

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

**HEIDI E. FJELD, 2022**, *The Return of Polyandry: Kinship and Marriage In Central Tibet*, New York: Berghahn Books, 232 pp., ISBN 978-1-80073-607-8

Why did the people of Panam, in Western Tibet, opt for polyandry (*zasum*) over one-to-one marriage in the early 1990s? Heidi Fjeld's intriguing historical ethnography tackles this question and examines the role of polyandry in the Himalayas. I suspect most anthropologists of my generation (those trained in the 2010s) only encounter polyandry as a fleeting example of the possibilities afforded by kinship, or as a counterpoint to more normative marriage practices. This book provides a sympathetic and attentive account of the lives of Tibetans, many of whom shared polyandrous marriages, against a backdrop of rapidly changing rural life.

Fjeld's monograph comes from a rare position. She was one of the few foreign researchers who received permission from the People's Republic of China (henceforth PRC) to conduct fieldwork in Tibet in the early 2000s. As her field site, she chose the wheat and barley growing Panam. The short explanation for the return of polyandry lies in land reforms. When PRC-mandated collectivist farming ended in Panam in 1980, animals and land were redistributed. Households that received large parcels of land had no wish for them to be divided up in the following generations. Marrying sets of brothers to inward-coming brides proved a convenient solution. If newly formed households wished to continue to prosper, land needed to stay in large enough parcels to remain profitable to farm. At the same time, Fjeld makes clear that polyandry was much more than a response to a materialist problem. By mobilising the concept of the "house," Fjeld combines the domains of economics, kinship, and ritual. Households of various kinds take center stage in this book, such that a case could be made that this is a book about house or households, as opposed to polyandry. House-related terms appear over a thousand times in the ensuing pages. Fjeld builds on Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous formulation of house societies (*sociétés à maison*) and engages with scholars who pushed the concept further, especially Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones' reinterpretation.

Any suggestion that polyandry might be synonymous with matriarchy is quickly allayed by Fjeld. Working through the monograph, the reader encounters a dozen or so sociological concepts stemming from the Latin *pater* that are focused on male descent. An abbreviated list includes “patri-dominated” (54), “patrifocal,” “patrilineal,” “patri-ideology” (15), “patrilocal,” and “patrimonies.” Polyandry thus remains firmly within the patriarchy.

Chapter One sketches out the core concerns of the book and introduces life in the village of Sharlung. The specificity of polyandry lends itself to regional comparison, and Fjeld brings in relevant contrasts like Nancy Levine's work on polyandry in Humla, a region in western Nepal. Reading through this chapter, one gets a sense of the temporalities associated with different policies under the People's Republic of China. Because of the political sensitivity of Tibet, some readers might be surprised not to find more explicit anthropology of the state throughout the monograph. Instead Fjeld keeps the state subtle present while focusing on Tibetan understandings of social change within Panam and family histories.

Chapter Two begins with a consideration of the relationship between flesh and bone. Fjeld's discussion of Tibetan kinship idioms around *rü* (bones) reminds anthropologists of the breadth of theories of relatedness, and why kinship used to be so central to the discipline. Fjeld then provides an orderly overview of notions of belonging within Panam households, such as adoption, and, of course, marriage.

“Brothers,” as one elderly woman told Fjeld, “like to stay together” (65). This is one of the many social explanations in Panam for polyandry. Fjeld discusses sibling relationships and the significance of age rank among brothers in her third chapter, *Fraternal Relations*. She addresses the practicalities of marital sex from the brothers' perspective. Expectations around who sleeps where ensure that conjugal relations are structured and therefore discrete. Polyandry, as Fjeld repeatedly stresses, takes careful work. It requires structures and rhythms that can be easily read by the participants.

In Chapter Four, *Female Roles*, Fjeld tries to balance competing concerns regarding agency. How did women in Panam see their lives, and how should they be represented? Fjeld acknowledges that scholars have often highlighted Tibetan women's independence. But Fjeld rejects the analytic of 'the Tibetan woman' as both homogenising and essentialising. In many ways, this is the standout chapter in the monograph as we hear the voices of the *nama*, the women who entered into polyandry. Several *nama* stated that rural life was more desirable than becoming urban migrants. Entering polyandrous marriages made rural life work. Caring for multiple husbands was difficult, but it brought stability. Fjeld's positionality shines through in this chapter, both as a female researcher studying women's lives and as a mother undertaking ethnographic research. For example, Fjeld makes transparent how certain conversations around sex unfolded. Should *nama* visit both brothers in one night, or space out these relations? Opinions in Panam varied. But sex is not everything. The Tibetan women interviewed put great emphasis on sharing affection between each husband, regardless of the wife's preferences between the brothers.

Chapter Five, *The House as Ritual Space*, puts cosmology at the forefront. Fjeld guides the readers around the division of domestic spaces, such as the *lha khang*, a house for deities beneath the roof. The chapter stresses the need for separation to allow relations to flourish and to mediate pollution and misfortune. Fjeld also expands on notions of landscape, locating Panam within wider Tibetan conceptions of space.

Chapter Six engages with the pioneering work of Tibetan anthropologist Ugen Gombo on social stratification. When analysing descent group relations in 1970s Central Tibet, Gombo saw a strong correlation between decent groups, economic status, and ritual status. He argued these relations were akin to the practise of caste in India, which, even in the late 1970s, was often theorised as a fundamentally Hindu institution. Fjeld found similar caste-like relations among the Buddhists of Panam two decades later. However, in contrast to Gombo, she noticed that ritual stratifications appeared to survive Chinese state measures that increased economic equality. In other words, increased economic equality did not lead to ritual equality. Some communities in Panam were said to endure *drip* (ritual pollution), not just in their work but in their bones. Fjeld goes on to lay out the ways gifting, patronage, and notions of pollution shaped local hierarchies.

For some readers, Fjeld's theoretical style might seem determinedly canonical. More contemporary buzzwords like "affect theory" are not featured. Neither are accounts of human-animal relations. However, subsections on polyandrous masculinities (74) and a counter-example of the refusal of gender norms by a Tibetan called Phuntsok (108), chime well with current trends. For theory, Fjeld turns to the foundational Francophone anthropologists: Robert Hertz, Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, and Louis Dumont. Values are ranked, and categories are defined. Siblingship, and its related political ideal fraternity, are often treated as synonymous with equality in European thought. Fjeld, using Dumont's value theory, demonstrates how in polyandrous marriages the eldest husband encompasses his younger siblings and their wife. Hierarchy and oppositions feature prominently throughout the monograph. Fjeld, however, is no way beholden to the views of her anthropological ancestors. For instance, she chides Lévi-Strauss for his insistence that polyandry is a last resort for communities (11). Fjeld's monograph shows this is patently untrue. Similarly, Fjeld rejects the evolutionist ideas in Lévi-Strauss' original formulation of house societies. The reappearance of polyandry in the 1990s emphatically proves this point too. All that said, it might be hard to take much theory from this well measured book to other projects, unless, that is, one follows Fjeld's subtly revised concept of households. This revised concept, however, could enrich other studies of domesticity, kinship, and polyandry.

*The Return of Polyandry: Kinship and Marriage in Central Tibet* is a classic ethnography, both in structure and in its concerns. At a time when many classic texts are being questioned, and rightly so, this accessible monograph will hopefully feature on many undergraduate reading lists. It so vividly shows why kinship has so long preoccupied anthropologists.

**Edward Moon-Little** is a Social Anthropologist trained at the University of Cambridge. He was previously a convenor of Grammars of Marriage and Desire, a research network at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (CRASSH), at the University of Cambridge. Moon-Little studies kingship in Manipur and is currently a fellow at the Highland Institute, a non-governmental research institute in Nagaland, Northeast India. He is also a member of five-year research project, *India's Politics in its Vernaculars*, hosted at King's College London.

