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Levine, Nancy E

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Practical Kinship

The Centrality of Siblings in Pastoralist Life

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Nancy E. Levine
University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA
nelevine@anthro.ucla.edu

Abstract

This paper assesses enduring values and on-going changes in kin relationships among eastern Tibetan pastoralists. A key finding is the importance of sibling ties, an aspect of kinship life that was overshadowed by earlier historical and anthropological concerns with clans and tribes. The paper begins by reviewing accounts drawn from premodern times, the problematic terms in which these accounts were couched and some of the presuppositions guiding the authors. Next, it discusses government reforms implemented in pastoralist regions beginning in the 1950s and how these reforms have affected personal life and livelihoods. It then considers how long-standing expectations for kin concerning residence and inheritance have combined with new circumstances to create novel household forms and patterns of mutual aid. Brothers and sisters have facilitated adaptations to these new opportunities by providing chains of assistance across the rural–urban divide. Finally, the paper illustrates how focusing on kinship at a personal and practical level can contribute to our understanding of social change.

Keywords

Tibetan societies – pastoralism – kinship and descent – siblingship – urbanisation and social change

1 Introduction

Studying kinship among eastern Tibetan pastoralists in China requires navigating a literature of piecemeal and contradictory accounts, which were composed during different time periods and drawn from different local groups.

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These disparities have contributed to a number of unresolved questions. The character of clanship is one example: were clans ubiquitous and did clan affiliation affect political allegiances in past times? Other questions concern women's rights to property after marriage and expectations guiding sibling relationships in past and present times. Finding such differences is hardly surprising. Successive government reforms, increasing exposure to the national culture and incorporation in global markets have contributed changes in how pastoralists manage inheritance and organise their families. Another factor is regional variation. Then there is the fact that writers, particularly those from different eras, were guided by singular theoretical frameworks that shaped what they discerned and described. As this paper will show, all these factors have contributed to distinctive emphases in ethnographic reportage and portrayals of values, expectations, and kinship practices among pastoralists. Not surprisingly, the earliest reports seem most removed from more recent descriptions, which can be attributed to any and all of the factors cited above. The earliest work describes premodern lifeways, lumps together observations about separate populations and depends on categories of analysis and forms of argument that have now been abandoned in the social sciences. Flawed as they may be, the early reports are important in offering a glimpse into the past; they have also continued to have an impact on how we understand the cultural logics and practices of kinship in the present, and I will consider them here.

Our understandings of pastoralist kinship are, moreover, influenced by the languages in which they were composed. Anthropological studies in European languages are built on particular analytical vocabularies that reflect culturally embedded categorisational schemes. Such vocabularies are useful in abstraction and generalisation, but they can also obscure as much as clarify the subjects they are meant to address. Key constructs of this kind also have deep roots in the histories of their fields of scholarship. In anthropology, which is the classic locus of kinship studies, many of the terms reflected assumptions about stages of development in kinship institutions, a mode of thinking about the past which also has been influential in other fields. This fact has shaped the ways in which theorists perceive other kinship worlds and explain them.

For these reasons, I will begin this paper with a critical look at the language that has been used for studying kinship and some of the problems that have arisen in applying that language to Tibetan pastoralist societies. I will then turn to a set of linked assumptions about pastoralist kinship that was influenced by earlier theories, social evolutionism, structural-functionalism and male-focused imaginings of societies in particular. This model highlights tribal organisation and a patrifocal ethos foregrounding patrilineal descent, patrilocal postmarital residence and father–son inheritance. The first two dimensions

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of the model – the putative existence of tribes and clan reckoning – have been the subject of debate among those who study contemporary pastoralist societies, although they seem to be accepted as having existed in the distant past. The third and fourth dimensions – preferred patrilocality and male inheritance – stand, as I will show, on shaky ground. In the next section of the paper, I will provide a brief summary of the past half-century of changes experienced by pastoralist populations in Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces and how those changes have altered social life. Then I will introduce findings from my own research in several pastoralist regions in this area, highlighting the critical roles played by women in their families, the adaptations that families have been making to changing circumstances, and how ties between brothers and sisters have been critical to these adaptations.[1] At this point, I will consider which of these practices map onto long-standing traditions and which seem to be responses to the unprecedented circumstances of the present day. I will then turn to the literature on farming populations and document how sibling relationships play a critical role there too. In conclusion, I will consider how a focus on everyday life and practical expressions of kinship obligations, as in sibling relationships, make sense of some of the long-standing puzzles in the understanding of Tibetan society.

2 Social Evolutionary Models and the Language of Kinship

2.1 *The Trouble with Tribes*

The conventional assumption has been that traditional pastoralists living in Kham and Amdo, particularly those living outside the effective control of monastic and secular principalities, displayed a tribal mode of political organisation. These assumptions are evident in the early travelogues and scholarly treatises such as those compiled by the diplomat William Rockhill (1891), the missionary and protean scholar Mattias Hermanns (1949; 1953) and the missionary-turned-anthropologist Robert Ekvall (1964; 1968). These writers described geographically delimited groups, whose memberships occupied a contiguous territory, maintained a commitment to action on behalf of the collective and were ruled by hereditary leaders. Ekvall (1968: 29) authoritatively states, 'the tribe is historically the basic political organisation of the nomadic

1 My studies of eastern Tibetan pastoralist populations have been conducted in a number of provinces and prefectures, including Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province (2014), Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province (1997 and 2015) and Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province (1994, 2001 and 2015).

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pastoralists … Pridefully it has its own name, identity, and a strong sense of its rights, maintained both by force and by evasive mobility.' Rockhill (1891) speaks of tribes in his listing of named groups of pastoralists whom he encountered or heard about on his travels and also of tribal chiefs whom he also describes with the term *sde pa*.[2]

Anthropologists have relied on these early accounts for evidence on traditional culture and to trace continuities into the present day. Pirie (2005a; 2005b: 1), for one, argues that Amdo pastoralists in past were guided by tribal loyalties, had recourse to feuding and displayed defiance toward authority, and that these ideas have continued to influence how they negotiate authority in the contemporary period. Other scholars, however, question whether the notion of tribes rightfully can be applied to eastern Tibetan pastoralist populations. One reason for doubt is that, as Rinzin Thargyal (2007: 185) notes, group memberships were fluid and heterogeneous. Anthropologists now question the utility of the concept of tribe because of its imprecision, for its usage in colonial discourse, and because it labels a society as socially primitive (Sneath 2016). This may be why translators of Naktsang Nulo's *My Tibetan Childhood* (2014) reject this term. As they put it, tribe has 'associations of prehistoric simplicity wholly inappropriate for the highly sophisticated and literate society of nomadic Amdo' (2014: liii).[3] Nor has any term come to take its place; given the diverse experiences and political histories of eastern Tibetan societies, no single term would seem to suffice.

2.2 *The Cachet of the Clan*

A core concept in Tibetan kinship is *rus*, which literally means 'bone'. This is a term so widespread and of such antiquity that its significance is unquestionable. It references biophysical constituents of the person, which are thought to be passed down successive generations from father to child. The term also refers to the named collectivities that are conventionally described as clans and that figure prominently in Tibetan origin myths, ancient chronicles and oral epics (de Filippi 1932: 192; Kapstein 2006: 34–5; Levine 1981a). While these

2 Tibetan terms used in this paper are given in their classical spellings, following the Wylie (1959) system of transliteration.

3 The translators use the term clan for larger social groupings, 'sept' for families with a shared name, and chiefdom for the association of clans under high chiefs (Nulo 2014: liii, 15). The usage of sept is an obscure footnote in anthropological history. Franz Boas (1920: 114–15) applied it to what he deemed subtribes of Pacific Northwest Coast 'Kwakiutl' peoples, who later were reanalysed by Lévi-Strauss as exemplifying a house society. The term has the dictionary definition of 'a branch of a family, especially clan', but it has now passed from common usage in anthropology.

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sources stipulate *rus* being passed down through men and the relative ranking of clans, little is known about the social and political obligations that clan membership historically entailed (Samuels 2016; Stein 1961: 3). The early Tibetan chronicles also suggest the importance of sibling ties, which Róna-Tas (1955: 260) conceptualises as embedded within clans.[4] Róna-Tas additionally infers an earlier matrilineal stage of kinship reckoning (1955: 266 n41; see also Lévi-Strauss 1969: 372).[5] This is a pervasive idea in Tibetan kinship studies, as the following discussion will show. To an anthropologist, however, matrilineal descent seems unlikely on the high plateau, because the productive systems practised there do not favour the tracing of descent and transmission of household resources through women.[6]

For today's eastern pastoralists – at least for some of them – clanship conveys a dimension of personal reputation, and there is a sense of distinction associated with being a member of a prominent, well-regarded clan (Levine 2015). For past times, patrilineal ancestry served as a call to common action. Gelek (1998: 52) writes, 'Externally the clan was effective because it enabled local lineage segments to call on ever-increasing support when faced with disputes over use of the grassland.' Gelek (2002: 10–11) also writes that members of the leading clan who live in different encampments provide 'a point of unity in tribal structure'. This statement can be compared to and may have been influenced by Evans-Pritchard's model of dominant clans among Nuer pastoralists of southern Sudan 'forming a framework on which the political system of the tribe is built up … into an organization of related parts' (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 212) and providing the basis for a segmentary system in which clanship coordinates political mobilisation (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940: 6).

4 Róna-Tas (1955) wavers between translating the terms *pu-nu* (or *phu-nu*) and *pha-spun* as referring to broader kin relations or paternal clans, and differences of opinion continue on this issue. Karmay (1995) stresses the former interpretation for understanding the Gesar epic. Stein (1972: 95) suggests an exogamous clan that 'widens to an association of friends or companions who become "sworn brothers" through an oath'. Scholars also have debated whether *pha-spun* in Buddhist Ladakh references descent or relationships of mutual aid between neighbouring households. Kaplanian (2008) argues for the former and Srinivas (1993) for the latter, while Jahoda (2015: 176–8) suggests that *pha-spun* were based historically on patrilineal descent and were linked as well by common residence but that, over time, the significance of descent waned for the commoners.

5 Róna-Tas (1955: 258 n29) bases this conclusion on the following logic: 'originally *spun* had denoted the clan on the maternal side as against *phu-nu*, and when the paternal clan system had arisen it become [sic] necessary to add the prefix *pha* to discriminate the paternal clan from the former maternal line'.

6 A number of studies point to positive associations between matrilineal descent and extensive agriculture conducted with hand tools, and negative associations between matrilineal descent and large domestic animal keeping (Holden & Mace 2003; Surowiec *et al.* 2019).

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The significance of clanship for alliances forged between groups is, however, a point of debate. Other writers on eastern Tibetan pastoralist societies argue that the key to understanding politically motivated linkages was residence on contiguous grazing lands. Xing Haining (1994) describes nesting segments based on rights to territory in Golok. In her view, the most inclusive level, *khag*, references ancestral origins. She describes subsidiary groups known as *tsho-ba* and *tshang*.[7] *Shog-ka*, *sde-ba* and *skor*, in Xing's typology, describe the third level, and *ru-skor* describes the residential encampment. Pirie (2005b: 3, 12, 18) speaks of a segmentary tribal system in Maqu County in southern Gansu and of the expectation that tribal groups would combine in response to disputes, although 'not based on a lineage model'. In reality, she notes, it was sometimes difficult to bring people together because of frequent migration and the lack of long-standing ties between group members or shared kinship to unite them.

Thus, although segmentary patterns of tiered mobilisation may have characterised how groups responded to external threats, it is unclear whether propinquity or common ancestry provided the stronger rationale for providing mutual aid. In any case, it would be difficult to tease out the rationale in particular instances, since people living near to one another were likely to be kin of one kind or another and likely to have multi-stranded relationships. Another factor complicating our understanding of how and why encampments and larger groups formed coalitions was their regionally particular political circumstances. Pastoralist areas that were administered by secular principalities, such as Dege, and those that fell under the jurisdiction of major monastic institutions, such as Labrang, had access to powerful patrons who could intercede in local conflicts. By contrast, areas affiliated with politically autonomous pastoralist confederacies, such as Serthar, had to rely on their own resources when faced with threats of raiding, revenge, or land usurpation. Thus, an array of factors joined in influencing the paths people would follow in resolving disputes and countering threats to security and livelihoods on the grasslands, not the criterion of clan identity or shared territory or affiliation with a powerful institution on its own. Patterns of political mobilisation thus depended on multiple factors, and this is the case even among the 'paradigmatic' societies for which segmentary lineage models were developed (see Gough 1971; Kuper 1982: 82, 89–91; McKinnon 2000).

7 The term *tsho-ba* has been translated into English in various ways. Gelek (2002: 7) leaves it as a 'broad group'. Clarke (1992: 398–9) speaks of nesting segments, with *tsho-ba* comprising multiple encampments.

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2.3 *Gender Lines: Residence, Inheritance and Rights to Resources*

Local groups typically included numbers of clans.[8] They included the descendants, through male links, of recent and long-ago immigrants and the descendants of women who had remained in their natal group. Some of those women had married 'uxorilocally', that is, their husbands joined their parents' tents, perhaps because they had no brothers or no competent brothers. Then there were women who never married or whose marriages had failed and came back home with their children. There were substantial numbers of unmarried women in traditional times (Gelek 1998: 51; Li 1947)[9] and this situation continues in the present day. Clarke (1992: 393, 403–5) found households composed of unmarried siblings – brothers and sisters – among pastoralists living along the Blue Lake in Qinghai Province in the 1980s and drew several conclusions about such arrangements. One conclusion was that household membership, not clan identity, provided the key to understanding rights to territory and property in such communities. A second conclusion was that such practices were an index to economic hardship and posed a challenge to the patrilineal, clan-based social order. The logic is that men who have access to adequate livestock and grasslands remain within their own group. But those with too few animals to make a living move in with their wives, creating a pool of resources sufficient to support an economically viable household enterprise. Clarke goes on to argue that the cumulative effect of uxorilocal, or *mag-pa*, marriage is to create subsidiary matrilineal units in normatively patrilineal pastoralist communities, comparable to the matrilineality of neighbouring farming groups in Yunnan Province.

There are several problems with this argument. First, eastern Tibetan pastoralists trace descent through men, and children are identified with the clans of their father, so that the image of pocket matrilineages created by uxorilocally resident women runs contrary to local kinship values. Second, the notion that poverty causes populations to reconstitute themselves as matrilineal bears the imprint of structuralist and early evolutionary models, both of which posit congruence in the tracing of ancestry, residence, inheritance and forms of political authority. Social life is never so neatly ordered, and more recent re-evaluations of the ethnographic data from which the early descent models were mined

8 Although many scholars describe the groups known as *tsho-ba* as being clan-based or having 'dominant lineages' (Clarke 1992: 398), all the *tsho-ba* I have surveyed included men from more than one clan (see Levine 2015: 167–8). Langelaar (2017) reviews efforts to make sense of the intersections between descent affiliation and *tsho-ba* membership among pastoralist and settled peoples in Amdo.

9 Li (1947: 290–91) reports that 22 per cent of surveyed pastoralist households in Dege included unmarried women only.

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show groups with more diverse memberships and a broader range of kin providing mutual aid to one another than the earlier authors described (Kuper 1988: 196). It is worth noting, too, that there are no documented instances of poverty contributing to the formation of matri-clans. These conclusions about the sources and consequences of uxorilocal marriages also run contrary to what I found in eastern pastoralist communities. In Serthar County, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, I collected multi-generational household histories which show that uxorilocal marriage was practised by well-off and politically prominent households in premodern times. In those instances, daughters remained with their parents, and the children produced from this marriage were regarded as belonging to the clan of the husband. As people remember the past and as they consider present-day circumstances, there are advantages in such an arrangement, in that a daughter is likely to be more committed to one's welfare in old age than a daughter-in-law. I also found that the majority of households included a married couple, but those without tended to be poorer. This was because households with fragmentary membership and without a gender-balanced workforce were unable to keep large herds and manage their herding enterprises successfully.[10] Nowadays, the calculus of decisions about where to live after marriage has changed, due to the situation of fixed land contracts, as I will describe below.

Accompanying accounts of residence and rights to resources are descriptions of cross-generational inheritance: and the common assumption here is that eastern Tibetan pastoralists pass property preferentially on to sons. In the words of Clarke (1992: 402),

> The cultural rule is for the main tent to be inherited as one unit by the youngest son, who stays with the parents, and for there to be an equipartition of livestock between male offspring if they move away from their tent of birth. A woman, if she leaves her natal tent, receives only clothes, jewellery and possibly a horse.

Hermanns (1953: 71–2) also speaks of the 'principle of male inheritance of property'. He attributes the sheep and yak that women bring to their marital households to dowry, which he regards as the 'free gift' of their parents.

10 Li (1947: 290–91) describes 50 per cent of pastoralist Dege households as including married couples. My house-to-house survey of three Serthar xiang in 1994 found that 68 per cent included one or more generations of married couples. (Concerning the importance of gender-balanced workforces for household economic viability, see Levine 2019: 6 and Thargyal 2007: 131–41.)

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Ekvall (1968: 25), by contrast, reports that each child of the tent has right to an equal share of the common wealth. Similarly, Gelek and Hai (2002) describe Serthar parents as providing marrying children with a fair and equal share of the household property when they marry and move out. Their account struggles with applying the conventional anthropological categories of bridewealth and dowry to such circumstances; it also counters Goody's (1976) expectations for bridewealth to be the predominant marital payment in pastoralist economies. Contrary to their expectation for parents to divert larger amounts of property to their sons, Gelek and Hai report that respondents to a small survey described wives bringing somewhat more property into their marriages than their husbands, not only the classic forms of female property, such as jewellery, but also domestic animals.[11]

In short, it appears that newly married couples were endowed with movable property from both of their households in premodern times. They took up residence with one set of parents or set up their tents alongside them, close by siblings, other relatives and, occasionally, friends. Clanship defined honour and status, but did not determine where people could or should live. In consequence, encampment groups in the past were composed of people related in a host of different ways. The factors determining residential choice underwent several shifts in subsequent decades. For today, the likelihood of living alongside close kin may have increased, due to policies concerning land rights, as the following discussion will show.

3 Past and Present on the Grasslands

To understand present-day kinship and family life, one must look back to the series of transformative social and economic policies implemented over the past half-century. Before that time, pastoralists lived in encampment groups whose members shared seasonal pastures for grazing their privately owned herds of yak, sheep and horses and provided mutual aid to one another on a discretionary basis. This way of living changed dramatically when the Chinese state assumed control of these areas during the 1950s and began implementing programmes involving collectivisation and communal organisation. Local groups were reorganised as production teams that managed available resources and allocated work responsibilities and shares of the group's

11 These marriages were contracted between 1983 and 1991, that is, after the inception of the household responsibility system in which individuals received a share of their collective's animals (see Levine 1999: 163).

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revenues to individual members. Following the introduction of the household responsibility system in the early 1980s, member households took back a share of the collective's animals and returned to producing for their own consumption. They also resumed living in encampment groups and moving seasonally across what was, for many individuals, their traditional grasslands.

In the late 1990s, the government began rolling out a succession of new reforms aimed at furthering economic development. They instituted programmes meant to privatise the use of grazing land and reduce mobility. These programmes included subsidies for the construction of durable houses and permanent animal shelters at winter sites and the fencing of plots for creating reserve grazing. Most consequential was the mapping-out and allocation of long-term contracts to individual households in sectors of grazing land.[12] These parcels are indivisible and ordinarily cannot be sold.

The programme of greatest consequence involved policies mandating and encouraging settlement. Holders of pastures designated as ecologically fragile or degraded have been required to leave their newly contracted lands for stipulated periods of time and have been provided with housing in county towns and subsidiary townships and promises of government support.[13] The government has offered subsidies for house purchases to still other pastoralists, many of whom decided to take advantage of what might be a once-in-a-lifetime offer of aid to buy a house, or saw residence in settled communities as offering a more modern lifestyle and access to new economic opportunities in town and schooling for their children.[14] In the regions that I have surveyed, pastoralists whose winter grasslands border the rapidly expanding town have chosen to build their own houses – which sometimes also include small shops – on the outskirts of town. Also contributing to increasing engagements with urban

12 Eastern Tibetan pastoralists received their long-term leases at varying years during the 1990s (Horlemann 2002: 254–255; Wu *et al.* 2012: 295; Yan *et al.* 2005: 35). The terms of these contracts differed in different regions, but it appears that they ranged from 50 to 70 years. In locales facing special conditions, such as limited access to water resources, land was contracted out to larger groups, whose member households each received a proportional share of the collective property (this is known as *bza' skal* in Maqu County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, where I conducted research in 2014).

13 On these initiatives, see Bauer & Nyima (2010), Du (2012) and Yeh (2005).

14 Nine years of education were mandated by the government in 1986. This policy was followed by school consolidation, a policy that appears to have been implemented in Tibetan areas after 2001 and that brought the majority of schools to more densely populated townships and towns. I should note that interviewees in Maqu County described strong commitments to educating their children, although this was not the case in other communities I surveyed.

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centres has been the emergence of a 'post-pastoral' economy based on the extraction of medicinal fungi for Chinese and international markets, particularly the valuable caterpillar fungus, although not all pastoralist areas have good access to this resource (see the map in Gruschke & Breuer 2017: 32).[15]

These changes are unprecedented and raise questions about how new forms of livelihood, contacts with populations outside formerly insular ethnic enclaves, global information exchange and inclusion in a centralised state are affecting personal life. There are questions too about how these changes are altering family relationships, obligations to kin and the makeup of social networks. Answering these questions requires looking back at the past and what we know about it. The problem, as we have seen in earlier sections of this paper, is that information about the past is limited and, at times, inconsistent. Some of the inconsistencies can be chalked up to the fact that the information was sourced from different places at different times and by scholars with markedly different skill sets. Other reasons for discrepant accounts can be found in the theorised expectations at the time of their production: the earliest work was influenced by nineteenth-century social evolutionary theory and work produced in the latter part of the twentieth century was influenced by structural anthropological theory. Meanwhile, descriptions of pastoralist societies in European languages were guided by the analytical categories developed for studying kinship systems cross-culturally.

The following section of the paper attempts to work within these constraints to assess the ways in which present-day kin relationships both follow and depart from long-standing traditions. The focus will be on what I term practical kinship, that is, decisions impacting everyday life: where to live, how best to manage resources and household-contracted grazing lands to meet economic needs, as well as how to maximise kin support to facilitate adaptations to a rapidly changing world. I will focus on three different strategies for managing household-contracted grazing lands and the balancing of rural and urban opportunities: conglomerate families, alternating residence and collaborations between kin who are based on the grasslands and those settled in town. As I will show, these strategies rely on lifelong ties between parents and children and brothers and sisters. I will argue that, although some of the ways in which these ties are manifested may be novel, they draw on long-standing and deeply felt loyalties.

15 It is important to note that none of my research sites earned more than token amounts from the trade in medicinal products.

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4 Practical Kinship, New Household Forms and Sibling Ties

In my initial encounters with eastern Tibetan pastoralists, I certainly was influenced by the early writings on these populations. I expected to find parents selecting sons as their successors and sons staying on in their parents' encampment, living in the same tent or in a separate tent alongside them. There were, however, many instances in which I found daughters as successors. This led to further inquiries. In Serthar in 1994 – more than a decade after people returned to managing household herds on common grazing lands, but prior to the implementation of household land contracts – I heard contrary opinions on the choice of a successor. One man voiced a preference for having a son as his heir; he said he anticipated selecting the most competent and reliable of his sons. Then I asked where a young couple would live when the husband and wife came from different encampments in the same *tsho-ba* group. I was told that they were free to join either, but were more likely to make a home in the man's encampment. But when I asked people about their place of birth in house-to-house interviews, I found numerous cases of men who had joined their wife's encampment when they married. The reason in some instances was that the woman lacked brothers, but in other instances it was because the grazing was better in her area. These decisions were made carefully and in consultation with both sets of families and were, overall, guided by practical criteria. Brothers and sisters were living alongside one another. This was not due to a lack of better options, as Clarke (1992: 404) has suggested, but rather because they saw advantages in doing so. Uxorilocal residence was not stigmatised, and, as one person noted, sons who married the women of different groups would carry on their clan wherever they went. In the end, I found that encampments in the early 1990s consisted mostly of the households of brothers and sometimes sisters, but also sometimes people who simply were good friends or whose respective household workforces or herd compositions benefitted by their close cooperation. Most important, I was told, was to live amid people who could be called upon in times of need and who were strong and could protect one another against encroachment and theft. It was important, too, to live close by relatives who could provide mutual aid at life crises and make it possible to manage when divorce or widowhood occurred. The need for reliable assistance also contributed to decisions in which parents consciously selected a daughter as their heir, because they expected that she would provide solicitous intimate care as they aged. Similar patterns have been reported in other Tibetan pastoralist populations. As Goldstein and Beall (1990: 56) have written, 'Parents sometimes decide to keep a daughter in their household even when they have sons. In reality, they evaluate which of their

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children will take the best care of them as they grow old'. There were also instances of divorced and widowed individuals who were unable to manage a pastoralist domestic economy on their own and returned home to join forces with their parents' or a sibling's household, whom they camped alongside and with whom they shared domestic animal management.

In summary, residence in the time of the household responsibility system, when people were endeavouring to manage their herds independently on shared grasslands, was flexible and guided by eminently practical concerns. The household histories I collected in Serthar also suggest that these patterns replicated decisions made in premodern times. But I also found apparently new adaptations in family living that emerged after the allocation of long-term land contracts. These cases are drawn from Maqu County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, which I visited in 2014. First, I will discuss instances of what I term conglomerate households, followed by practices of alternating residence and, finally, collaborations between kin who have remained on the grasslands and those who have settled in town.

I use the term conglomerate households to describe arrangements in which two or more children remain with their parents after they marry. This creates a household that can be described as simultaneously extended and joint, in that it includes multiple generations and several married siblings. I encountered three households of this kind in my 33-household survey; the largest included 21 people: a man, his wife, his three sons and two daughters, their wives and husbands, and their 11 grandchildren. When I met them, they were occupying four tents set up alongside one another. The father, a man aged 61, explained that they were living together because of the indivisibility of contracted grazing lands and their efforts to maintain a base in the nearby district capital and provide a home there for their school-going children. He and his wife were spending much of the year in town together with those children and one of their sons-in-law, who had a relatively well-paying town job. The other young adults managed pastoralist enterprises out on the grasslands. While this was the largest household I encountered, I also interviewed two other similarly organised households, one with 15 and the other with 13 members.[16]

It is not clear if this is a new pattern. Looking back at my earliest census, in 1994 in Serthar, I found most households to be small, averaging under six members, and to include no more than a set of parents, one married child and his or her spouse, and their grandchildren. But I also found cases in which

16 Other researchers have described situations in which some family members live in town and others live on the grasslands in order to facilitate children's education (for example Ptackova 2011: 9), but not multiply complex families of the kind I found in Maqu County.

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two households were living alongside one another and spent so much time together that the boundaries between them were hard to discern. This kind of closeness seemed most intense when one of the two had fallen on hard times and could not manage alone. Such interdependencies may explain why Gelek, who lived with Serthar pastoralists during the 1970s, describes a larger average household size than I found in 1994:

> Most Washu Serthar families have more than six members, and about 20 percent of the tents had more than ten members. The family is extended rather than nuclear. Joint families not only allowed for the efficient carrying out of economic interests, but also obligations for military association and trade in a vast and sparsely populated area. A small-sized family would find it difficult to deal with various natural calamities and sudden danger, and the families of Washu Serthar frequently had extended lateral ties between siblings and different generations to other tents in the encampment. A family consisted of a man, his wife, his nominally unmarried daughters and their children, and his sons and their wives and children who were resident in that tent. Each couple in principle had a separate tent in an encampment, but shared livestock and often ate together with the wider joint family.
>
> GELEK 1998: 51

Thus the conglomerate households I encountered in Maqu County in 2014 may have had their roots in traditional patterns of inter-household cooperation in work and the intersecting domestic lives of close kin who live near one another. The way in which land is used and household boundaries construed may have changed nowadays, but this way of meeting practical challenges is not wholly novel.[17]

The fact of closely held land contracts and restrictions on the sales of land may explain a second, possibly unprecedented domestic pattern: alternating residence. Nowadays, young people who wish to pursue pastoralism are confined to the grazing lands contracted to their natal households. When they marry, decisions have to be made concerning where they are best off residing, a decision that is complicated by a perceived shortage of grazing land.

17 The fact of semi-permeable household boundaries may explain, at least in part, the marked discrepancy in reports of household size in Dege. Rinzin Thargyal (2007: 135) reports an average household size of 6.2 for 10 dependent pastoralist households in premodern Dege, while An-che Li (1947: 290) reports an average of 3.0 for 880 Dege households.

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Thus, the answer sometimes is that neither place will suffice. I heard about couples moving back and forth before they settled down in one place. I also heard from one household whose two married children had adopted a regular seasonal cycle of moving back and forth between two parcels of grazing land. It was their father who described the situation to me. The eldest child, a son, started out his married life as a *mag-pa* in his wife's parents' household. He remained there less than a year and then returned home. At the time of the interview, the couple was going back and forth, travelling between the two places, spending the summer in a tent close by his parents and the winter in his wife's place. The man gestured toward its location, a valley behind a distant mountain ridge to the north. These moves, he said, were facilitated by having relatively few material possessions and access to trucks to carry some of the load. His second child, a daughter, had married a man from an adjoining community, that is, much closer to home, where she and her husband faced the same constraints – inadequate grazing land to support their family herd. In the end, she adopted the same plan as her brother. She was spending the summer alongside the tent of her parents, grazing her animals on their contracted land. In winter, the couple took their animals the small distance to his place, where they had a winter house. Other young couples whom I interviewed have opted to live year-round on one set of contracted lands; they cope with shortages by renting additional land from community members who have moved to town. Alternating residence thus seems to be a novel – and rare – response to shortages of grazing land under the system of household contracts. Such practices would have been unlikely in the past, when grazing lands were shared by all encampment members and inadequate grassland resources prompted people to strike out for new areas to settle.

Then there is the matter of urbanisation which seems, overall, to be strengthening relations between kin, whose lives have come to be intertwined in new ways. Siblings see themselves as tied lifelong by their shared rights to their natal household's grazing lands. They also are tied by their sense of mutual obligation and trust, which has contributed to extended forms of cooperation across rural and urban space. I describe these arrangements as collaborations; they are becoming common as more pastoralists take up town residence. Here there seem to be as many intricate family stories as there are families who have close kin living in town. I offer two examples of how these relationships are instituted and maintained. The first derives from an account offered by a young man who was living in a household consisting of his widowed father, himself, his wife and their two primary-school-aged children. This man was a successful herder, someone who had to rent additional land to graze all his animals. He had earned enough from the sale of animal products to have bought a plot of

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land in town and built a house there, in which he installed his father. He and his wife were living alongside the tents of his two older sisters, with whom he shared household-contracted grazing land. One of those sisters was divorced and had a disabled child, and he was helping her meet that child's considerable medical expenses. The children were spending the school year in town with their grandfather, and the adults were working out on the grasslands. Here is another example, taken from a vivacious middle-aged woman who had bought a house in the original Maqu resettlement village in 2004. She was living there with her mother and her brother's son, who was in high school at the time. She told me that her son and daughter were off at college in other parts of China and that it took nearly all of her income as a street cleaner and the government assistance (Ch. *chengshi dibao*) that she received to pay their tuition and living costs. Her brother remained on the grasslands and brought his urban kin meat, butter and cheese from the family herds.

5 Siblingship in Comparative Perspective

The contexts surrounding these modern-day exchanges may be new, but they draw on long-standing expectations for mutual aid between siblings. The difference is that in the past, those exchanges were made between people who were living a purely pastoralist life and, commonly, living close by one another. If such relationships have received little attention, it may be that anthropologists and other writers on pastoralist societies were focusing their attention elsewhere, on what they considered more important kinship practices, such as clan affiliation, succession to political leadership and the massing of lineage segments for raiding and warfare.

Not only in Tibetan studies has siblingship been considered mundane and subordinated to what were considered more important kinship topics, particularly descent and marriage. Consider neighbouring groups such as Moso, where analysts have given more attention to visiting partnerships, the so-called walking marriages, than the relationships between the brothers and sisters who remain together throughout their lives in large extended family households (see, for example, Shih 2000). One can find the roots of this pattern, this partial vision of what was important to study, early in the development of kinship theory. Radcliffe-Brown's methodological programme focused on constructing fundamental 'principles' that were abstracted from the flow of interpersonal interactions and on relations between groups, rather than individuals. His oft-cited dictum of the unity of the sibling group (Radcliffe-Brown 1950: 23–4) speaks to siblings' common identity and sense of purpose and how they were

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viewed as a unity by those groups with whom they interacted, rather than considering them as motivated actors in personal kin networks. Meyer Fortes, the twentieth century's consummate kinship theorist, began his career analysing sibling relationships in terms of the larger web of kin relationships and interpreting these relationships in light of political-ritual rights and the obligations associated with clanship among the patrilineal Tallensi (Fortes 1949: 241–80). Only later, in his writing on the matrilineal Ashanti, did he elaborate on the loyalties, affection and 'bond of inescapable moral obligation' that linked siblings (1969: 162, 172). Studies of India have drawn attention to the special relationship between brothers and sisters and how it is expressed in values, ceremonies and gift-giving (Goody 1990: 222–5). Nevertheless, this has been overshadowed by the attention paid to marriage, affinity, hierarchy and patrifilial inheritance.[18] One can point to the 1984 collection of essays on Oceania (Marshall 1983) as a break in the trend, but the contributors were more concerned to overturn genealogical thinking and to advocate for the culturalist perspective of Schneider (1968) than to make sense of the ways in which being a sibling affected kin practices in daily life.[19]

In *The Anthropology of Sibling Relations*, Thelen *et al.* (2013) lament inattention to sibling relationships in 'new' as well as classical kinship studies, an omission all the more glaring given their obvious importance to families and across the life course. They point to three dimensions of siblingship that have a resounding effect on personal life. First is the fact of siblings sharing parentage, which sets the stage for obligations of caretaking across the generations and establishes common interests in valued property. Shared parentage also gives rise to shared relationships with other close kin, to whom siblings refer with the same terms of reference and address. A second fact is that many siblings experience shared childhoods, which can contribute to a sense of identity and feelings of mutuality. Finally, siblingship involves reciprocal exchanges and acts of care, which may develop and change across a lifetime. Thus, particularly in parts of the world characterised by bilateral kinship, siblingship occupies a central place, and even 'encapsulates the most central meanings of kinship morality' (Carsten 1997; Thelen *et al.* 2013: 15).

Attending directly to sibling relationships illuminates features of personal experience, family life and social expectations that may otherwise appear

18 Jamous's (2003) study of the Meo of North India may be the rare exception.

19 It is worth noting that Schneider's earlier account of siblingship in matrilineal societies followed the standard structuralist programme, as the following quote illustrates: 'The interdependence of male and female members in matrilineal descent groups is thus primarily a phenomenon of descent *groups* [emphasis in original], not of pairs of persons or pairs of statuses' (Schneider 1961: 13).

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obscure or perplexing. I will offer three examples of how repositioning our analytical lens can enrich our understanding of Tibetan societies. Here I will focus on kinship in farming communities, which have been studied more fully and over a longer period than pastoralists on the high plateau. Extending the discussion to farmers also lends support to my contention that sibling relationships are central to personal life throughout the Tibetan cultural world. I have drawn these examples largely from my own research, which has included a brief study in the far western Tibet Autonomous Region (in 1990) and a long-term study in northwestern Nepal (1973–2017), supplemented by the work of other anthropologists.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, example of the importance of siblingship is fraternal polyandry, which is common among farming communities in the western regions and the Himalayan borderlands. Heretofore, most analyses of polyandry have focused on the kind of marriage it entails, that is, affective ties and non-exclusive sexuality between husbands and wives (Levine 1981b), and the economic benefits conveyed to polyandrous households. These benefits include concentrating male labour, forestalling the division of the patrimony and reducing the number of married women in the community, which limits population growth (Goldstein 1978: 327–30; Schuler 1987: 56). But it is equally important that polyandry entails a special relationship between brothers, who spend their lives together, share obligations to provision a household, raise collective children, and alternate the nights they spend with their wife. There is no greater example of the unity of the sibling group, and here it is based on practical action and a felt sense of mutuality (Fjeld 2007: 123, 345; Levine 1988: 159, 171, 278).

The second example is cross-cousin marriage. Such marriages are common in Himalayan communities, although proscribed and considered incestuous by farming and pastoralist populations to the north, across the Tibetan border. They are typically arranged by the couple's parents, who are brothers and sisters, together with their spouses, and are said to have a number of virtues. First, they strengthen the siblings' own relationship and are thought to be more stable than marriages with unknown families – given the expectation that the two sets of parents will be more invested in the marriage's continuance than people lacking pre-existing ties. A second reason is that they elevate the families' reputation by displaying their stability and the continued high regard they have for one another. Third, they are held to be easier on the bride and a better bet for domestic harmony in the short and long term, because of the pre-existing relationship and the likelihood that she will be solicitous of her aunt and uncle in their declining years. One fact to keep in mind is that people place the rationale for these marriages in ties between brothers

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and sisters, rather than in some special quality of cousinship, and this fact is reflected in the descriptive terms in common use. Among the Nyinba of northwestern Nepal, such marriages are described as linking the children of uncles and aunts (*a-zhang-gi bu-mo* and *a-ne'i pu-tsha*). In the more northerly community of Limi, people speak of this as the marriage of sisters' and brothers' children (*ming-phrug sring-phrug*).[20]

The final example is drawn from research in Purang, in the far western Tibet Autonomous Region, and concerns changes in marriage practice that occurred following the radical social and economic reforms of the 1970s and 1980s. Collectivisation and the household responsibility system created conditions that made it possible for individuals to leave unsatisfactory marriages. Women returned to their birth homes and took up residence with their parents and their brothers, some of whose marriages had dissolved as well. This contributed to a shift from households organised around polyandrously married men to households organised around sets of unmarried brothers and sisters. Rather than formal marriage, these individuals turned to consensual partnerships. The children they had generally remained with their mothers, who raised them with the assistance of their brothers (Levine 1994).[21]

6 Conclusion

This paper has covered a broad array of subjects, regionally and historically, to interrogate some of the common assumptions made about the foundations of kinship among eastern Tibetan pastoralists. I have questioned the utility of the notion of tribes, whether clanship was the central organising institution of eastern Tibetan pastoralist society, and whether residence and inheritance in these populations are accurately described as patrilocal, patrifilial and patrifocal. I have suggested instead that siblings were among the most important kin relationships over the life course, that they were critical to mutual exchanges in traditional society and that the strength and significance of sibling relationships have carried over to the present day. Siblings share land and resources and aid one another in meeting the challenges of new social and economic environments. Siblings, I have argued, are important not only to

20 The Tamang of Nepal, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language, find the relationship between brothers and sisters to be 'the balance point from which all sociality hangs' (March 1983: 731).

21 This was not an entirely novel pattern. In premodern times, people who were considered too poor to marry were likely to establish consensual partnerships and remain with their siblings in their parents' home.

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pastoralists, but also to Tibetan farmers, as my brief analyses of fraternal polyandry, cross-cousin marriage and brother–sister households in Purang suggest. Finally, the focus on siblingship draws attention to the practical and emotional dimensions of kin ties: the many ways in which people organise their lives around their relatives, sacrifice for their well-being and draw benefits from kin networks. Individuals thus are enabled to make ends meet while they forge personally meaningful lives.

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