

## **THE WATERSPIRITS AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN AMONG THE SHERPA**

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The Sherpa are a Buddhist hill-people living in the northeast of Nepal. Research among them was conducted from November 1991 to May 1993, especially in the area of Solu. Nowadays the economic activities of the Sherpa there comprise mainly agriculture (potatoes, wheat, maize). However, cultural experiences from a close relation to herding (including trade) are still traceable and continue to provide a frame for their way of life. In their once stronger nomadic-pastoral way of life women had greater equality with men compared to societies where agriculture has long constituted the basis of living.<sup>1</sup>

In this regard this paper also provides a perspective on the problem of cultural memory and its association with actual social relations. The central point to be made is that myths showing a reference to a certain way of life may provide a legitimation for certain enduring aspects of the social order, though this relation is not always interpreted unequivocally by all social strata. This legitimizing and debating meaning of a cultural or "communicative" memory (Assmann 1983) is not, however, only or exclusively noticeable in contexts where myths are retold, but is present also in other traditions that are connected to an audience, such as visual expressions of characters (e.g. dance-drama or paintings) and in exchange relations where speeches and songs are presented. With a song from the Sherpa I would like to bring the theme straight to the position of women in their communities. From a singing-match:

Proud parent's son you are, raised by horse and carpet. I have the life of a daughter only, and must rest myself on water and air.

Though this song, sung by a girl to a boy, points to the difference in caring for sons and daughters among the Sherpa, it also contains a hint that the place of women is not on the earth or at the husband's feet, as so often among their more hierarchical and orthodox Hindu neighbors. Seemingly, however, also here men are related to culture while women are related to elements of nature. Does this have a legitimation from the perspective of the Sherpa or are we confronted here with questions of tolerance and acceptance? How is the conceptual relation of women to water in particular to be understood – is the “floating” element conceived of as having active or primarily passive qualities – and what is their relation to the *lu-water-spirits*? Stepping from ideological and mythical conceptions to social reality we might ask how the jural position of women is traditionally conceived, and in which aspect women have the most weight.

A thorough study of the position of women among the Tibetan-oriented communities of Tamang and Sherpa has already been given to us by Kathryn March (1979), who brings the “intermediacy of women” to the fore, be it in the field of marital and agnatic kinship or in the mediating role of femaleness in relation to the Buddhist gods. However, on the level of high religion in particular, a self-sacrificing and devotional caring attitude on the part of women reveals itself, something which might have its origins more in the orthodox Buddhist scriptures, written by men, than in the folk-culture of these hill-peoples themselves. It may also be noted that even in the monastic institutions of the Sherpa Solu area the question concerning the position of women is still open. There are monasteries which demand life-long ascetic vows from their adherents, but there are also monastic institutions which consider themselves more as schools and do allow the withdrawal and re-entry for their followers, and this applies also to women. We will now have a look at the role of women, starting from March's study, as bringers of culture in religious contexts.

### **Femaleness in Religion and Other Domains**

As far as popular conceptions of the Tibetan religion in regard to femaleness are concerned, aside from the goddess Drolma (Tib.) or Tara (Sk.) (Beyer, 1971), the highest importance is given to the women who accompanied Padmasambhava or Guru Rimpoche: his Indian woman Hajam Mandarva, who is also called his Newari woman (Bai Sya), and his Tibetan woman (Bhot Sya), Khangdo Yeshe Chogyal. As March notes, the Sherpa say that these two women accompanied the Guru on his journeys to look after his well-being and his reception of hospitality. Further, the Tamang say that, in particular the tradition of drinking beer in the Lama ritual was handed down by his Newari wife (March, 1979: 300). Among the Tamang as among the Sherpa the task of producing beer is considered to be the work of women.

Whoever has seen a Sherpa ritual might connect the idea of *chang* (Sh., beer) with a certain feeling of solidarity that is felt among the visitors, as well as among the people themselves and the gods through their offering of bottles of *chang*, which are either brought to the altar or, in case of dance-ritual, to the shrine at the flag-post in the middle of the courtyard of the gumpa. In the same manner the dancers, who represent the gods coming out of the gumpa, are offered cups of *chang* by the sponsors of the ritual – which they just dip and sprinkle with their fingers. Beer also has an important function in the first steps of marriage as well as in the marriage itself; the bond of marriage will be completed by drinking *chang*, which will then be offered across to the relations of bride and groom. In a song collected by March (1979: 302) the preparing of the beer yeast is compared to a sexual act, and the giving of *chang* to the gods, whose blessing of long life is expected, is compared with the devotion of a woman. However, the gift of beer outside religious contexts is less connected to such a devotional attitude, but has an eminent meaning in the tradition of hospitality and help-relations.

As an example, the case of an old woman intending to build a house might illustrate this. The woman was poor and until then just tolerated living in a thatched hut on a small plot of land in the village area. After being able to provide the neighbors with *chang* in exchange for their help, however, she could manage to have a wood-roofed stone house built to replace her hut. The giving of beer is thus not just connected to a devotional act, but to the effect of being able to request voluntary labor. As such or in a still broader context, the offering of beer provides the paradigm for a present for request, which is called *yangdzi* (Sh.) or in Nepali usage, *koseli*. Thus it has something of a general exchange value, though the moral obligation predominates.

These different cultural attributes, connected to the giving of *chang*, seemingly have their origin in the conceptions of the Sherpa and the Tamang on the character of femaleness as such, which connotes devotion and the flow, also active, that is floating, of relations. On the level of high religion, however, the aspect of devotional femaleness is put in the foreground, an attitude also found in the practice of Tibetan Tantrism or Vajrayana Buddhism. As Martin Brauen (1985a) has shown, it is the passively devotional aspect which is considered, when reflecting on the female side of existence.

The idea of the devotional attitude of women in Buddhism is also witnessed by other examples, as noted by March (1979: 310f.). Among these there is the legend of Gang Jyungmo, daughter of the founder of the first Tibetan monastery of Samye, who spent the most part of her life as an ascetic and finally, according to the myth, founded the big stupa of Baudghanath. At that time she begged the king to give her a plot of land the size of a buffalo's skin in order to build a religious shrine, but then cut this skin into a long strip and surrounded with it the land where the stupa was build. The king was bound to his word

and could not but give his permission. Gang Jyungmo then was recognized by the Tamang as an incarnation of Cherenzig and as mother of all Buddhas – mother of wisdom.

The legend of Gang Jyungmo and the acknowledgement of the enormous help of women in general at the foundation of the monastery of Samye is also known to the Sherpa, where I heard it cited by a woman on the occasion of a feast. In a kind of ritual match with the men's side she intended to recount this legend as a proof of the legitimation of her claim that women, too, have the right to "sit high", that is on the *choksi* banks and not on the ground. It is not the devotional act that is put to the fore, but the active and energetic attitude. From her perspective, activity and femaleness go together; they do not contradict each other. The legend of Gang Jyungmo by itself worships one particular woman while it leaves the others, with less ascetic – "male" – careers, "on the ground". The part of culture transmitted through and by women is thus not only differently evaluated but related with different attitudes.

This example also demonstrates that, from the perspective of the Sherpa women, the reality does not correspond to the timeless unconventionality as represented by the high-religious conceptions, where women are subordinated to men. The character of femaleness, of the "floating element", includes more than devotional attitudes from their perspective, be it in the giving of *chang* or in conceptions about femaleness in general; the devotional, the requesting and the active attitude stand equal to each other.

A further example that shows these different attitudes is given to us by the Sherpa Lama and researcher Sangye Tenzin who recounts the myth of the first Minyag king in the east Tibetan province of Kham-Salmögang, the area from which the Sherpa originally came (Sangye Tenzin, 1992: 7-14). The myth is built up on the cleverness of an old woman, who initiated the defeat of the Chinese king in this area and thus established a long line of Minyag kings. According to this myth the first Minyag king was the son of *zhibdag*, a mountain-god of *lu*-Water-spirit variety, who fathered this boy with a girl who was lost in the mountain forest. Astrologers at the court of the Chinese king soon predicted the birth of a leader, who would bring danger to the king, but didn't know where to look for him. The old woman, the mother of the child, heard of the king's plans to kill the child. She kept it hidden under the floor of her house and put a cask of water over it (she also wanted to hide the birth itself, since the child had no human father). Despite many searches the child was not discovered. After reaching manhood, the new leader went out, with a following of forest-workers, to fight against the Chinese king's army. Again it was thanks to the advice of an old woman, who kept herself veiled, that the leader from Minyag was successful. She told the king's soldiers that a big army on horses was attempting to defeat the king, and that they were so many that the Machu River would become dark from dung of their horses. As she had prophesied, the horses of the Minyag leader and his followers deposited so much

ding in the river that it grew dark. The Chinese, however, were so horrified by this that they gave themselves up without resistance. A new line of kings was duly founded in the province of Minyag.

It is interesting to note, that a seemingly fatherless child, a foster-child so to say, was given the honor of becoming the first king of the house of Minyag. This mythical aspect will be taken up again below in the discussion of the concepts of inheritance. A parallel between the position of the woman in this myth and the position of women nowadays might be discerned in the role of the adviser. Thus, while the honor of acting as mediator and adviser in community affairs is given to the *mijhari* (Nep.), the honorable ones, it seems that this function is then connected to the "house" of the *mijhar*, and may in case of his absence or after his death also be requested of other members of his household and thereby, for example, also from his wife.

From a general point of view, however, it should be recognized that for women to achieve status in a Buddhist oriented community will be easier the more they put their effort into religious works (cf. March 1979: 312); achieving status and reputation through public works, be it as representative of monastic or communal institutions, is less open to them. The individually composed song of a Sherpa woman suggests this dilemma of the conflicting motives of devotion to religion and the impossibility of acceptance as equal without:

Everything is unfolding in peace. I asked the father to let me study in the gumpa. The father thought about it and agreed, but it shouldn't be in the daughter's destiny. On the high ridges there are many flowers (daughters), but between them there are the rocks (sons) of the mountains (who determine their destiny). On a journey to Yambu (Kathmandu) I happened to meet three lamas. Also I remember the wild geese in an Indian lake. The wild geese may fly to wherever they want. One life, two lives, you three lamas, please don't give me the life of a woman again.

### **Belief in Waterspirits and Concepts of Equality**

We will now shift our interest to the folk belief of the Sherpa about femaleness and its relation to the element of water and the *lu*-water-spirits. This has to be seen against the background of their once more nomadic-pastoral way of life where water-places were most essential for the high-pasture economy, and where the herds of *yak* and *cauri* were looked after mostly by women, as is still often the case nowadays. From this time too originates the relatively egalitarian right to property (for both sexes) of the Sherpa, which will also be discussed. To turn to the water-spirits first, it is said that the *lu* go with women (especially

after marriage), which also indicates that the water-spirits themselves are viewed as less settled and less bound by borders than is usually thought of local gods.

The water-spirits, in Sanskrit and Nepali the *naga*, in Tibetan the *lu*, are of importance not only in the belief of the Sherpa, but also in the South Asian (including Tibet) and South-East Asian region in general, where they are associated with fertility in the first place. According to A.W. Macdonald's comparison of different myths of the origin of man and the world from these regions the conception of the sacrifice to the female earth gods stands at the focal point of creation (Macdonald 1983). Thus we know of the myth of the Kachin in Burma, where the sacrifice of a child to a female *nat*-spirit brings into being the different peoples of South-East Asia, and the myth of a *lu*-queen in Tibet, from whose parts of the body the elements of the world and the universe itself were created. It might even be possible to conceive relation to the Indian primordial man *Purusa*. In Nepal, then, the Newar of the Kathmandu Valley believe that the local gods exist in a kind of parallel world to the human world, and the *naga*-spirits in particular receive special attention there (Anderson 1988: 69-70). The idea of a parallel world or a nether-world of the waterspirits, the *lu wokla*, also exists among the Tibetan-oriented Sherpa.

Once, so the Sherpa believe, the worlds of humans and *lu* were very near to each other. Only when people became selfish and didn't give the water-spirits something from the harvest of their fields and produce of their herds, did the *lu* withdraw their help and bring drought to the fields and pastures. From these times on, it is said, a good harvest and the luck of the household have been dependent on the regular ritual offerings to the waterspirits.

Considering that the Sherpa once followed a way of life which was less settled than today, we might take the conceptions and myths surrounding the *lu* as idealized presentations of this way of life and as the frame of social relations. In one such oral traditional the activities of the water-spirits, who have families like humans, are arranged according to a calendar, which as related in Nepali by a Minung, a shamanic Lama:

In Phagun (February-March) each *lu* thinks over what will be done in the coming year.

In Chaitra (March-April) each one's wish is being formulated.

In Baisakh (May-June) they eat much food, in particular *korsum-morsum* (curd, butter, milk-millet, maize and wild wheat).

In Jeth (May-June) each one does his or her own work (for example: the Lu Mu Karmu from Junbesi visits the Dudh Kunda Mela, a pilgrimage festival at a mountain-lake).

In Asar (June-July) they prepare their fields.

In Srawan (July-August) they bring in their harvest.

In Badau (August-September) they just live at places where water comes out of the earth.

In Asojh (September-October) they get new clothes.

In Kartik (October-November) they draw water from the trees (the trees lose their leaves).

In Mangsir (November-December) they lie down to sleep.

In Magh (January-February) they divide their acquired wealth equally among the members of their families – man, woman, sons and daughters receive the same share (the *lu* don't invest their wealth in feasts but prefer to distribute it equally at the end of the year).

As revealed in this calendar, the *lu* seem to be rather independent of each other and spent their time individually, which parallels the attitude of the Sherpa, to whom the solitude of herding life still has meaning in other fields of activity. Though the waterspirits seem also to be engaged in agriculture, the whole calendar is told as if it were seen from the perspective of someone engaged primarily in herding. In the conception of the Sherpa the *lu* have cattle, and if one looks at the places where offerings are brought to them (at the *lu-wang*), then one will find trees planted that are useful at least as fodder. So much for their way of life. However analogous the relation might be, the waterspirits show themselves to be so independent of each other that they do not even give feasts. But this seems to demonstrate another aspect in contrast to the Sherpa of today: While the *lu* distribute their wealth equally at the end of the year, the Sherpa periodically give feasts where status (religious rank and wealth) is displayed, and thus inequality is produced.

Still, there are parallels in the fields of equality, especially as concerns the original Sherpa concepts of equal access to property and inheritance for men and women. The Sherpa's own concept of inherited property is called *durshi*, although it is also common to use the Nepali term *angsa*, which clearly has a patrilineal emphasis and thus is primarily used to speak of inherited land. *Durshi* can be explained in different ways. On the one hand, it refers to the expenditures for the funeral rites. This is also applied to the expenditures for unmarried daughters. On the other hand, *durshi* refers to the part of inheritance as well as to the dowry (Nep. *daijo*) that a daughter receives after her marriage. The dowry will be handed over at the dowry-ceremony (*lara dongup*), which takes place one or more years after the marriage (*gyen kudop*, "to put on the mark on the forehead", also called *janti* in Nepali, "to bring home the bride", (cf. Oppitz, 1968: 122). What will be acquired through investing this dowry would have to be equally divided, in case of divorce or death of the husband, among the woman, her children and the brothers of the husband. The dowry itself may be kept by the woman herself. However, only after the dowry-ceremony has been completed must the side of the husband bear the costs of the funeral rites for the woman. Finally, we could consider the etymology of the term *durshi*. Here it seems to mean "comparative part",

because the meaning of *dur* is given as "compare" while *shi* has the meaning of "basis" or "thing", but also "nature of a person" (s. Das 1989: 630; Tharchin 1960: 19, 83).

In the context of "comparative part", we find a parallel in the custom that in the case of the marriage of a man, his unmarried sisters will receive from him a rather large amount of money or wealth for providing butter-wheatcakes (*phemar*) and liquor (*arak*), as well as for serving the feast after the bride has been brought into the husband's home. The wealth offered to the sisters will exceed their expenditures several times. This can also be understood as a settlement or a "comparative part", since the bride will now have a more respected position in the household than the unmarried sisters.

From these data it can be concluded that the Sherpa's original concept of inheritance – *durshi* – has not drawn a line between patrilineal and matrilineal inheritance. This separation is now a long established fact, although Furer-Haimendorf (1964: 99) noted exceptions for the region of Khumbu, which is near to Tibet. Until recently according to Nepalese law, which has long been effective in Solu, land could only be inherited patrilineally. The terminology, however, points to a time when at least certain sub-groups of the Sherpa were probably more accustomed to a nomadic way of life, such as that of the Humli-Khyampa (Rauber 1980), than to the agricultural sedentariness that tends to replace the structure of their activities nowadays. In the stronger nomadic-pastoral way of life both sexes were rather equally involved in economic activities, while certain people showed that they had special qualities in leading a group. Today, these aspects are still reflected in the custom of giving a number of cattle as dowry and of considering the qualities, the nature of a person, in terms of the amount that he/she will inherit.

The idiomatic endurance of the concept of *durshi* is reflected in a further custom. In case a woman loses her husband through his untimely death, without having given birth to a son, the woman can leave her husband's village again and may, together with her daughters, ask to receive a house in the village of her parents. When the daughters marry, however, the husband's brothers have to provide a dowry for them as well as lead the engagement consultations.

Different from the concept of *durshi* is the concept of *phewa*, which says that a girl may already receive some cattle in her youth, from which she can have income for herself. Thus not only ornaments, and within the dowry jewelry, are given to a daughter, but also purely economical things, independently of her being married or not.

The concepts of inheritance thus also seem in general more egalitarian than those of the Sherpa's Hindu-Nepali neighbors<sup>2</sup>, where the dowry could sometimes rather be understood as a "bridegroom's price", that also remains with the husband's family after his



death. In this context, however, it has to be noted that at least among the majority of the households of the Lama clan, one of the four original clans of the Sherpa, the dowry ceremony does not exist any more, something that might indicate a shift in this respect. In the Lama clan's history more strategic marriages, whereby tax-collector's titles were transmitted, have to be noted. Thus alliances through marriage helped to sustain political loyalties and the dowry was a bonus for the groom.

The assimilation of more Hindu-Nepali oriented customs in certain cases leads to a higher potential for conflict. This is based, however, on the obviously near relation between the perpetuations of a household and the existence of a son, who guarantees its continuity. This also helps to explain, as Ortner (1978a) already pointed out, the strong emotional bond between mother and son. The relative absence of existential safety for childless households is traditionally balanced by adopting a boy from a related household of the lineage of the husband. The possibility of taking in a second wife, sometimes practiced by Hindu-Nepali householders, is less considered and seems practicable without conflict only in the case of taking in a sister of the wife. Open polygamous marriages as well as having concubines were strange to the Sherpa and, though there are only few cases, this leads nowadays to conflicts between the marriage partners, and also to conflicts between son and father. Traditionally, the rule was to avoid conflict in the household and this was made easy by taking in a foster-child as heir, which reminds us of this mythic aspect of the first Minyag king, and gives sense to it.

### **Women, Men and Marriage**

Finally, an aspect of general importance must be considered. As shown above, there seems to be a certain relation between the belief in water-spirits – an aspect of nature – and the continuity of egalitarian concepts regarding rights to inheritance for both sexes and the position of women in the household, reminding us very much of communities with a stronger nomadic-pastoral way of life. A further pillar of this egalitarian outlook is shaped by the traditional arrangements of the marriage. In describing briefly the situational aspects of the main rite, which is only carried out after a long phase of consultation ceremonies, but years before the final dowry ceremony, we obtain an impression of the total outlook of this culture-nature continuum, that seems to be bound to the Sherpa's once stronger nomadic-pastoral way of life.

The marriage ceremony is carried out in the house and the village of the bride's parents. After approaching the village, the groom's party attracts attention by firing a gun. Following their arrival at the house, they will be served in a tent next to the house significantly, outside the house, usually before the agnatic relation are served, who gather

inside the house, are served. Until the binding-ritual takes place late in the night, the bride will rest and hide at the cooking place, which is usually behind the house. The remaining time is spent in singing-matches or, today, mostly in disco-dancing. The binding-ritual is then performed in a real crowd. Older men settle on the seating-cushions along the walls, while younger men and women and children gather in the middle of the room. The bride and groom sit in the center, the groom with crossed legs, the bride resting on her legs and thus a little bit elevated. Both are accompanied by umbrella-carriers. Before them stands the lama, who came with the groom's party, and, after speeches (*molla*) have been given by representatives of both sides, he performs the binding ritual. To conduct this ritual the Lama puts butter in the hair above the forehead of bride and groom this is called *kargyen*, "white mark") and he offers them cups of *chang*, which after they have had a drink, will be offered across to the relatives of bride and groom. Outside the house, however, some of the younger, unmarried men are singing ionic verses about the fate of the girl who must go and lose her youth. Again, volleys of gunfire should accompany the rite. After the wedding rites the feast goes on until dawn, with singing, group-dances, and also solo-dances performed by men perhaps, too, with disco-dancing. The bride will be brought to the village of the groom only after all other invitations (*den*) in the village have been passed. Nowadays, however, the bride will move over to the groom's village and house at a later moment with a few friends accompanying her in order to save the costs of a second wedding-ritual carried out in the groom's parent's house.

As this short description of the main marriage ritual shows, the whole scenario is staged, as if it were a raid. The groom's party presents itself as intruders, and as such they are served outside the house in a tent. The wedding rite itself is performed in such a crowded gathering that as an observer one cannot but have the impression that the wedding turns to the best a situation that is styled to express a struggling crowd. Thus the wedding in the center of it all should help "to avoid the chaos", as Brauen (1985b) has similarly formulated in interpreting the wedding customs of Ladakh.

Thus again the attitude of voluntary devotion is seemingly expected from the women who give themselves in marriage. However, having collected data on the different attitudes that are connected to femaleness, this assessment seems somewhat incomplete. So it is no surprise that among the common Sherpa, men have to provide bride-service (*dalca*, "help") to the parents of the bride over a period of some years. This consists of help at harvest time, preparing the fields, house-construction and doing wood-work in general. Often the bride lives with her parents during this time until the birth of a child. Only then is the final move over to the husband's house carried out.

The reason for giving special attention to the situational aspect of the marriage among the Sherpa is now easier to understand. As Ortner and Whitehead (1983: 8) in

referring to Collier and Rosaldo (1983) have pointed out, the so-called "bride-service" societies exhibit a tendency to emphasize conceptions about man as hunter or man as fighter, while conceptions about women are less systematized and women are not glorified as mothers or life-givers in general. This seems to be true with regard to the perspective of the common Sherpa, whose cultural experiences have proved to be bound to a once stronger nomadic-pastoral way of life, but there seems to be one exception. In the more settled community of the Lama-clan which is oriented to hierarchical values, the *lu*-goddess Lu Mu Karmu is worshipped as rain-bringer and thus life-bringer for the whole region of Solu. At the same time she is believed to be an ascetic goddess and thus subordinated to the high-religious prestige-system.

### **Conclusions**

The social position and weight of women among the Sherpa is based on their importance for the household, where traditional women enjoy equal rights in property and internal affairs, also sustained by strong ties to their natal homes. At the same time conceptions about women as culture-bringers and life-givers, though important for the endurance of the household, are placed less in the foreground. Instead women themselves put emphasis on their energetic attitudes and on their being accepted as equal, while however the high-religious conceptions, on the other hand, tend to control these active sides and put devotional aspects to the fore.

By viewing the Sherpa's myths of the water-spirits and their communicative memory about attitudes of femaleness as embedded in a once stronger nomadic-pastoral way of life, the legitimizing function of their presentation also seems to highlight an indigenous discourse about culture and nature. In their "natural" relation to the water-spirits women establish the luck of the household. That is also the reason why, at the time the bride leaves her parent's home, the water-spirits have to be tricked in order that all fortune should not be lost with the giving of the bride. As was emphasized, the "floating element" is connected not only with this belief in qualities or attitudes of passive giving, but also with the attitude of activity. This latter attitude seems especially to be grounded in the oral traditions relating to the *lu*-water-spirits, who are able to distribute their wealth equally (among both sexes) and further their own plans.

Because we are confronted here with intersecting perspective on a single theme – the relation of the women, and ultimately humans and their relations of exchange, to the water-spirits – it is not possible, from the perspective of the Sherpa, to associate women definitely with concepts about nature and men with those about culture. In so far as the "water-spirits go with women", women have a natural relation to them, but as their myth

also provides a cultural memory of away of life, it is a relation concerning women and men alike. This conception is also expressed in another Sherpa song: "Older brother, you are the high gods' flower, younger sister, I am the flower of the *lu*. But we are both one tree's flowers ..."

## Notes

1. This point is also to be stressed in the light of the data and comparison given by Seitz (1990) concerning a variety of more simple societies in different regions of Asia and Africa, who have adopted wet-rice cultivation, and thereby, we might say, a stronger sense of settledness, only relatively recently. In this comparison Seitz reached the conclusion that despite of the introduction of wet-rice cultivation and associated features, like the private possession of terrace-land, a high proportion of these societies remain attached to their more egalitarian outlook in general affairs (e.g., community land) and did not develop a central political authority (1990: 130) with all its possible hierarchical effects, also concerning the position of women. Though the Sherpa have nearly no access to wet-rice cultivation, they are nonetheless confronted with the state-governed system of landholding of their Hindu neighbors, by way of which hierarchical aspects were also introduced into their system of landholding.

In my dissertation "Traditional Opposition: Individuality and Worldview of the Sherpa" it is shown, that, while more hierarchical aspects are in certain layers of their society nowadays, experiences from a stronger nomadic-pastoral way of life have still much influence on the ordering of today's life and relations. For example, the form of some of today's house-constructions show that the Sherpa are still conscious of the houses' derivation from the *goth* (Nep.) or *resa* (Sh.) type of high-pasture houses. Relations in the economic field of activities prove that, in case of shortage of resources, people do not tend to engage in conflicts over the limited means (e.g., fields), but look for alternative possibilities, even if they have to migrate temporarily. Equally, in the help-networks among the Sherpa there is an emphasis on voluntary involvement, which could have a basis in the nomadic-pastoral way of life, where resources as such seem to be unlimited, but where help itself cannot be enforced and thus has to be sustained by avoiding conflict in the community. The traces of this way of life are also to be found in the ritual relations to the gods of the locality, especially the *lu* water-spirits, which cannot however be treated here as such for reasons of brevity. Another perspective on the belief in *lu* water-spirits is given by Ortner (1978b), who shows how this belief is integrated into more high-religious concepts about human nature.

2. Indeed, objections may be raised as to the implication of a categorical contrast of Tibetan-oriented groups, like the Sherpa, and Hindu-Nepali groups in respect to the position of women. As Joanna Pfaff has said in a personal communication, the contrast should be seen relative to local variations, since the position of women is more subordinated in areas bordering India to the south-west of Nepal than in central Nepal, for example, where women have more freedom in choosing and handling their situation. For details, such as alternative forms of marriage, various works, particularly Bennett (1983: 73) may be consulted.

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