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Polyandry Marriage Pattern in Highland People of Nepal


Gokarna P. Gyanwali¹ and Ram H. Dhakal²

¹Department of Anthropology, Patan Multiple Campus, TU

²Department of Anthropology, Ratna Rajya Campus, TU

Author Note

Dr. Gokarna Prasad Gyanwali  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6877-051X> is a Lecturer in the Department of Antropology at Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University.

Dr. Ram Hari Dhakal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8700-1900> is a Lecturer at Ratnarajya Laxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Gokarna P. Gyanwali, Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University. Email: gokarna256@gmail.com

Abstract

Polyandry is a pattern of marriage in which a woman has more than one husband. It has been a common practice of marriage around the world since the historical period. There have been various forms of polyandry in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and America (snowbird of paradise, 2024). Among them, fraternal polyandry is common in most parts of the world. The polyandry system has also been common in most parts of Nepal in various forms. This article describes the present practice and situation of polyandry in the world as well as in the highland region of Nepal. This research is concerned with the study of the practice of polyandry in the upper Mustang of Nepal. For this research, the primary and secondary data are collected from the field and secondary sources like the Rural Municipality chairperson and local people for the case study. The major findings are that polyandry is prevalent in high hill and Himalayan regions of Nepal. It is arranged by the parents of girls or boys due to economic, social, biological, and cultural factors in the Himalayan region of Nepal.

Keywords: polyandry, fraternal polyandry, primary husband, successional polyandry, Upper Mustang

Polyandry Marriage Pattern in Highland People of Nepal

Polyandry is a form of marriage practice in which a woman possesses several husbands. Most authors mentioned it as a form of marriage developed from group marriage. The Encyclopedia Britannica (n.d.) mentions that polyandry is a marriage pattern in which a woman has two or more men at a time (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2018, February 23)). The term polyandry is derived from the merger of the Greek words *polys* and *anēr or Andros* which means many and man. Except for two doubtful examples (Khasias and Saporogian Cossacks), polyandry always assumes the fraternal marriage form; that is to say, the husbands of the woman are brothers (Deniker, 1900). Anthropologists and social science researchers give various definitions of polyandry. Cassidy and Lee (1989) define polyandry as the concurrent marriage of one woman to two or more men. Traditionally, this form of marriage was arranged by parents, with children, particularly females, having little or no say. This practice is changing somewhat nowadays, but it is still unusual for children to marry without their parents' consent (Goldstein, 1987).

In the Himalayan region of Nepal, polyandry marriage is arranged by the parents of girls or boys due to economic, social, biological, and cultural reasons. This article explores the various aspects of polyandry marriage in the world as well as in Nepal's Himalayan regions mainly in the upper Mustang. Polygamy is practiced in many parts of the country. In some districts of Nepal like Jumla, Humla, Dolpa, Lamjung, Mustang, Gorkha and Manang, polygamy is still practiced instead of polyandry, i.e. it is customary for a woman to have two or more husbands at the same time. In the news item titled 'Polygamy still prevails in Mustang: common brother of brothers', it was claimed that such culture still exists in Chhoser, Chhonhup, Lomanthang, Charang, Surkhang, Ghami, Muktinath, Kagbeni, Jhong and other VDCs of the district. Kantipur Daily also wrote in its issue on March 3, 2010, 'Why be ashamed to accept culture?' The headline was

"Religion, Wisdom and Chanorbu Lama, a resident of Bargaun, Humla."

Annapurna Post pointed out the documentary 'Ko Husband' based on polygamy in some villages including Lamjung, Gorkha, Mustang, Manang, Humla, Jumla, Dolpa and Taplejung. The BBC also recently reported that the family of Champa Singh Lama, who arrived in Humla from Fang Tungar in Tibet on January 16, 2022, had been practicing polygamy for 17 generations. Such news from time to time confirms that polygamy is still practiced in Nepal (Sthapit, 2022). Despite the historical practices of polyandry, a neglected number of studies have been carried out in the Nepali context. Hence, this paper is to overview the polyandry marriage patterns in the world and analyze the contemporary situation of polyandry marriage in the highland people of the Karnali province of Nepal.

Method and Sources of Data

The above-mentioned objective, analytical, and descriptive methods are to be applied to this research. The data used in the study is both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative data are collected from the field observation and group discussion with senior citizens who are familiar with polyandry marriage. Three short case studies are collected from the field for the justification of polyandry marriage. The quantitative data are collected from secondary sources like the National Population Census of Nepal, reports related to the topic, articles, government documents, and other organization/individual research. Both the qualitative and quantitative data are triangulated for their reliability.

Theorizing of Polyandry

There are several theories which speak on the practice of polyandry in anthropology. Westermarck (1926), a leading figure in Anthropology, studied various aspects and determinants of polyandry around the globe. He proposed a number of determinants for polyandry throughout exceptional styles of societies, which include skewed intercourse ratios with males outnumbering females, aid limitations, geographical circumscription, and prolonged absences of

husbands from home. Similarly, Starkweather and Hames (2012) stated that there are a number of anthropological theories for polyandry marriage like the Monogamous Principle, Division of Labor and Low Productivity, Skewed Sex Ratio, Male Absenteeism, and the Father Effect theory. Likewise, the kin-selection theory of sociobiology explains the various aspects of fraternal polyandry. This theory also has developed different hypotheses about the polyandry marriage practice. A hypothesis is that fraternal polyandry enhances fitness because of the differential survival of offspring in such unions due to the greater parental investment made possible by multiple brothers supporting a wife and her offspring (Beall & Goldstein, 1981).

Another hypothesis is that polyandrous women have offspring that are half-siblings rather than full siblings. Fraternal polyandry seems an exception since each of the several brothers sexually sharing a single wife substantially lowers his number of mating and his chance to fertilize a female and produce offspring (Beall & Goldstein, 1981). Among these theories and hypotheses, different disciplines like biology, socio-biology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and psychology have several theories of polyandry. This article has applied the socio-biological theory of kin-selection and division of labor and low productivity in the highland people of Nepal.

Polyandry Marriage around the Globe

Polyandry marriage practices were more common in the past in many cultures and tribal groups of the world. It was widespread in Tibet before the Chinese interference and is still predominant in the rural areas of Tibet (Yangkyi, 2023) and many ethnic Tibetan communities in Nepal and India. Polyandry is rare around the world now, but it is also noted elsewhere, including in communities in Nigeria and northern Cameroon, in many parts of India, and among many New World hunter-gatherers, including the Inuit and the Paiute, Shoshone, Aceh, and Yanomamo (Haddix, 1999). But in the modern period, it is uncommon and legally

banned in most of the countries. According to Tiwari (2008), polyandry was an uncommon practice before European colonialism. A recent study of tribal societies in the modern globe found that 83.39% of them practice polygyny, 16.14% practice monogamy, and only 0.47% practice polyandry (Heaphy, 2017). In almost all cases, the polyandry practiced is fraternal, where a group of brothers share a wife and it was believed to be the norm and values historically (Heaphy, 2017). The different forms of polyandry marriage around the world in the contemporary period are given in the table below.

Table 1*Types of Polyandry in the World*

Continents	Countries or localities
Asia	Paharis of North India, the minority of people in Kinnaur & Himachal, Toda tribe of Nilgiris, the Najanad Vellala of Travancore, Nair & Palians people of South India; Ethnic groups of Monpa, Tamang, Qiang, Sherpa, Bhote, Newbie and Lhoba people of Nepal, Han and Hui people of China; Gilyaks people of northeast Asia, Mongolian People; Bang Chan people of Thailand; Panans of Southeast Asia; Sakai people of Indonesia; Semang people of Malaysia; Subanu people
South America	Polyandry existed in the South American tribe Bororo, Tupi-Kawahiband up to 70 percent of Amazonian cultures may have believed in the principle of multiple paternity. Other people are: Ache, Aymara, Bari, Canela, Cashinahua, Cubeo, Guaja, Kulina, Mehinaku, Panoan Matis, Surui, Yanomamo, and Zo'e.
North America	Aleuts of Alaska, Sugpiaq of Alaska, Blackfoot people of northeast USA, Cherokee people of USA, Copper Eskimos of Canada, Iglulik of northern Canada, Innu people of Quebec and

	northern Labrador, Inupiaq people of Canada, Mackenzie River Eskimo of Canada, Paviotso-Pawnee-Pomo-Point white Eskimo of USA, Polar Eskimo, Shoshoni of Southeastern California, Tikerarmiut people, Tlinght people, Utes of Utah, and Yokota.
Oceania	Chuuk people, Hawaiians, Lamotrek Atoll, and Malekula people
Australia	Dieri people
Africa	!Kung people of Africa, Bahuma people of Uganda and Congo, Canarians people of northwest Africa, Irigwe people of central Nigeria, Lele people of Nigeria, Massai people of Kenya and Tanzania.

Source: Abiola, 2022; Akinyoade, 2019; & <https://answersafrica.com/>

Table 1 indicates that most of the ethnic communities of the world have been practicing polyandry because of their cultural norms and values, hidden biological interests, geographical structure, economic conditions, and low productivity of the land. There are various forms of polyandry in the contemporary world. Anthropologist Goldstein (1976) mentioned that polyandry is the least well-understood form of marital practice. Starkweather and Hames (2012) classified classical and non-classical types of polyandry (Benedict, 2017). Starkweather and Hames (2016) found 53 nonclassical societies including North America and South America have polyandry in formal or informal forms (cited from Encyclopedia Britannica). Levine (1980) and Peters (1982) stated that there are six types of polyandry in the contemporary world, they are fraternal, associated, polykoity (described by Levine 1980), secondary, walking marriage (described by Peters 1982), and familial polyandry (Benedict, 2017). But Levine & Sangree (1980) and others define the following basic types of polyandry.

Fraternal or Adelpic Polyandry

According to Levine and Sangree (1980), it is the classic form of polyandry in which co-resident brothers jointly marry a single woman in only one

wedding and later form a single household. It is simple to understand that two, three, four, or more brothers jointly take a wife, who leaves her parental home and go to live with them. Doda of India, the Aham of Africa, and the Shihalida of Srilanka practice this type of marriage system. Fraternal polyandry is common in Nepal too especially in Lomthang or upper Mustang of Mustang District, Samagaon, Chhekampar village (Tsum valley) of Gorkha District, and Kimathanka village of Sankhuwasabha District (CSVFN, n.d.). There are two types of polyandry practice. If one woman is married by brothers of the same family at the same time, it is called fraternal polyandry. Whereas if the woman is married by more men, but not brothers, at the same time, it is called non-fraternal polyandry (CSVSN, n.d.). Mostly the fraternal polyandry practice is widespread in the Himalayan region of Nepal.

Associated Polyandry

It is a system of marriage in which a woman marries two men who may or may not be brothers, though marrying brothers is not uncommon. This type of marriage begins monogamously and additional husbands are incorporated into the pre-existing union later on (Levine & Sangree, 1980). In this practice, generally, the first husband will act as the primary husband and the husbands who entered the union later will act as the secondary husband. This marriage pattern is very flexible (Levine & Sangree, 1980) and secondary husbands will often leave the marriage once they acquire a wife of their own (Peters & Hunt, 1975; Steward, 1936).

Nayar Polyandry

This type of polyandry is unique to the Nayar of southwest India. The nature of the system is that just as a woman is involved in several marital relationships with a number of men, a man is married to several women. Nayar women and their husbands did not traditionally live together in the same

household. The purpose of each union was to legitimize children born to the wife (Levine & Sangree, 1980).

Successional Polyandry

It is a practice of marriage in which a woman receives several husbands simultaneously and a woman acquires one husband after another in sequence. These men may or may not be related and may or may not incorporate a hierarchical system where one husband is considered primary and allotted certain rights and privileges over the others, such as biologically fathering a child (Anisulowo, 2022).

Secondary Marriage

This practice of marriage has been found only in Northern Nigeria and Northern Cameroon. It seems to be a combination of polyandry and polygyny, as women can get married and cohabit with several men without having to divorce simultaneously and the same men are married to several women simultaneously (Zeitzen 2008 cited in Naksomboon & Mondain, 2013).

Polyandry in Nepal

Generally, there are two types of marriage patterns polygamy and monogamy in Nepal. However, according to the Muluki Civil Code 2074 BS and Muluki Criminal Code 2074 BS, the polygamy marriage practice is strictly prohibited in Nepal. However, research shows that not only polygyny, but polyandry is also still practiced in some villages of Nepal including Lamjung, Gorkha, Mustang, Manang, Humla, Jumla, Dolpa, and Taplejung. It is the practice of accepting the wife brought by the eldest son of the family as his wife. Even though he is accepted as his wife, he still refers to her as his brother-in-law. It is customary for other brothers to become grooms at the eldest son's wedding (Poudyal, 2020). This type of marriage practice is commonly called Fraternal Polyandry and it is also called adelphic polyandry. In this form of marriage system, the eldest brother is normally leading in terms of authority and

responsibility to manage the household, but all the brothers share the work and participate as sexual partners. It is one of the forms of a matriarchal family system in which the wife is powerful and has treated all the brothers equally in sexual and household activities. Concern over the delicate question of which children are fathered by which brother falls on the wife alone. In polyandrous families, the woman often cannot declare which of her husbands fathered which children. She may or may not say who the father is because she does not wish to create conflict in the family; she may also be unsure who the biological father is. Under polyandry, there are two sets of asymmetric relationships in Nepal:

The Asymmetric Relationship Between Husbands

Under the brotherly polyandry system in Nepal, the authority between the brothers is usually exercised by the elder brother, and the younger brothers have to follow. When these younger brothers want to actively change their status, the relationship between the brothers is often easy to change but it gets anxious and even struggles among the brothers.

Asymmetric Relationship Between Wife and Husband

It is common for men and women to have a large age difference, in polyandry. This is mainly because the marriage started when the eldest brother was about to get married, and it is not uncommon for the brothers to have a big age gap, which will lead to a wife. The age gap with the youngest brother is also often very large. Studies have found that the culture of polyandry originated in the Tibetan region and spread to some parts of Nepal and India including the Mustang, Himachal, Nilgiri, and other regions of that areas. Polyandry marriage has two controversial ideas: in favor and against it. It is said that this type of marriage system is one of the best ways to maintain limited parental property rights within the same clan and maintain the population of the area. Indirectly has made a great contribution to the protection of scarce natural resources in the region (<https://inf.news>).

However, it is controversial and has been criticized in human rights as well as biological perspectives.

The study shows that polyandry marriage is still common in most of the district of Karnali region. Out of the eight local levels of Dolpa, some families of three municipalities like Dolpo Buddha, Shey Foksundo, and Charkatansong are still practicing polyandry (Budha, 2019). Similarly, such type of marriage practices are still present in Chhoser, Chhonhup, Lomanthang, Charang, Surkhang, Ghami, Muktinath, Kagweni, Jhong, and other places of Mustang district (Gurung, 2012; Pahilopost, 2015). According to Lama (2020), the origin of this practice is linked to poverty. He cited the statement forwarded by the chairperson of Simikot Municipality, Padam Lama, and mentioned that there is a belief in the society that when all the brothers live together, there is no need to share, the population is controlled and the burden of household chores is reduced. This practice is still prevalent in Buraunse, Torpa, Limatang, Bargaun, Hutik, Langdu, Gumba, Talki and Dojam in wards 1, 3, and 4 of Namkha municipality and Simkot municipality. Chairperson Lama claimed that polyandry is still in practice in about 30 percent of the houses in these Municipalities. Deputy Speaker of Karnali Pradesh Sabha Mrs. Puspa Gharti mentioned that all brothers who practice polyandry can earn a living from ancestral wealth. This is called 'dong khane'. To follow the practice of polygamy is to eat at home by continuing the tradition. Eating the dong of old age is considered to be a matter of honor and tradition. So, for the happiness of the society and the family, the sons resort to polyandry (Gharti, 2019). Nowadays, young people of this region do not want to practice it but due to the lack of education and fear of society, they have been following it. Polyandry was very common in the past, but with the development of modernization, the marriage system is gradually disappearing and is on the verge of extinction.

The American social anthropologist Melvyn C. Goldstein (1987), pointed out in 1981 that to ensure the integrity of family resources, 56% of the richer or higher-status peasant families in Limizeng Village choose fraternal polyandry, and the lower income or poorer class (when a generation has two or more brothers) also have 33% choose this kind of marriage system (Goldstein, 1987). According to a survey, in 1998, 93% (28) of the settlements in the Upper Mustang area adapted to the practice of polyandry, and a total of 12.73% of families adapted to the practice of polyandry to 4.9% in 2005/2008, and the number has declined. (Gurung, 2013). One widely accepted view treats polyandry as a sensitive cultural mechanism for adjusting population levels to changes in resource availability and economic productivity. In this view, polyandry is to be regarded as an adaptive strategy, not as a cultural ideal, and monogamy is generally seen, even by the participants themselves, as the more personally satisfying form of marriage. Another argument associates polyandry with relatively high status for women. In this view polyandry is simplistically conceived of as the converse of polygyny: just as the acceptability of multiple wives suggests the relatively high status of males, polyandry is taken to suggest the opposite, the relatively high status of females (Schuler, 1987).

Polyandry Marriage Practice in the Himalayan Region of Nepal

Even today polyandry continues to be practiced in the two most well-known places: The Tibetan Plateau area of India, Nepal, and Tibet of China; and the Marquesas Islands of the South Pacific area. In this region, each of the brothers cohabits in turn with their common wife, a certain period being agreed upon. The ancient Arabs had practiced it as a temporary marriage and it was common in Persia and the Toda people of India. Polyandry has been practiced by several peoples living on the borders of Tibet like Miris, Dophlas, Abors, Khasias, Ladakhis, etc. (Deniker, 1901). Most of the researchers believed that it exists in this region due to the scarcity of productive land, the scarcity of women, and the

support of the pastoral life of these people. The practice of polyandry is believed to stem from the tale of Mahabharata, the ancient Hindu epic. In the text, one of the cornerstones of Indian culture, Draupadi, daughter of the King of Drupada was married to five brothers Paanch Pandava. It is not legal, but it is the most common form - whereby women in polyandrous relationships marry more than one man from the same family - it is permitted. It tends to be practiced in male-dominated villages, which still follow primitive rituals and customs. Brothers who refuse the union are often treated as outcasts (Williams, 2013). Hence, the Tibetans, Sherpas, Ladakhis, Mustangese, and other Himalayan peoples in remote areas still practice polyandry, a custom in which a woman can have two or more husbands.

Case Study 1: Prevalence of Polyandry

According to P. Lama, a local of Namkha-5, Muchu, Humla, six brothers have one wife. Lama said that when he had to leave the house after marrying a single man, all the brothers got married to a woman. It is customary for all the brothers to accept the brother-in-law as their wife only after getting married to the eldest brother of the family. Similarly, Ward Chairperson of Simkot Gaonpalika-4 Chhabichandra Lama said that the practice of polygamy could not be eradicated in the Lama settlement of Humla due to social norms linked with economics (P. Lama, personal communication, October 10, 2023). Ward chairperson Lama, who got married alone after rebelling at home, says that the practice of polygamy still prevails in his own village Burause, which is adjoining to the district headquarters Simkot. According to Chairman Lama, the problem of polygamy is still the same.

According to PB Lama, the local leader of Namkha Gaonpalika-1, polygamy is practiced in all the wards of Namkha Gaonpalika. As it has been a tradition since the time of old grandparents, it is not easy to break it. Due to the deep-rooted rules, it is not easy to bring under the purview of law. According to

ward chairperson Lama, polygamy is still practiced in about 70 percent of Ghurdhuri in Namkha village municipality.

Case Study 2: Polyandry in Mustang

Many people may not believe that polygamy is still practiced in the Himalayan area of Mustang. However, such culture is still present in Chhoser, Chhonhup, Lomanthang, Charang, Surkhang, Ghami, Muktinath, Kagweni, Jhong and other rural municipalities of the district. A. Gurung of Choser said that the brothers of a family in Mustang have a tradition of mass marriage with a woman since time immemorial so there would be no need to distribute property as there would be less food production in the Himalayan region. According to him, after all the brothers are together, there will be no division of property, grief and workload will be less and there will be no need to share ancestral property (A. Gurung, personal communication, October 8, 2023). "Even though the outside world interprets the marriage ritual here as a practice, in our view, it is not a problem but a recognized social practice," (S. Bhattachan, personal communication, October 8, 2023) a Mustang intellectual. He said that of all the siblings in the same family, Myla's son Lama lives, but other siblings have to accept the eldest brother's wife as their wife. "Those who collectively do not accept the same wife of the brothers do not get the ancestral property of the parents," Bhattachan added. "In some cases, the wife is twice as old as the husband." (S. Bhattachan, personal communication, October 8, 2023, and <https://pahilopost-com.translate.google.com>).

Case Study 3: An Event of Polyandry in Humla

C. Lama of Limatang has left the village due to polyandry practice and has come to the district headquarters. He said that after living together for about seven years, he quarreled with his brothers. "I have left my son with my brother-in-law and come here (Simkot Bazaar). I have got another marriage," he said. "That's why I didn't get a share of the house and a son" (C. Lama, personal

communication, October 8, 2023). Such domestic disputes do not reach the judiciary. Simkot village chairman P. Lama says that, it is kept secret in the village. According to him, the origin of this practice is linked to poverty. "There is a belief in the society that when all the brothers live together, there is no need to share, the population is controlled and the burden of household chores is reduced," (P. Lama, personal communication, October 8, 2023). This practice is still prevalent in Buraunse, Torpa, Limatang, Bargaun, Hutik, Langdu, Gumba, Talki and Dojam in wards 1, 3, and 4 of Namkha municipality and Simkot municipality. About 30 percent of the houses in these villages have polygamy, said Chairman Lama. Along with education and development infrastructure for a decade and a half, some families have given up polygamy. Many of the displaced families have abandoned the practice (Lama, 2020). These three cases as mentioned above studies proved that the High Himalayan people have practiced polyandry since the matriarchal period. It is still common in Mustang, Humla, and other parts of the Karnali province of Nepal.

Conclusion

Polyandry is rarely found in the world however it is still practiced in some communities of different parts of the globe. Polyandry has been practiced by several peoples living on the borders of Tibet like Miris, Dophlas, Abors, Khasias, and Ladakh. Fraternal polyandry is practiced in high-hill areas of Nepal such as in Jumla, Humla, Dolpa, Lamjung, Mustang, Gorkha Manang, and Taplejung. There are various reasons for polyandry such as sensitive cultural mechanisms for adjusting population levels to changes in resource availability and economic productivity, poverty, no division of property, no need to share ancestral property, and sharing of grief and workload. There is a relatively high status of women in polyandry. It is not easy to break such practices due to the social norms and traditional practices.

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