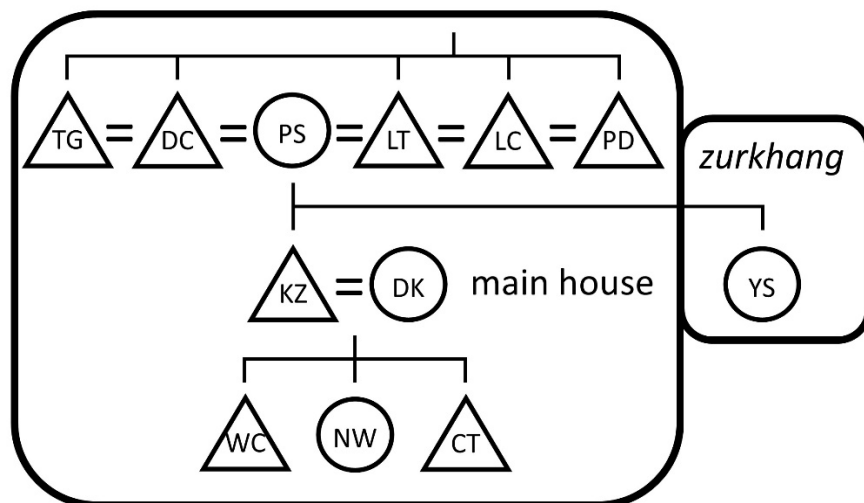
I was sent as a bride, but I came back home. My parents told me to go back to my husband, but I did not like him. I never stayed with him. He said he needed me, but I refused to go. They put me in the jail in the *dzong* and beat me. I was in the jail for a week, but I never married him, and I never gave birth to any children.

YS was permitted to occupy a *zurkhang* in her natal household, giving her a viable residential option for life outside of marriage.

<sup>14</sup> Samtenling Monestary (bKra shis bsam gtan gling) was founded in 1756 by Yeshe Gyaltzen, a tutor of the Eight Dalai Lama. See Smith 1969 and Schuh 1988, 17- 29.



Figure 4: Household KZ46

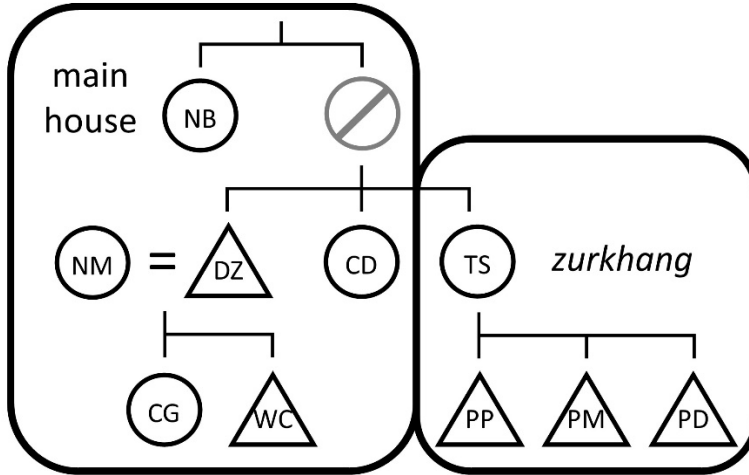


*Zurkhang* dwelling women who were involved in unions usually partnered with small householders or men who split from polyandrous marriages. Pairings that stemmed from mutual affection were referred to as 'meeting of the mouths' (*kha thugs*) to distinguish them from formal marriages (*chang sa*) that were arranged by kin and involved ceremonies and the exchange of goods to recognize the movement of a bride from her natal to her marital family. Unions based on mutual affection were rarely documented in the household register. In some cases, this is because the partners did not co-reside. For example, the senior generation in Household KZ12 (Figure 5) consisted of two sisters who inherited their parents' household because they had no brothers. Neither married, but the deceased younger sister had three children: DZ, a son and designated heir, a daughter CD who had left in marriage but returned after getting divorced, and a daughter TS who lived in the *zurkhang* with her three sons. According to PP, the eldest of TS's sons,

My father had come to Kyidrong as a servant (*g.yog po*) of the District Commissioner (*rdzong dpon*). He stayed with the District Commissioner for three years, then left. He and my mother liked each other and had three kids. We stayed in a small house owned by DZ, it was a *zurkhang*. It was not appropriate for my mother to remain in the

house after DZ's wife arrived, so we lived separately. But we were very close, we helped each other.

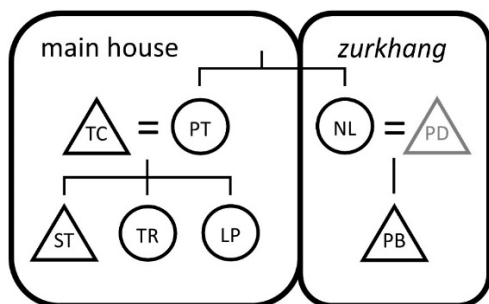
**Figure 5: Household KZ12**



PP confirmed that neither he nor his brothers PM and PD were eligible to inherit the household's assets because WC, son of the household head DZ, was the rightful heir.

In the case of informal unions co-residence was usually not indicated in the household register because people were listed according to the households in which they belonged for taxation purposes. Thus, a woman and her children living in an adjunct house were enumerated in her parents' household (or her brothers' if her parents were deceased) while her male partner was enumerated in his natal household. Information on informal unions came to light primarily through the interviews. For example, in Household GR22 (Figure 6), the sisters PT and NL did not have any brothers, so they inherited their parents' estate. According to a former resident, the elder sister PT married TC, a *magpa* (*mag pa*; matrilocally-resident husband). The younger sister NL stayed in the *zurkhang* with her partner, PD, who was a subject of Samtenling Monastery. He was listed in Samtenling's register but not in the register of government taxpayers. Only one of the sons in the youngest generation, ST, was eligible to inherit because he was a child of the formally married sister (PT) and *magpa* (TC) living in the main house.

Figure 6: Household GR22



Had PD been formally married to NL, a ‘human exchange’ (*mi brjes*) would need to be executed which involved a legal document to formalize the exchange of individuals between Samtenling Monastery (*chos gzhis*; a religious estate) and Kyidrong District (*gzhung gzhis*; a government estate). In 1939 PD was listed in Samtenling’s register as a 15-year-old man living with two elder brothers in their 30s, their common wife, and two young children. In 1949 he was listed as living only with his considerably older wife and five children. PD’s two elder brothers had died in the meantime.<sup>15</sup> It seems reasonable to speculate that, with NL, PD was seeking a relationship with a woman closer in age than his wife, something denied to him as the youngest brother in a polyandrous marriage.

### *Zurkhang* for Divorced Women

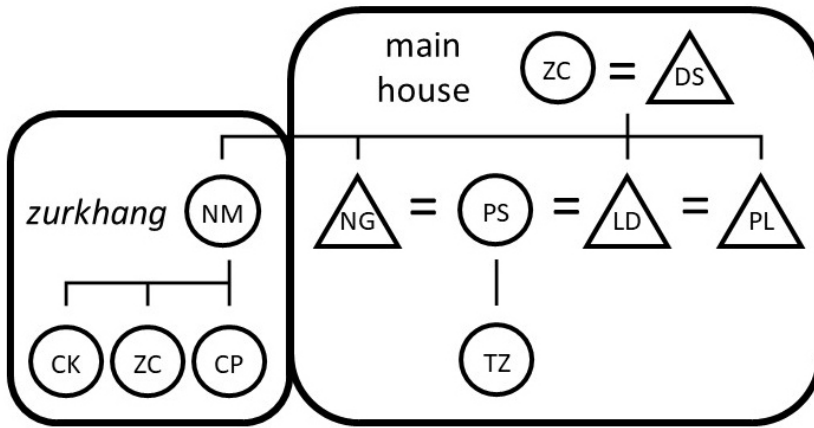
Two of the above households included a divorced woman living in a *zurkhang* attached to her natal household (LP8 in Figure 1 and KZ12 in Figure 5).<sup>16</sup> These were by no means the only cases. For example, in

<sup>15</sup> See Schuh 1988 for examples of human exchange documents from Kyidrong, and for the 1939 and 1949 Samtenling registers that list PD alongside his other household members.

<sup>16</sup> Not much has been written about divorce in Tibetan societies. Aziz comments that divorce in Tingri was common, and that it was most likely to occur in the early stage of a marriage before children were born and in a later stage when the roles of brothers in a polyandrous union changed (1978, 80-85). Levine (1987) found it to be quite common in some Tibetan communities of western Nepal where, by age 30, roughly 20% of women had experienced a divorce or partitioning of a polyandrous household. Du and Mace (2019) identified a variety of factors that influence marital longevity among Amdo pastoralists, including the payment of dowry and bridewealth and the presence of children. Tenzin (2008) cites statistics from contemporary Tibet Autonomous Region to show urban-rural differentials in divorce

Household GL2 (Figure 7), NM was the daughter of ZC and DS and the elder sister of the polyandrously married brothers NG, LD, and PL. NM had married into another household but returned after a divorce and lived in the *zurkhang* with her three daughters. Following a divorce, it was customary for sons to remain with their father because they were potential heirs. Daughters (in this case CK, ZC, and CP) stood to inherit nothing from their father and thus went with their mother.

Figure 7: Household GL2



In the main house of Household GP14 (Figure 8) the aging couple GY and SG lived with their two sons ZG and TB, the *nama* PG, and three granddaughters. SG was GY's second wife; the first died after bearing two daughters. The elder daughter passed away before 1958 leaving a daughter born out of wedlock (PM). According to former *zurkhang* resident TK,

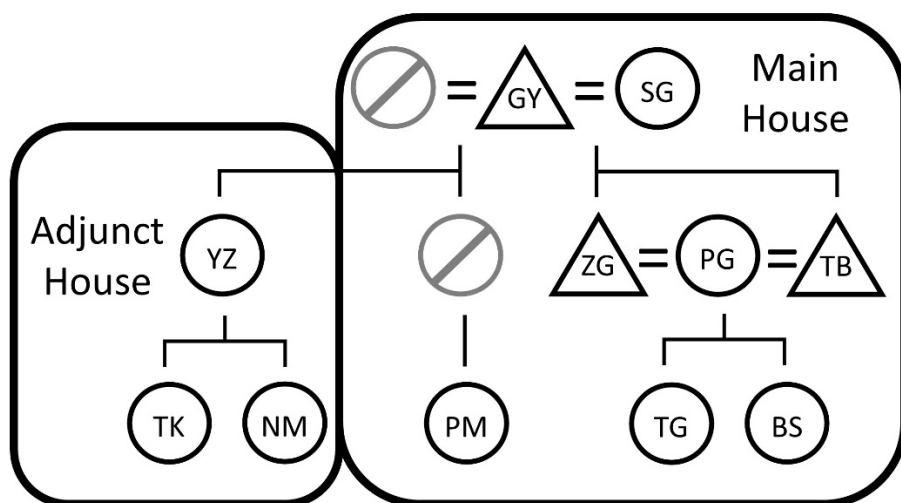
PM was a girl in our house. Her mother died when she was young. Her father was a lama who came to do rituals at our house, and then PM was born a *nyelu*. Because she was born out of wedlock, the father did not take responsibility for her. So, when PM's mother died, she remained within our household, not in the *zurkhang* but within the main house.

---

rates. Only Aziz's study pertains to pre-1959 Tibetan societies so it remains difficult to determine the past frequency of divorce.

YZ, the other daughter of GY's first wife, had originally married into another household but returned to live in the *zurkhang* after divorce. As per custom, she brought her daughters TK and NM with her. In 1958 the brothers ZG and TB were 34- and 26-years-old, and their wife PG was 30. If a son was subsequently born to them, he would be the household heir. If not, one of their daughters (TG or BS) could be the successor and marry a *magpa*. The other girls in the household (TK, NM, and PM) were ineligible to inherit.

Figure 8: Household GP14



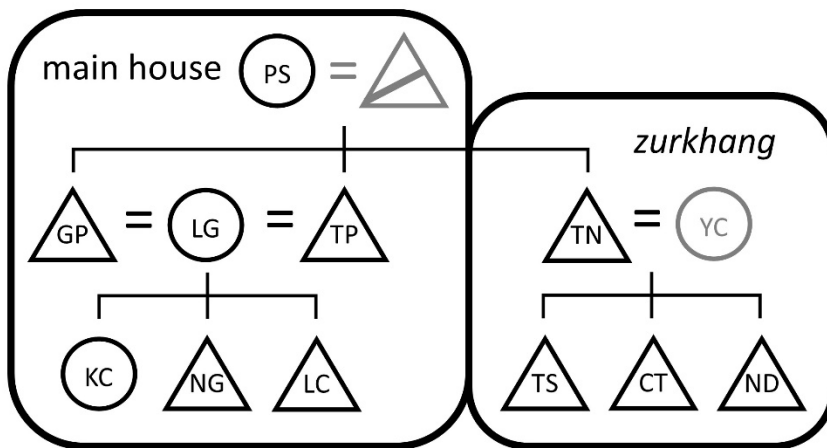
### *Zurkhang* to Escape Polyandry

Polyandrous marriages were difficult to maintain.<sup>17</sup> A former Kyidrong resident explained, “If you are not compatible with the *nama* and take your own wife, then you move out to the *zurkhang*. You are referred to as a *zurpa*.” Yet when a man split from his marriage and resided in an adjunct house, he was still counted as a member of the main house for taxation purposes and listed as such in the register. Once again, the interviews were crucial for detecting such divisions. For example, everyone in Household GP21 (Figure 9) is enumerated under one entry; the document provides no evidence that an adjunct house existed. According to LC and TS who were both interviewed for

<sup>17</sup> See Levine and Silk 1997; Haddix 2001; Fjeld 2008.

this project, 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 a *zurkhang* with YC, a woman he fell in love with. Although TN and YC lived together, the household register listed YC as a daughter (*bu mo*) in her natal household.<sup>18</sup> Despite the split, the brothers continued working together and were considered a single unit for taxation purposes. But from the perspective of inheritance and household continuity, only NG and LC were considered the rightful heirs. By moving into the *zurkhang* with a partner of choice, TN relinquished inheritance rights for his three sons.

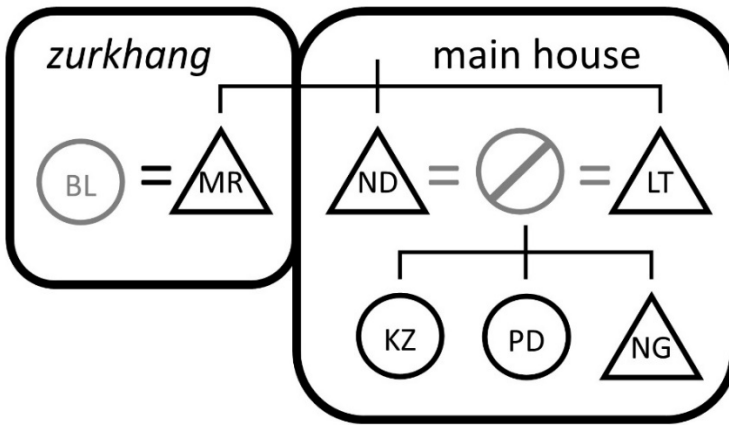
Figure 9: Household GP21



Household TD4 in Figure 10 contains a rare example of a person who is identified in the register as a *zurkhang* resident. Three brothers originally married one wife but the eldest, MR, decided to live separately with a partner of his choice, BL. She is listed in the register with her natal family. A note in the document describes MR as a 'zurkhang dwelling man' (*zur sdod khyo*). NG was the future heir to this household. MR and BL never had any children.

<sup>18</sup> YC was also listed alongside two more of her children (a son and daughter) who were also fathered by TN. It is unclear why three of her children were enumerated as residents of GP21 and two as residents of her natal household. Perhaps it had something to do with labor needs of the respective households.

Figure 10: Household TD4

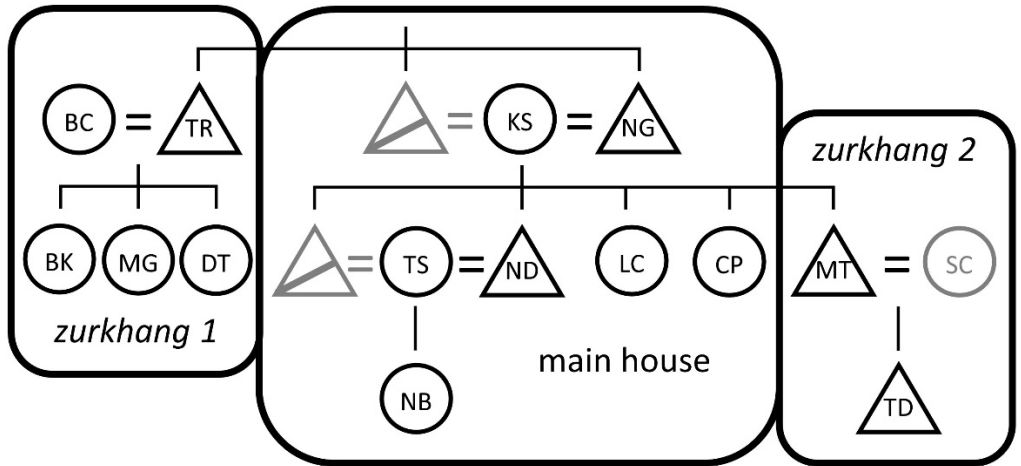


In Household KR1 (Figure 11), residents of the main house and *zurkhang* 2 are listed together in the register. NG and his elder brother (deceased prior to 1958) married KS. They had three sons who married polyandrously with TS (the eldest died prior to 1958). The middle son ND remained in the main house while the youngest, MT, moved into a *zurkhang* with SC, a woman he fell in love with. MT confirmed in an interview that he lived with SC, nevertheless in the register she was listed in her natal household. MT also confirmed that, by moving into the *zurkhang* with a partner of choice, he relinquished any claim on the inheritance. The successor would be any son(s) born to ND and TS, or their daughter NB if no sons were born.

At the end of this village's entry in the register, TR is identified as, "brother of the taxpayer NG, a *zur*-dwelling small householder."<sup>19</sup> TR is enumerated alongside the other small householders in the village, and together with BC who is identified as his wife (*bza' zla*) and three girls who are identified as their daughters (*bu mo*). They occupied *zurkhang* 1 in Figure 11. Household KR1 spawned *zurkhang* in successive generations. Residents of the older adjunct house had already been reclassified as small householders, the same status residents of *zurkhang* 2 would be relegated to in the future.

<sup>19</sup> *khral khongs NG gyi spun zur sdod dud chung chag/*

Figure 11: Household KR1



### Socioeconomic and Demographic Significance of the *Zurkhang*

The examples above illustrate that the *zurkhang* in Kyidrong was an abode for elderly retirees, women who were unable or unwilling to marry into taxpayer households, divorced women, and men who were discontent with their polyandrous marriages. The movement of individuals into an adjunct house helped prevent the main house from becoming overcrowded or perhaps unruly due to interpersonal conflicts and did so without diminishing a robust labor force comprised of numerous adults and children. Whether this family management strategy was unique to Kyidrong or existed elsewhere remains to be determined. In a study of pre-1959 villages in Gyantse District Goldstein did not uncover such a practice, whereas Dargyay reports in a study of other villages in the same district that when a *nama* arrived to marry her brothers an unmarried woman could move into a small house constructed specifically for her. Aziz mentions the presence of unmarried women and their children in the households of their married brothers in Tingri but does not provide details on their living arrangements.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the closest parallel is the 'big house, little house' (*khang chen khang chung*) of Ladakh, Zangskar, and Spiti, a system in which parents

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication with Melvyn Goldstein, November 2021. Dargyay 1982, Aziz 1978.



pass the head of household position to their son(s) and then move into a separate abode (the *khang chung*) with unmarried children.<sup>21</sup> More research across Tibetan societies is needed to better understand the range of strategies families relied on to manage large households.

To gauge the demographic importance of Kyidrong's adjunct houses, consider that the average size of the eleven households analyzed above was 10.4 individuals. The main house had an average of 7.1 residents while the *zurkhang* had an average of 3.3 residents. The main house had a ratio of 1.4 men per woman whereas the *zurkhang* had the inverse ratio of 1.4 women per man. Although this small sample is not representative of all households, the data does suggest that a significant percentage of Kyidrong's population inhabited *zurkhang*, and that the adults were disproportionately women.

Although the exact number of Kyidrong's adjunct houses is unknown because information through interviews could not be obtained on all households, it is possible to estimate prevalence. A study of households with one or more elderly residents found that 43% (66 out of 153) had a *zurkhang*.<sup>22</sup> Those with a *zurkhang* had an average of 10.3 residents while those that did not had an average of 6.0 residents which suggests, not surprisingly, a correlation between household size and the presence of an adjunct house. Because households with elderly residents were on average larger than other households (8.1 vs 5.8 residents), it is reasonable to assume that those lacking elderly members were less likely to have a *zurkhang*. If they were half as likely, then about 30% (112 out of 369) of all taxpayer households in Kyidrong would have had an adjunct house. If they were one quarter as likely, then about 24% (89 out of 369) of all households would have had an adjunct house. These estimates, albeit imperfect, suggest that *zurkhang* were quite common.

A further demographic consideration is the childbearing contribution of women living in *zurkhang*. Women who formally married into taxpayer households gave birth on average to 6.2 children. However, the overall fertility rate was tempered by Kyidrong's high frequency of informal marriage and nonmarriage: roughly half of all women aged 20-49 were not formally married into taxpayer households.<sup>23</sup> The

---

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Dollfus 1989; Attenborough 1994; Elford 1994; and Jahoda 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Childs 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Childs 2003, 2008, 81-83. A high frequency of female nonmarriage in Tibetan polyandrous societies was common. Goldstein reports that 31% of women were unmarried in Limi (1976), and Schuler found the incidence of nonmarriage to be 44% of women aged 20 and above in Chumik (1987).

average of 2.2 births among unmarried and informally married woman, many of whom lived in *zurkhang*, moderated the aggregate total fertility rate to 4.4 births per woman which was sufficient to sustain a modest population growth rate of 0.5% per annum.<sup>24</sup> Had the residents of Kyidrong not been relatively permissive toward informal unions and out of wedlock childbearing – phenomena facilitated by the *zurkhang* – the population may well have stagnated or declined which could have generated pervasive labor shortages.

It is not just the scale of childbearing that matters; the rights and social status of individuals living in or born into the adjunct house must also be considered. *Zurkhang* residents of reproductive age were either ineligible to inherit (unmarried daughters and divorced women who returned home) or had voluntarily relinquished any claim on heritable assets for themselves and their progeny (men who left polyandrous unions). The link between house of residence, parentage, and rights to inheritance is clear from a lexical distinction. 'Insider children' (*nang gi phru gu*) referred to those born to parents in the main house, whereas 'outsider children' (*phyi'i phru gu*) were those born to unmarried or divorced women, and to men who opted out of polyandry. Outsider children usually lived in *zurkhang* and were in many respects appendages to taxpayer households. Their labor was compensated with food and shelter, but they would eventually be consigned to small householder status because they held no claim to heritable assets.<sup>25</sup> As one person explained, "In our village many women were sent as brides to other households. Others just had children [out of wedlock] who became small householders." Another commented, "Many women did not marry; they were spinsters (*mo hrang*). Most spinsters would give birth to one or two children, not many. Their children were considered small householders because they were *nyelu* (born out of wedlock) and did not have [socially recognized] fathers. They did not inherit." Inheritance preferences therefore created a situation in which

---

<sup>24</sup> The population growth estimate was achieved by comparing fertility parameters of Kyidrong's population with those found in stable population models. For the full demographic methodology and analysis see Childs 2003 and 2008, 83-84. This finding confirmed Goldstein's finding (1976, 1981) that a modicum of nonmarital fertility was essential for preventing population decline in Tibetan polyandrous societies.

<sup>25</sup> In Tingri, Aziz found cases where the illegitimate son of a man's sister married polyandrously with his cousins or could be the first option for adoption as the household heir if his maternal uncle failed to have a son (1978, 126). No such cases were uncovered in Kyidrong although there are no specific rules that would preclude such practices.

*zurkhang* residents played a role in sustaining a specific segment of Kyidrong's population, namely, small householders.

Kyidrong's taxpayer households often relied on the labor of small householders to fulfill tax obligations so they could retain their status and privileges. As Schuler noted in a study of nonmarriage in Chumik, Nepal, "Single adults are part of a sizeable population that the system defines as economically and socially peripheral, limiting their access to property and to social status, and by extension to marriage and reproduction. It is the peripheral people, the unentitled and unmarried, who provide cheap labor for the entitled."<sup>26</sup> Extending this observation to Kyidrong, the work capacity of *zurkhang* residents along with their ineligibility to inherit must have played a significant role in allowing taxpayer households to remain relatively affluent from one generation to the next. In other words, the peripheral status of *zurkhang* residents should not overshadow their role in helping maintain, through reproduction, the pre-1959 social order of Tibet.

### References

- Attenborough, Robert. 1994. "The Population of sTongde, Zangskar." In *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*, edited by J. Crook and H. Osma-ton, 295-330. Bristol: University of Bristol.
- Aziz, Barbara. 1978. *Tibetan Frontier Families*. New Delhi: Vikas.
- Bischoff, Jeannine and Saul Mullard, eds. 2017. *Social Regulation: Case Studies from Tibetan History*. Leiden: Brill.
- Childs, Geoff. 2003. "Polyandry and Population Growth in a Historical Tibetan Society." *The History of the Family* 8(3): 423-444.
- Childs, Geoff. 2004. "Demographic Analysis of Small Populations Using the Own-Children Method." *Field Methods* 16(4): 379-395.
- Childs, Geoff. 2006. "Namas (*mna' ma*) and Nyelus (*nyal bu*): Marriage, Fertility, and Illegitimacy in Tibetan Societies." In *Tibetan Borderlands*, edited by P. Christiaan Klieger, 89-113. Leiden: Brill.
- Childs, Geoff. 2008. *Tibetan Transitions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Fertility, Family Planning, and Demographic Change*. Leiden: Brill.
- Childs, Geoff. 2021. "The Tibetan Stem Family in Historical Perspective." *The History of the Family* 26(3): 482-505.
- Childs, Geoff, Melvyn C. Goldstein, and Puchung Wangdui. 2011. "Externally-resident Daughters, Social Capital, and Support for the

---

<sup>26</sup> Schuler 1987, 59.

- Elderly in Rural Tibet." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 26(1): 1-22.
- Dargyay, Eva. 1982. *Tibetan Village Communities: Structure and Change*. New Delhi: Vikas.
- Das Gupta, Monica. 1999. "Lifeboat Versus Corporate Ethic: Social and Demographic Implications of Stem and Joint Families." *Social Science and Medicine* 49(2): 173–184.
- Diemberger, Hildegard. 2021. "Gender, Kinship and Relatedness in Fifteenth-century Tibet: The Biography of Chokyi Dronma (1422–1455) through Anthropological Eyes." *History and Anthropology* 32(2): 211-230.
- Dollfus, Pascale. 1989. *Lieu de neige et de génévriers: organisation sociale et religieuse des communautés bouddhistes du Ladakh*. Paris: CNRS.
- Du, Juan, and Ruth Mace. 2019. "Marriage Stability in a Pastoralist Society." *Behavioral Ecology* 30(6): 1567–1574.
- Elford, John. 1994. "Kumik: A Demographic Profile." In *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*, edited by J. Crook and H. Osmaston, 331-360. Bristol: University of Bristol.
- Fjeld, Heidi. 2008. "When Brothers Separate: Conflict and Mediation within Polyandrous Houses in Central Tibet." In *Conflict and Social Order in Tibet and Inner Asia*, edited by F. Pirie and T. Huber, 241-261. Leiden: Brill.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1971a. "Taxation and the Structure of a Tibetan Village." *Central Asiatic Journal* 15(1): 1–27.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1971b. "Stratification, Polyandry, and Family Structure in Central Tibet." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 27(1): 64–74.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1976. "Fraternal Polyandry and Fertility in a High Himalayan Valley in N.W. Nepal." *Human Ecology* 4(3): 223–233.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1978. "Adjudication and Partition in the Tibetan Stem Family." In *Chinese Family Law and Social Change in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, edited by D. Buxbaum, 205–214. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1981. "New Perspectives on Tibetan Fertility and Population Decline." *American Ethnologist* 8(4): 721–738.
- Haddix, Kimber. 2001. "Leaving Your Wife and Your Brothers: When Polyandrous Marriages Fall Apart." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 22: 47-60.

- Jahoda, Christian. 2015. *Socio-economic Organisation in a Border Area of Tibetan Culture: Tabo, Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India*. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
- Levine, Nancy E. 1987. "Fathers and Sons: Kinship Value and Validation in Tibetan Polyandry." *Man* 22(2): 267-286.
- Levine, Nancy E. and Joan Silk. 1997. "Why Polyandry Fails: Sources of Instability in Polyandrous Marriages." *Current Anthropology* 38(3): 375-398.
- Ramble, Charles, Peter Schwieger, and Alice Travers, eds. 2013. *Tibetans who Escaped the Historian's Net: Studies in the Social History of Tibetan Societies*. Kathmandu: Vajra.
- Schuh, Dieter. 1973. *Untersuchungen zur geschichte der Tibetischen kalenderrechnung*. Weisbaden: F. Steiner.
- Schuh, Dieter. 1988. *Das archiv des klosters bKra-shis-bsam-gtan-gling von sKyid-grong*. VGH Wissenschaftsverlag.
- Schuler, Sidney R. 1987. *The Other Side of Polyandry*. Boulder: Westview.
- Smith, E. Gene. 1969. Introduction. In *Biography of Tshe-gling Yongs-'dzin Ye-shes-rgyal-mchan by Dalai Lama VIII*, edited and reproduced by Ngawang Gelek Demo. New Delhi.
- Surkhang, Wangchen Gelek. 1966. "Tax Measurement and lag 'don Tax." *Bulletin of Tibetology* 3(1): 15-28.
- Surkhang, Wangchen Gelek. 1986. "Government, Monastic, and Private Taxation in Tibet." *Tibet Journal* 11(1): 31-39.
- Tenzin. 2008. "Marriage Customs in Central Tibet." Unpublished Master of Philosophy Thesis, University of Oslo.
- Thargyal, Rinzin. 2007. *Nomads of Eastern Tibet: Social Organization and Economy of a Pastoral Estate in the Kingdom of Dege*. Leiden: Brill.
- Travers, Alice. 2020. "Meritocracy in the Tibetan Army after the 1793 Manchu Reforms: The Career of General Zurkhang Sichö Tseten." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 53: 147-177.

