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## The Ethics (and Economics) of Tibetan Polyandry

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# The Ethics (and Economics) Of Tibetan Polyandry

Jonathan Stoltz<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Fraternal polyandry—one woman simultaneously being married to two or more brothers—has been a prominent practice within Tibetan agricultural societies for many generations. While the topic of Tibetan polyandry has been widely discussed in the field of anthropology, there are, to my knowledge, no contributions by philosophers on this topic. For this reason alone, my brief analysis of the ethics of Tibetan polyandry will serve to enhance scholars's understanding of this practice. In this article, I examine the factors that have sustained the practice of polyandry in Tibet, but do so with the further aim of drawing attention to some of the key ethical implications of polyandrous marriage. I argue that the natural law criticisms raised against the practice of polyandry by St. Thomas Aquinas are unsuccessful, but I also argue that the

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utilitarian motivations for this marriage practice endorsed by agrarian Tibetans are also highly suspect.

## Introduction

In the midst of providing his moral defense of monogamy, the thirteenth century Italian theologian Thomas Aquinas argues, “Therefore, since certainty as to offspring is the principal good which is sought in matrimony, no law or custom has permitted one woman to be a wife for several husbands” (SCG III-II, 124.2).<sup>2</sup> Thomas was almost certainly wrong about this conclusion. Though it appears that he was ignorant of the practice of polyandry—that is, the practice of one woman simultaneously being married to multiple husbands—the tradition has existed in a variety of societies throughout history, and, in particular, continues to this day to be a prominent practice within agricultural communities on the Tibetan Plateau. Yet, though he was undoubtedly mistaken about the existence of polyandry, there is much less certainty with regard to Thomas’s moral condemnation of this form of marriage, and so an examination of his criticisms deserves closer attention.

Western philosophers have written almost nothing about Tibetan polyandry. Aside from a few offhand comments by Bertrand Russell—where Russell’s concern is logical, not ethical—there has never been, to my knowledge, any deep philosophical discussion of this Tibetan marriage practice (45). In addition, surprisingly few Buddhist studies scholars have tackled the topic. Nearly all of the investigations of Tibetan polyandry in the past fifty years have been carried out by anthropologists or, to a lesser extent, evolutionary biologists, and most

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<sup>2</sup> Here, by “certainty as to offspring,” Aquinas is referring to knowledge of paternity.

of our collective knowledge about this marriage custom derives from a series of anthropological studies. Given this state of affairs, I believe the time is right to start a philosophical conversation about the ethics of Tibetan polyandry.

In what follows I will engage in a preliminary examination of the moral status of Tibetan polyandry, focusing my inquiry on just two items. First, I will briefly describe the practice of fraternal polyandry in Tibet, identifying its central features and also teasing out the principal reasons why this form of marriage has continued into the twenty-first century. I will then reflect on some of the ethical questions surrounding the practice by looking at both natural law arguments and utilitarian considerations relevant to the practice. I will argue that the natural law criticisms of polyandry that are raised by Thomas Aquinas fail to be persuasive, but I will subsequently show that the utilitarian motivations that Tibetans use to support this form of marriage are themselves problematic.

### **Background of Polyandry in Tibet**

I shall begin by tracing some of the basic features of polyandrous marriage as it is practiced on the Tibetan plateau. The details that follow come from anthropological research that has been carried out over the past forty years.<sup>3</sup> My aim is not at all to contribute to this research. I am only providing these details to help ground my subsequent philosophical analysis of Tibetan polyandry.

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the anthropological studies on Tibetan polyandry have been conducted in Nepal, and not in Tibet proper. These studies include those of Goldstein (*Fraternal, Pahari*), Levine, Levine and Silk, and Haddix. The information that follows is derived largely from these publications.

Although there are obviously going to be small differences in the practice from region to region, the general features of Tibetan polyandry are fairly stable. First of all, and most importantly, the only common form of polyandry in Tibet is *fraternal* polyandry, wherein multiple brothers share a single wife. (To be more precise, because polyandrous relations commonly occur in successive generations, this means that in many cases the siblings who share a single wife will actually be *half*-brothers.) In most instances of polyandrous marriage two or three brothers take the same wife, but it is not unusual for four, five, or even six brothers to have a single wife. In these arrangements, the parents of the male children arrange a marriage for those sons whereby a bride is brought into the family unit. The eldest son is considered the dominant male figure in the marriage, but the expectation is that all the brothers will play equal roles in working for the good of the family, and also that all of the brothers (assuming they have reached an age of sexual maturity) will have equitable sexual access to the wife.

A second key point is that fraternal polyandry is practiced almost exclusively within *farming communities* in Tibet. That is, it is not commonly practiced in nomadic regions of Tibet—where the main occupation is the herding of yaks and other animals—nor is it practiced within urban areas of Tibet. Instead, and for reasons that will become clear shortly, polyandry is a widespread form of marriage in Tibetan agricultural regions alone. Within farming areas there is much physical labor that needs to be performed, and the presence of multiple males working toward the sustenance of a single family unit makes it possible for the family to reach a level of economic security that likely could not be obtained from the work of one husband. Evidence suggests that polyandrous marriages are most stable in situations where the brothers

have distinct contributions to the household's success.<sup>4</sup> So, for example, one brother might be in charge of farming the field, while a second brother takes charge of herding the family's sheep, and a third brother engages in trade. Such a division of labor creates a situation in which each brother will have different periods of the year in which he is absent from the house, thus making it possible, in principle, for all the brothers to have sexual access to their wife without great tension.

In most areas where polyandry is practiced, it is expected that the wife will treat, and love, each of the brothers equally. Surface level affection for all her husbands is encouraged, and emotional bias in favor of one husband over others is ideally to be avoided. Along similar lines, in most Tibetan areas where polyandry takes place paternity is not explicitly assigned to an individual husband. All the husbands are to treat all the children equally, not showing favoritism toward offspring that they might know to be their own.

It is also the case that in areas of Tibet where this form of marriage exists, it tends to be the norm rather than the exception. While both monogamous and polyandrous marriages exist side by side (together with, to a lesser extent, polygynous marriages) in agricultural areas of Tibet, it is clear from numerous studies that polyandrous marriage units are sought whenever possible. Most cases of monogamous marriages in these agricultural regions arise as a result of one of two scenarios. First, a monogamous marriage can occur due to a family's having only one male child or, at the very least, having only one male child who is physically and cognitively suitable for marriage. Second, a monogamous marriage may arise when a previously polyandrous marriage suffers a *partition* in which an invariably younger brother leaves the marriage. Yet, in nearly

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<sup>4</sup> This was one of the key findings in Haddix. The matter was not carefully addressed in Levine, where sources of instability were also studied.

all cases in which a landowning farming family does have multiple male children, a polyandrous marriage is sought.

Although polyandrous marriages are the norm in these areas, participation in such a marriage is not viewed as compulsory or permanently binding for the brothers. Younger siblings in a polyandrous marriage are free to partition from the relationship and start their own families, and there is little or no social stigma associated with doing so. As I will explain below, economic considerations may constrain the willingness of the brothers to partition. But, at least in principle, participation within a polyandrous marriage is viewed as optional.

As a final background note, it must be pointed out that while the practice of fraternal polyandry has been formally outlawed in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, the custom continues largely unabated there. Formal documentation of these marriages—in cases where there is documentation—identifies them as monogamous marriages between the eldest brother of a family and his wife. Yet, in practice, the younger brothers, while not legally documented as husbands, are considered by the culture to be husbands as well. Recent research by a professor at Tibet University, for example, indicates that the practice of fraternal polyandry in Gyantse county of central Tibet continues to be widespread, despite having been formally outlawed years ago by the Chinese government (Dekyi).

### **Economic Motivations for Polyandry**

Anthropological studies have indicated that Tibetans do not view polyandry as intrinsically desirable. Rather, it is viewed as a practical means toward other, desirable ends (Goldstein *Pahari* 328; Beall and Goldstein 10). Nor are there any underlying religious motivations for this form of



marriage. What, then, are the principal considerations that support polyandrous marriage in Tibet? How did this form of marriage gain acceptance in Tibetan society?

The eighteenth century Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri, who lived in Tibet from 1715 to 1721, offers two explanations for the presence of polyandry in his writing on the topic. The first point he makes is that the harshness of the land makes earning one's livelihood difficult in Tibet, and thus to divide land between male offspring would make everyone "miserable and quickly reduced to beggary" (Desideri 288). The second reason he offers is that in areas where polyandrous marriages are practiced it is due to "the large number of males and the much smaller number of females" (*ibid.*).

All available evidence suggests that Desideri was wrong about both these reasons. There is no evidence that males ever substantially outnumbered females in Tibetan agricultural societies, and current data shows that in locations where this form of marriage still exists there are frequently more females (of suitable age) than males. Desideri's other explanation is a bit closer to the mark, but also incorrect. While it is true that Tibetan land is not easy to live on, and while it may be true that monogamous marriage would lead to an increased population and decreased quantity of arable land per person, numerous recent studies have shown that Tibetans do not consciously entertain these considerations as reasons why they engage in polyandrous marriage. As anthropologist Melvyn Goldstein puts the matter, "Polyandry is primarily selected not for bread and butter motives—fear of starvation in a difficult environment—but rather primarily for the Tibetan equivalent of oysters, champagne, and social esteem" (*Pahari* 329).

The reasons offered by Tibetans themselves as their motivations for adopting polyandrous marriages are nearly all economic in nature. The foremost consideration in the minds of Tibetans who practice poly-

andry is the benefits associated with the consolidation of family wealth. Having all the male children within a family marry a single wife keeps not only that family's land intact, it also keeps all of the family's material possessions—such as their house, equipment, and animals—together as well. As previously mentioned, this makes it possible for the family to achieve a level of economic security that could not be achieved if the family partitioned into separate households for each male child. Again, these marriages are not aimed at staving off poverty, but at attaining substantial wealth.

Along similar economic lines, having several husbands makes increased productivity—and hence, greater wealth—possible by way of specialized labor. As explained in the preceding section, one brother might be in charge of tending to the barley fields, while another brother is tasked with managing the family's animals, and yet another brother specializes in trade. Such specialization contributes to increased wealth in good times, and also eases worries about calamities in bad times. Three brothers with diverse occupations increases the family's likelihood of surviving (economically) through, for example, a year of bad crops, or a disease that wipes out a large portion of the family's herd of sheep.

In a slightly similar vein, an additional rationalization made for the practice of polyandry is that it prevents, rather than produces, familial tensions surrounding inheritance. Were there to be multiple male siblings forming separate nuclear families, that would, these Tibetans maintain, lead to increased familial strife, and uneasy relations between the brothers (and between the brothers' wives). It could lead to fears of favoritism and inequity in dividing family property. Polyandry is seen as a way to forestall such tensions. Thus, rather than creating conflict amongst brothers—though in some polyandrous marriages there

are such conflicts—Tibetans frequently maintain that such marriages prevent greater conflicts from occurring.

### Natural Law Arguments against Polyandry

Tibetans themselves make no explicit attempts to morally justify the practice of polyandry. Explanatory reasons are given in support of the practice, and as I've just mentioned, these explanations are principally economic, but the practice is not generally regarded as a moral issue in Tibetan society. To make a very rough analogy, we might say that the contrast between polyandry and monogamy is viewed by agrarian Tibetans to be more like how Americans currently see the contrast between *interracial* and *intra*racial marriage, and less like how Americans view the contrast between same-sex marriage and heterosexual marriage. Be that as it may, it is still possible to critically assess the moral status of polyandrous marriages in Tibet. To that end, I will begin by examining the natural law criticisms leveled against polyandry by Thomas Aquinas.

There are two criticisms that Aquinas raises against the practice. First, he claims that, insofar as all animals desire the pleasure of sexual intercourse, the practices of polyandry and polygyny restrict an individual's freedom to satisfy these desires. More simply, and in the specific case of polyandry, there will be a natural competition between husbands for sexual access to the wife. Second, Aquinas claims that people naturally desire to know their own children, and knowledge of paternity "would be completely destroyed if there were several males for one female" (SCG 124.1). Taking both these considerations together, Aquinas concludes that monogamous marriage "is a consequence of natural instinct" (*ibid.*).

It is, in fact, this second consideration—involving the identification of paternity—that Aquinas takes to be the most pertinent argument against polyandry. After all, his first criticism applies to both polyandry and polygyny. Whether a marriage consists of multiple male partners or multiple female partners, there is the possibility of sexual competition within the marriage. But the matter of identifying paternity is a problem for polyandrous relations alone. Thomas Aquinas’s view is that polyandrous marriage makes determinations of paternity impossible. Now, there is little question that present day empirical evidence shows Aquinas to be mistaken on this point. We now possess the scientific means by which to identify paternity through DNA testing. One might think, however, that Aquinas, as a thirteenth century figure, was nonetheless justified in asserting that determinations of paternity would be, *practically speaking*, impossible. So even if Thomas is strictly speaking wrong about the possibility of determining paternity within polyandrous marriages, one might be inclined to the view that knowledge of paternity was not possible in the pre-twentieth century world.

Yet, at least as polyandry is practiced on the Tibetan plateau—and even in the absence of modern day knowledge of genetics—far from being “completely destroyed,” identification of paternity is a well-established process. Admittedly, the social ideal is to have paternity *not* be a point of focus, and for all brothers to treat the family’s offspring equally. But it appears that in Tibetan areas where polyandry is practiced the husbands *are* aware of who the real father of a child is. As the anthropologist Nancy Levine notes about paternity in the ethnically Tibetan village of Ladog in northwest Nepal,

Although paternity is a fact of common knowledge, it is not a matter for public discussion, and while women and men were able to tell me the assignments of paternity for

every child in their village, they did so quietly, where we were not likely to be overheard. (274)

In most cases, the wife is charged with determining paternity (by calculating the date of conception) and with informing the husbands about who fathered the child. In fact, contrary to what Aquinas thinks, while there are occasionally *political* disputes about paternity in Tibetan polyandrous societies, gaining knowledge of paternity is not very difficult. As I mentioned earlier, because the husbands in polyandrous marriages in Tibet often spend periods of time away from home, there is quite frequently little difficulty determining who fathered a given child. As such, I find Aquinas's second criticism against polyandry to be far from convincing.

His first criticism is a bit more difficult to assess. Aquinas's complaint is that both polyandry and polygyny create situations in which the natural desire to engage freely in sexual intercourse is restricted, and that these restrictions lead to conflicts between spouses. Now, in one respect, this criticism comes across as quite silly. For, even if polygamous marriages do place restrictions on one's freedom to engage in sexual intercourse, so do traditional monogamous marriages. The exact restrictions are slightly different, but any form of marriage in which sexual relations are limited to one's marriage partner(s) has the potential to restrict access to sexual intercourse. A society in which its members practice open marriage—where extramarital sexual relations are permitted—allows for a substantially greater measure of freedom for members to engage in sexual intercourse than traditional monogamous marriage. Of course, Aquinas holds the view—for reasons that have little to do with the issue of polygamy—that sexual intercourse should take place only within marriage, and so his complaint must be understood as the limited one that polyandry constrains a husband's sexual access to *his wife*, whereas monogamous marriages do not face this restriction.

I am strongly inclined to think that Aquinas is correct in thinking that polyandrous marriages do result in restrictions on the husband's sexual access. This feature should not be regarded as surprising, however, as it is predicted by evolutionary biology (Levine and Silk). Individual husbands are unlikely to produce as many offspring as they would or could have had they married monogamously. The more important question, however, is whether these restrictions to sexual access are morally relevant. Does the fact that polyandry restricts sexual access show this form of marriage to be morally deficient?

In order to assess the merits of Aquinas's complaint we must get clear about just what it is that makes restricted sexual access an abhorrent feature of polygamous marriages. It would seem that having one's sexual access restricted could not be *inherently* morally wrong, as that would absurdly entail that it is immoral for monogamous spouses to spend extended periods of time apart from each other. It would, for example, be wrong for a man to spend a year apart from his wife while fighting in a war or traveling on a trade mission far from home. Given Aquinas's comments about the sexual activities of animals, it appears that the main reason he thinks restricted sexual access is morally wrong is not because of its intrinsic nature, but due to the resulting *conflicts* that would arise between competing sexual partners (SCG 124.1). Yet, assuming that this is the right way to understand his complaint, it is far from clear that this criticism is applicable to Tibetan versions of polyandry. There are two central factors that serve to counter the critique that Aquinas poses here. First, in Tibetan polyandrous marriages the so-called competing husbands are all brothers. And second, these brothers are freely able to partition from the marriage if they so choose.

The fact that Tibetans practice *fraternal* polyandry is supposed to counter fears of conflict between husbands. To whatever extent conflicts do exist in polyandrous marriages, proponents of Tibetan polyandry

maintain that these conflicts are lessened owing to the fact that the husbands in question are all brothers from a single family. In fact, while polyandrous marriage does sometimes lead to conflicts over sexual access, it is believed that these conflicts are the lesser of two evils when compared to the (quite different) conflicts that would arise were the brothers to take separate wives.

The option of partitioning is relevant here as well. A brother in a polyandrous marriage is free to leave the marriage so as to take his own wife if he desires. Thus, while Aquinas argues that the sexual competition inherent in polygamous marriages creates conflicts, in the Tibetan case it is always an option for a brother to leave the marriage if there are such conflicts, or if these conflicts become sufficiently large. In Tibetan agricultural societies there is no moral disapproval associated with brothers partitioning from a polyandrous marriage.

It is interesting to note that even the Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri claims that the immorality of Tibetan polyandry is to some extent reduced owing to the option of partitioning. He states,

However, it should be mentioned that the moral corruption of the above-mentioned custom is somewhat tempered by the fact that the brothers are free to take their own separate wives whenever they want to do so or, in addition, have the means and comfort to maintain their own household; there is not the slightest shame or obstacle in their doing this. (288)

Desideri's point applies not just to the worry of conflicts, but also to the broader issue of sexual access. If a brother believes his sexual access to the wife is limited, he is free to partition from the marriage and remarry monogamously. Recent data suggests that partitioning from a polyandrous marriage is not an infrequent occurrence in contemporary Tibet,

and that it is most likely to occur in families where an often substantially younger brother feels that his sexual desires are not being met (Childs; Levine and Silk).

The central point I'm making here is that, given the way that polyandrous marriages standardly operate in Tibet, one of two scenarios manifest. Within a given marriage, either sexual competition leading to significant conflicts do not arise, or if such conflicts do arise, one or more brothers have the option of partitioning from the marriage. For this reason, I do not believe that Aquinas's worries about restricted sexual access are applicable to Tibetan forms of polyandry.

As this form of marriage has developed in Tibet, polyandry is not faced with the moral concerns that Aquinas directs toward it. It is worth pointing out that in many parts of the world *polygyny* does not operate the same way. Whereas Tibetan men can freely depart from a marriage if they feel their sexual access has been unduly restricted, as a broad, sweeping generalization, this tended *not* to be the case for women in polygynous marriages during Aquinas's time. There is little doubt that Aquinas was operating under the belief that marriages (even polygamous ones) would or should be permanently binding. The fact that Tibetan polyandrous marriages allow for partitioning would have left Aquinas appalled, but it also substantially blunts his criticism about restricted sexual access.

### **The Ethics of Polyandry**

I mentioned earlier that Tibetans do not view polyandry, or even polygyny for that matter, as a particularly moral issue. But there are several important comments in order about that claim. First, it is of course impossible to speak about the views of all Tibetans—whether



those alive now, or historical figures—on these matters. It is certainly not the case that ethnic Tibetans speak with one voice on the issue of polyandry. Thus, when I say that Tibetans do not view polyandry as a specifically moral issue, what I mean is that there is a clear lack of textual discussion of the issue by any significant number of Tibetan thinkers throughout history. Having said that, it must be made clear that sexual morality is a topic quite at home in Tibetan society. What little evidence there is suggests that lay Tibetans by and large maintain that both homosexuality and incest are immoral. As Melvyn Goldstein observed fifty years ago, “Among the Tibetan lay population, [homosexuality] carries an extremely derogative stigma and is almost unknown” (*Study* 134). Yet, the culture’s broad condemnation of homosexuality does not appear to have any significant connection to their views of polygamy. We should, thus, not think that Tibetan culture lacks an appreciation of the moral dimension of sexuality. Nor, as I will explain below, do they lack an appreciation of the relationship between human nature and sexuality.

An additional important point I need to make here is that when I say that Tibetans do not view polyandry as a moral issue, what I mean is that they do not consider engaging in such marriages to be *inherently* good or evil. There is nothing inherent in the activity itself that is judged to be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy. Value is, however, applied to polyandrous marriage on utilitarian grounds. The economic gains achieved through this form of marriage lead many agrarian Tibetans to conclude that polyandry is not merely acceptable, but actually a good practice. This is, not surprisingly, the point at which the economics of polyandry and the ethics of polyandry intersect. Tibetans within agricultural communities view polyandry to be a good practice largely because it increases a family’s material prosperity. On balance, this material prosperity is thought to outweigh the negative consequences of the practice.

The two preceding points bring to light some important ethical questions. The most obvious question to ask is why polyandry is appraised only on utilitarian grounds and not from the perspectives of other ethical systems, be it a version of virtue ethics, deontological ethics or natural law ethics. This is particularly relevant insofar as Tibetan criticisms of homosexuality are grounded frequently in either deontological considerations—that homosexuality is seen to violate certain monastic rules—or in natural law considerations—that homosexuality is viewed as contrary to nature. One might wonder why Tibetan polyandry is not subject to the same kinds of criticisms.

With regard to homosexual acts and incest, it is relevant to note that Tibetan views on these matters, though partly religious, are also partly cultural (Cabezón *Homosexuality* 82). Although it is possible to find Buddhist texts that condemn homosexuality, it is doubtful that these textual passages have much influence on ordinary, lay Tibetan beliefs.<sup>5</sup> In addition, as other scholars have pointed out, Buddhist condemnation of homosexual behavior is generally ancillary to a broader condemnation of sexuality for celibate monks and nuns (Cabezón *Homosexuality* 82; Numrich 65-7).

It is well known that the present Dalai Lama himself has expressed on several occasions support for a natural law conception of sexuality—one that is, in fact, very similar to that propounded by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> His Holiness has upheld the view that, according to Buddhist teachings, sexual intercourse should be used for reproductive purposes, and that, as such, actions like masturbation and anal sex are morally prohibited. Specifically, with regard to homo-

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the textual claims about homosexuality in Buddhism see Zwilling.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the views of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama on homosexuality I suggest Cabezón *Thinking*.

sexual relationships, he stated, “I think, basically, the purpose of sex is reproduction. So in order to fulfill that purpose, man to man, women to women cannot fulfill [this purpose of reproduction]” (WTNN). As expressed, the Dalai Lama’s comments are clearly in line with a natural law approach to sexuality in which sexual morality is connected to the nature and purpose of the sexual organs. At the same time, even if among ordinary (lay) Tibetans there is a similarly negative attitude toward homosexual intercourse, and even if the support for this attitude comes from considerations linked to natural law, there is little reason to think that lay Tibetan beliefs on this matter are explicitly related to Buddhist teachings on sexuality or on the Dalai Lama’s comments on the topic.

Be that as it may, we can perhaps see at least one reason why Tibetan culture might be so accepting of polyandry, while at the same time generally opposed to homosexuality. This is because polyandrous marriages are fully consistent with the goal of procreation in a way that same-sex relationships are not. It is far from clear, however, that this reason is genuinely operative over Tibetan views toward polyandry. I myself am inclined to think that Tibetan attitudes toward polyandry are thoroughly cultural and not consciously swayed by natural law considerations of this sort. That is, I would contend that the practices of polyandry and homosexuality are considered morally acceptable and unacceptable, respectively, largely due to historical cultural precedence. Polyandrous marriage units are traditional, and even normative, within certain segments of Tibetan society, and as such are deemed acceptable, whereas homosexuality is largely without precedent, and thus deemed unacceptable.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Homosexual activities within Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are exceptional cases in this regard. See Goldstein (*Study*), as well as the comments on this in Cabezón *Homosexuality*.

Given the traditional status of polyandry in Tibet, it is not surprising that basic support for the practice is expressed not on theoretical but on pragmatic grounds. The economic utility of this form of marriage is all the justification agrarian Tibetans believe they need to provide in support of polyandry. But there is at least one moral worry we should have about the distinctly economic calculations Tibetans employ in their appraisal of polyandry. If the support for polyandry is genuinely based on utilitarian considerations, it ought to be the case that this form of marriage aims not merely toward the well being of those who directly participate in these marriages, but for the greatest overall happiness. That is, after all, one of the basic guiding principles of standard utilitarian thought. Yet, it is far from clear that polyandry does achieve the greatest good for the greatest number.

The principal benefits of this form of marriage for both the husbands and wife are admitted to be of an economic nature, which in turn is thought to contribute to a happier life for those involved. These benefits are believed to outweigh negative factors like restricted sexual access for the husbands or the wife's being forced to hide her true feelings of love for one brother over the others. That is all well and good, but my worry is that these calculations reflect merely the interests of the explicit participants in polyandrous marriages and fail to take into account the negative consequences that polyandry has on broader facets of Tibetan agrarian society.

In particular, all available evidence shows that the practice of polyandry in Tibet creates a situation in which a *very large* percentage of females (from these agrarian regions)—perhaps more than 30% of women between the ages of 20 and 49—are unable to marry (Goldstein *Fraternnal* 228). There are limited options available for these unmarried women. A few are able to stay within their families' households, and others are lucky enough to start their own, independent households as single wom-

en. In some cases, unmarried women become servants in village households, and, in other cases, women will become servants within households in Lhasa or other large Tibetan cities. (In practice, women who leave their home villages to become servants [*'bangs mo*] in cities typically do so before they reach a marriageable age. But this practice of sending young girls to the city to become servants is no doubt effectively used as a means by which to reduce the number of unmarried women living in agricultural regions.) As domestic servants, they have limited economic or educational opportunities, and women who act as servants in urban areas face uncertain prospects of marriage.

In this way, the utilitarian support for polyandry is partially undercut. It is true that polyandry offers economic benefits to the male offspring of agrarian families, both by preventing family possessions from being divided in subsequent generations and by increasing the productive capacities of a single family. It is also true that polyandry benefits (at least economically) the women who enter into polyandrous marriages. Yet, precisely because of the way that polyandry works, it implies that a vast number of women born into agrarian households will never secure marriage, and thus it is far from clear that this form of marriage promotes the greatest good for the greatest number of people within Tibetan agricultural communities.

In my view, it is with these unmarried women where we find the most significant moral problem with polyandry. Women in farming areas who find themselves in arranged polyandrous marriages tend to lead relatively good lives. But the significant percentage of women who cannot secure marriage face difficult lives. Moreover, because families in Tibetan agricultural communities are patrilineal, the well being of unmarried women in these communities is not considered important to address. As I see it, that is a big problem, and one that is difficult to address as long as polyandry continues to be practiced in its current

form. At this time, however, little research has been done on the status of these unwed women.<sup>8</sup>

To sum up, in contrast to Tibetan views of homosexuality, in which its moral assessment tends to be tied to deontological or natural law considerations, Tibetan polyandry is (at least within agricultural communities) generally evaluated from within a utilitarian framework. Within these agricultural areas of the Tibetan plateau polyandry is claimed to be economically beneficial in a way that justifies its continued existence. Yet, I believe that these utilitarian calculations are mistaken, for they fail to take into account the well being of the leftover women from Tibetan agricultural communities who cannot secure a marriage precisely as a result of the practice of polyandry.

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<sup>8</sup> Tangentially related research has been conducted in Childs and also in Zhang. No detailed studies have (to my knowledge) been carried out on the status of women from agricultural areas who fail to secure a spouse.

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