

A note on the Tibetan kinship terms *khu* and *zhang**

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Tibetan kinship terminology is an important topic, not just for learning about the language and culture of Tibet, but also for learning about the languages and cultures of other Sino-Tibetan peoples. This subject has long been discussed from the standpoints of cultural anthropology, history and linguistics. However, because of limited data and insufficient field work, research results have not yet reached the point where we can gain a comprehensive view of the problem.

Recently, research on the Dunhuang manuscripts (mainly from the 9th and 10th centuries) has progressed rapidly. The Japanese historian Dr. Zuiho Yamaguchi (1983) has succeeded in reconstructing in detail the process of the establishment of the ancient dynasties of Tibet, which had been considered a mystery in the past. Furthermore, new results have been achieved thanks to recent fieldwork by several anthropologists. Thus, it appears that we have finally reached a stage where the system of this kinship terminology can be deduced. In this short paper, I would like to look back at some previous theories concerning Tibetan kinship terminology and marriage practices, pointing out problems in these theories; at the same time, I would like to offer an interpretation of "maternal uncle" which is most deserving of attention in considering Tibetan social structure, based on recent anthropological and historical research.

1. A critical examination of the hypothesis of P. Benedict

Paul K. Benedict's *Sino-Tibetan: a Conspectus* (1972), has been positively evaluated as a wide-ranging analysis by contemporary scholars, although the forms that he has reconstructed for Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) present some problems. Before this volume, he published in 1942 a paper concerning kinship terms in Tibetan and Chinese. We can obtain an overall picture of his arguments from these two publications. Benedict's 1942 paper is especially important as a paper which relates directly to Written Tibetan (WT). The object

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of Benedict's research was to reconstruct kinship terms (and an older layer of meanings of such terms) in Tibetan and various Sino-Tibetan languages by a comparison with literary data, and to elucidate the history of both the overall systems and the individual terms involved. This research was not based on fieldwork.

Benedict proposed WT forms as representing an older layer of Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages. From these forms, Benedict extracted 24 basic kinship terms. Then, analyzing the systematic relationships among these terms, he reconstructed older forms and meanings for the individual terms. Benedict concluded that "we thus are presented, in general, with an exceptionally well-defined picture of an ancient cultural stratum, underlying both the Chinese and Tibeto-Burman cultures, in which cross-cousin marriage¹ was a conspicuous feature" (Benedict 1942:337). However, in the process of reaching this conclusion, Benedict drew inferences from comparisons of TB and Chinese kinship terms, and invoked analogies with the practice of teknonymy (a phenomenon whereby appellations used by children and grandchildren for certain persons are employed by parents and grandparents) seen e.g. in Chinese; accordingly, some problems remain. Here, based on an investigation of the kinship terminology system peculiar to Tibetan, and using historical facts from the recently elucidated ancient history of Tibet as well as results of recent fieldwork in cultural anthropology, we will infer that Tibetan society was a society of patrilineal exogamy.

First, in regard to linguistic facts, a look at kinship terms which reflect this patrilineal exogamy reveals the following:

Table 1

(1)	<i>rus-pa gcig</i>	:	<i>sha gcig</i>
	"same bone = paternal relatives springing from a common ancestor"		"same flesh = relationship created by marriage" (See note 2)
	<i>rus gyud</i> "bone line"	:	<i>sha gyud</i> "flesh line"

¹ Cousin marriages have attracted recent anthropologists' attention because of their high frequency and wide distribution in the world. First cousins are divided into two types—cross-cousins, and parallel-cousins; cross-cousins are the children of siblings of opposite sex, parallel-cousins are children of siblings of the same sex. Thus, ego (man's) father's sister's children, and his mother's brother's children are his cross-cousins; his father's brother's children and his mother's sister's children are his parallel-cousins. Many societies prohibit marriages with the parallel-cousins and prefer or prescribe ones with the cross-cousins, because the former are regarded as violations of the incest taboo or the law of exogamy.

- (2) *pha mes* "father and grandfather"
 (*mes* also means ancestor)
pha spun "children of the same father; brothers and sisters"
span spun "relatives"
- (3) *khu* "paternal uncle" : *zhang* "maternal uncle; son-in-law"
- ne* "paternal aunt" : *sru* "maternal aunt"

As is evident from the above examples, a clear distinction between father's side and mother's side, and a continuous vertical line from grandfather (*mes*) to the father's sons (*pha spun*) are emphasized. Written Tibetan kinship terms may be viewed as a system which reflects a patrilineal exogamous social structure. Benedict's reasoning also shows rough agreement on this point, but does not specify at which stage patrilineal exogamy existed in Tibet. Referring to historical evidence recently presented by Yamaguchi (1983) [see Section 2, below], we can find traces of a patrilineal exogamous system in ancient Tibet prior to the establishment of the Tufan 吐蕃 dynasty. In the *Dar rgyas gsal ba'i sgron ma*, which deals with the history of the Bon religion, there are descriptions of "the marriage of the father lord *Phywa* of the country of *Phywa* and the queen mother of the *dMu*", and of "the marriage of the mother *Ngang zang* of the mother *Phywa* and the king father *dMu* of the country of *dMu*", in reference to the *dMu* tribe and *Phywa* tribe (a branch of which later became the ancestors of the *Yar lung* royal family), two of the four major tribes which existed considerably prior to the time of *Nya khri btsan po*, a remote ancestor of the *Yar lung* royal family. Furthermore, details of marriage proposals from the *Phywa* tribe to the *dMu* tribe are also related in Dunhuang manuscripts [Pelliot tib. 126] (Yamaguchi 1983:159-172). Yamaguchi (1983) infers that both the *dMu* tribe and the *Phywa* tribe were patrilineal, and that intermarriage between these two tribes began in the second or third century. Later, the *dMu* tribe became one of the most important tribes related by marriage to the *Phywa* tribe, with marriages taking place repeatedly in successive generations. Therefore, considering metalinguistic facts such as Desideri's description of later marital practices in Tibet² and the results of fieldwork in anthropology as

² Desideri, who visited Tibet at the beginning of the eighteenth century, described the distinction between *Rupa-cik* (literally, one bone) and the *Scia-cik* (literally, one flesh) as follows: The Tibetan recognize two classes of kinship. The first are called relations of the *Rupa-cik*, or of the same bone; the second, relations of the *Scia-cik*, or of the same blood. They recognize, as relations of *Rupa-cik*, or of the same bone, those who descend from a common ancestor, however remote, even when they have been divided into different

well,³ we may conclude that Tibetan society has practised patrilineal exogamy from at least the second or third century A.D. up to the present day.

On the other hand, we find a troublesome problem exists concerning "maternal uncle" as a linguistic fact. This problem is important when we consider the ancient history of Tibet or the relation of WT to other TB languages. Benedict reconstructs *ku as the PTB form for "maternal uncle"; however, the corresponding WT form *khu* means "paternal uncle". In almost all Tibeto-Burman languages, forms corresponding to PTB *ku indicate "maternal uncle"; Tibetan alone shows an isolated meaning.

Benedict believes that *khu* originally meant "maternal uncle" in Tibetan as well, but that at some point in time this word underwent a meaning shift to "paternal uncle". Benedict sought the reason for this in polyandry, which has been considered peculiar to Tibet. In this case, the "(co-) husbands" are brothers. According to Benedict, since father's brother is also mother's husband under a system of fraternal polyandry, and thus plays an extremely important role, it took over many of the functions originally fulfilled by mother's brother (= father-in-law) under a cross-cousin marriage system. Here, a semantic shift from "mother's brother" to "father's brother" took place (Benedict 1942:317-8).

This reasoning, however, is a bit too arbitrary. If an important role can be said to have shifted from mother's brother to father's brother, this presupposes a sudden change in, for instance, the marriage system and social system. Furthermore, there are also problems in the very assumption that fraternal polyandry could be the cause of such a shift.⁴ Specifically, in the

branches during many generations. Relations of the *Scia-cik*, or the same blood, are those created by legitimate marriages. The first, though it may be exceedingly distant, is looked upon as an absolute and inviolable bar to matrimony, and any intercourse between two relations of the *Rupa-cik*, or of the same bone, is regarded as incestuous, and they are shunned and loathed by everyone. The second is also a bar to marriage in the first degree of relationship; thus an uncle may not marry his niece, but marriages with a first cousin on the mother's side is allowed, and frequently occurs. (Japanese translation 1991:296-97).

His description tells us that a primary distinction between father's side and mother's side, that is, patrilineal exogamy exists, and also that Tibetans prefer matrilineal cousin marriage. From the results of recent anthropological fieldwork, Prince Peter (1963:423, 1965:197) points out the distinction between *rus gyud* (bone line) and *sha gyud* (flesh line) which functions as the regulation of affinity. However, *rus* is often used with relation to a clan as a social segmental unit in the reconstruction of the ancient Tibetan society. (See Richardson 1952:50-1, Tucci 1955:204-5). From the recent anthropological point of view, Levine (1981) examines and summarizes the concept of *rus* in detail.

³ Concerning present results of fieldwork on Tibetan speaking people who practice patrilineal exogamy, see, for instance, Kawakita (1966), Aziz (1974), Levine (1988) and Crook (1994).

⁴ According to the results based on the fieldwork by Goldstein (1971, 1978a, 1978b, 1988), Crook (1994) and so on, Tibetan fraternal polyandrous marriage would be an adaptation or a solution to the principle of monomartial stem family connected with the pattern of land use under the Tibetan feudal system. If their interpretation is right, Tibetan polyandry could be considered as a marital form which emerged after the establishment of a land system and