

The most common form of marriage in Melemchi through the mid-1980s was capture marriage, in which the unsuspecting bride is captured by friends of the groom and weds under protest. The marriage is often arranged by the parents, and, until recently, the girl was uninformed.

Melemchi marriages occur in three stages. The first event is *nama langdwang*, or "going to ask for the bride." The parents of the groom visit the parents of the prospective bride to ask for permission for the marriage to take place. The groom's parents bring a *shalgar* offering, and, if permission is received, then the wedding is planned. Normally, the bride is unaware of this visit. In some capture marriages, the *nama langdwang* is omitted and everyone is surprised by the capture.

The marriage ceremony, itself, usually takes place early in the morning so that the bride will be caught unaware. Friends of the groom come to her house and take her to the house of the groom's father, where they are seated on a mat and a meal is served. Brides customarily fight with the captors, protesting loudly and actively, especially if they don't want to be married. The witnesses include the friends of the groom and his family. After the meal, the senior man present blesses the couple, daubing *milam* (butter blessings) on their heads. First the father, then his male relatives, wrap white cloths around the head of the groom, forming a *to* or turbanlike covering. The bride is attended to by a young woman, either a friend or a relative of the groom. At some point, the heads of the bride and groom are banged together three times (*khoibansa*) and they are considered married. Later her family may come and join the party; the presence of her father depends on circumstances including the relationship between his family and that of the groom's.¹⁸ After these ceremonies, the village gathers for liquor and later, food, followed by singing and dancing outside the groom's father's house. Before everyone eats, white scarves of blessing called *kata* and gifts of money are given to the couple, along with brief speeches of blessing.¹⁹ All the money given at the wedding is kept by the groom, even if the wedding is never consummated. Since the groom's family has given the village the party, the money is his, and he may or may not share it with his parents. The bride usually returns to her father's house following the wedding ceremony. She won't be expected to sleep with the groom until the third ritual has been performed: the *toljung*.

Toljung occurs in Melemchi after the wedding. The parents of the groom take gifts to the parents of the bride (4 bottles of distilled liquor, 5 bottles of beer, 2 *shalgar*, 2 *kata*, 4 *paisa* [pennies], and 1 special *shalgar*), saying, "Please take this *toljung*." It is viewed as payment for nursing her when she was a baby. Once *toljung* has been accepted, it is assumed that the bride will sleep with her husband in his parents' house. In cases in which the parents of either the bride or groom are wealthy, gifts may be given to the girl as well. In the event of a divorce, such gifts may or may not be kept by the girl if they came from her own parents, but they must be returned if they came from the groom's family.

The young couple usually lives with the boy's parents for at least a year. At some point, a *pashi* ceremony signifies the formal separation of a boy from his parents. *Pashi* usually occurs after marriage and is only given to boys. This is when a boy gets his *zomo* and other animals and household supplies. There is no specific stipulation

of what he will receive; it depends on the circumstances of the family. Relatives are invited to the *pashi*, and they come bringing *shalgar*.

As might be expected, marriages by capture don't always proceed smoothly. In fact, in most cases, the marriage requires "fixing." This is because the girls are often unwilling. They refuse to go with the boy and return to their parents' house to stay. The parents and friends must "fix" the marriage by persuading the girl that she should go. In the past, girls were given 3 years to fix the marriage; at that point, the couple would either live together or divorce. More recently, the waiting period has shortened to 1 year, while in a few cases (see **Kendo** later) the boy waits longer. If forced to go by their parents, girls often try to run away. Women from several generations tell of being beaten, threatened, and sent back to their husbands by their own parents, or of attempts to run away over mountain passes, only to be recaptured again and again by their husband and his friends and relatives.

Ibe Balmu, now 64 years old, tells of being captured from Tarke Ghyang: Her husband, **Kirkiyap**, was the eldest son of a large Melemchi family. His wealthy and powerful father²⁰ decided he should marry a girl from Kirkiyap's mother's clan; since there were no Melemchi girls of that clan, Kirkiyap was given *pashi* and received his *gode* which he maintained alone for 3 years. Finally, he grabbed Balmu who had never been to Melemchi, knew nothing about the people there, and didn't want to

come. For 3 years, she ran away repeatedly, but no matter how she tried she was brought back. The men dispatched by her father-in-law were beaten if they didn't return with her, so they always found her within 1 day. Her wrists were swollen and bruised from being dragged back by her arms. Finally she reconciled herself to the marriage; in 1972, when she related this story in the presence of her husband and children (she had had 11), she seemed quite content with her life.

Kendo, now 30 years old, was grabbed in India by a Melemchi boy with the help of her older brother. She refused to go and tells about running hard through the snow, almost making it over a mountain pass, before the grabbers caught her and brought her back. She stayed with her parents for 6 years; finally, her husband asked for a final answer, and, although she never answered, she went with him and they now have two children.

Pemba Gyalmu was grabbed by a man from Kulu, her father's sister's son, when she was 19. Melemchi women don't like Kulu; it is isolated and lacks the beautiful open vistas of Melemchi. One girl told us of running away from her husband in Kulu because it was so desolate and windy there—the wind blew through Kulu making the sound “Ku-lu-lu-lu-lu.” Pemba Gyalmu's father threatened to beat her if she didn't go, so she went. Her father reasoned that the boy was from a good family and since she couldn't stay with her parents forever, she would have to be married sometime. She was very unhappy with the marriage; in the midst of arguments, the boy told her that she could go anytime she wanted, since she was from a poor family and hadn't brought any wealth to the marriage. A few months later, she met her father at the Gosainkund *puja* and told him how unhappy she was in her *gode* in Kulu and what the boy said about her and her family. Her father went to her husband's *gode* in a rage, threatening to kill him, but he ran away and hid. The father and daughter returned to Melemchi. Although his sister (the boy's mother) came to Melemchi to plead for the marriage, the father was immovable and the marriage was dissolved by agreement between the parents. The girl reproached her father for ruining her life by forcing her into a marriage she didn't want, and they argued for several months. The boy remarried, and, 6 months later, so did Pemba Gyalmu. Her new husband is a Melemchi man 24 years older than she is. His wife had died 7 years before, and he had three children, one only five years younger than Pemba Gyalmu. Now, he and Pemba Gyalmu have two babies of their own and live and work with all five children in India. In both marriages, Pemba Gyalmu followed the preferred cross-cousin marriage: Her first husband was her father's sister's son, and her second husband is her mother's father's brother's son's son.

Marriages can be dissolved through a ritual known as *takpa checken* (break the string). The bride and groom tie a string around their fingers and break the string. With that, their union is dissolved. They also file a paper with the village *goba*. Until they break the string, both are held in limbo, unable to marry. If a woman remarries before the string is broken, her new husband must pay reparation to the current husband for his wedding expenses. A woman receives nothing after *takpa checken*; she returns to her parents' household and remains until she remarries, although she may keep anything she brought to the marriage. The groom keeps all of the wedding money, even if the bride never comes to stay with him. If there are children, they belong to the

husband. In the case of infants, they stay with the mother until they are about 3 years old, during which time their father pays child support. Many children of divorce live for periods of time with their paternal grandparents if their father has not remarried or is working in India. This is always preferable to staying with their mother or her family, especially if she has remarried, as it is believed that children might be ill-treated by a man who is not their father or his kin.

Why Capture Marriage in Melemchi?

Capture marriage exists elsewhere in the world, usually as a way to circumvent either the costs of marriage (bride price or dowry) or restrictions on suitable marriage partners (cases in which two people want to marry against their families' or societies' wishes). Neither situation pertains to Melemchi, especially since in Melemchi capture marriage is the standard form of marriage whereas elsewhere it is an acceptable but infrequent alternative to other marriage arrangements. The neighboring Tamang, studied by Holmberg (1989), appear to view capture marriage as a form of elopement that avoids either parental objections to the match or an expensive village feast.

An alternative theory is that capture marriage provides an option for men who are socially handicapped (e.g., poor or ugly) and otherwise unattractive to mates (Stross, 1974). Here we may be closer to the situation in Melemchi. It is possible to consider capture marriage in Yolmo as stemming from the isolation and dispersion of *gode* life, making the problem of obtaining a wife difficult for many men. Not all Yolmo villages practice capture marriage. The villages in Yolmo who have traditionally practiced capture marriage (e.g., Melemchi, Nagote, Kulu, Bolgyang, and Nim Dumbu—most on the west side of the Melemchi River) are villages closely tied to *zomo gode* herding as the primary source of wealth. Even today, as *gode* disappear from Yolmo, men from these villages are still more likely to live in *gode* than are men from Tarke Ghyang or Sermathang, where religious marriages are common. *Gode* life is isolated and difficult; a man needs a wife and children to make the enterprise succeed, and opportunities to meet potential wives are limited. Unlike Tamang villages, where young men and women meet in song contests or in agricultural pursuits (Holmberg, 1989), opportunities for socialization and socializing are limited for children raised in *gode*. At village festivals, they are easily distinguishable from children raised in the village, as they hide behind their mother's skirts and more often are silent observers than participants. It was suggested to us that grabbing a wife solved a practical problem: There was little opportunity for courtship; there was no dowry or bride price involved, so negotiations weren't necessary; and, as a society, both Melemchi men and women were shy about being married or wanting to be married. No matter what age they are, men and women giggle uncomfortably when discussing marriage with us. No one admits to wanting to be married or liking to be married. More than one woman answered our question about whether she was happy in her marriage, after protesting so vehemently when she was grabbed, by responding with a shy smile and saying, "Well, what can I do now after all these children?"

It must be acknowledged that Melemchi people do not have an explanation for their tradition of capture marriage; it is their custom and goes back as far as anyone can remember. They view it today as a stigmatized custom and claim that they never

knew about other systems or that grabbing marriages were illegal in Nepal. Ibe Balmu tells of seeing Yolmo women in Tibet who had been grabbed and taken far away from their homes and families. One person suggested it came from the initial settlers from Tibet who were nomads and grabbed girls from the low regions taking them up to villages in Yolmo. We witnessed one capture marriage in 1971 in which an unsuspecting woman from Tarke Ghyang was grabbed at a music recording session we were holding. She was wrestled to the floor and dragged screaming to the mat to sit next to her husband-to-be. The villagers all argued on behalf of the groom. She argued back that she was already married; her husband had been away in India but they hadn't broken the string. This was the 31-year-old groom's eighth attempt at grabbing a wife, and it was ultimately unsuccessful. The woman was allowed to slip away in the night, and no one made an effort to retrieve her. This example confirmed other statements made by women that they feared going places without their friends and relatives, since they were vulnerable to being grabbed.

The phenomenon of "fixing" marriages essentially provides a period during which the young couple can mature, prospects can be evaluated, and childbearing can be postponed. In a society in which early marriages are common, the prospective field of partners is broad, and choice depends on economic factors, a girl who is not consulted about her marriage in advance may require time to consider her options. Since children complicate divorce, it is beneficial to postpone cohabitation until the marriage is certain.

Until the mid-1980s, nearly all marriages in Melemchi involved grabbing the bride, often arranged by the parents, with only the groom consulted. A boy may be pushed into marriage by his parents anytime after age 15. In the case of a younger son, it often happens because the parents need some extra help, which a young wife could provide. In one exceptional case, a Ghale family arranged their sons' marriages when the boys were young, contracting with families of the mother's clan in her natal village. One of the sons told us he first met his wife when they actually married at age 22, although they had been betrothed most of their lives. There are several cases historically of very young marriages in Melemchi, both boys and girls, at 12 years of age. People told of young girls being grabbed by rich men who "figured that even if she doesn't like him, she will stay for the money." In such cases, the girls live with their parents for at least 2 years before they join their husbands. This is reminiscent of the way in which the Chini Lama family treated Melemchi girls, appropriating them as wives and mistresses. The girls were initially recruited as young servants, and their relationship with the Chini Lama brought benefits to their entire extended families.²¹ They were usually servants to the family and then remained as mistresses. Two women in their 50s, recruited as young girls by the old Chini Lama, today remain loyal and contented members of the Chini Lama household; they gave up their chance for children of their own in exchange for a comfortable life, access to gifts and power, and the possibility of brokering for their Melemchi relatives in the process.²²

Today, most marriages are arranged with the consultation of the bride and groom, even though the capture is still carried out and the girl protests vigorously. For many young people, their parents still arrange the match, especially in families without much experience in India. Adults interviewed today favor "love marriages," viewing them as an improvement for everyone concerned. Under the old system, capture marriages created problems between girls and their families. Now, if a young

couple doesn't remain happily married, they have only themselves to blame. Parents favor marriages within Yolmo, although they also seem to accept the few marriages that involve others, such as the Tamang, Indians, and Tibetans. In India, relatives take the role of Melemchi parents in arranging the marriages that are held there. The only totally unacceptable marriage would be one within one's clan, and no example of this has ever been mentioned.

Marriage is definitely the norm in this community, regardless how it comes about. There are fewer than 15 adults who have been residents of Melemchi during the past 25 years who have never lived as husband or wife. Some Melemchi residents remain unmarried, although very few are never married. Some women were grabbed but never stayed, or in the case of several men, no woman would ever stay with them. But divorce and remarriage are easy and common.

Inheritance

Melemchi is a patrilineal society; children belong to the clan of their father. As already mentioned, boys receive animals, household goods, and occasionally fields from their parents when they have the separation (*pashi*) ceremony. Families vary in what they give to sons, depending on their wealth and the number of sons. Yolmo people practice ultimogeniture; that is, the youngest son inherits the parent's house and land. In exchange, he takes care of his parents until their death. Girls do not inherit anything from their parents, except in the cases of wealthy families in which they give their daughters gifts of money or land when they marry. Families without sons set up a formal relationship with one of their sons-in-law, giving him the rights and obligations of the youngest son. There are two such written agreements in place in Melemchi today; in one case, there were only two daughters born, and in the other case, all the sons died before the parents did.

Clarke has noted the paradox in Yolmo villages between the principle of ultimogeniture in the household and primogeniture in the priesthood. The former custom is Tamang; the latter, Tibetan. In villages like Tarke Ghyang, where wealth is based on trade and absentee landholdings, sons did not need village land and hence did not disperse. They remained in the village and at the temple, resulting in heightened competition for rank and prestige over control of the temple. In Melemchi, where the Chini Lama controlled the *gomba*, there were just a few lineage lamas (Hlalungba) present and none could control the *gomba*. Thus, the principle of ultimogeniture predominates. Ultimogeniture encourages older sons to leave and seek their own fortunes, since they won't inherit. Thus there is in Melemchi, in contrast to Tarke Ghyang, much less emphasis on hierarchy and rank, since the only access to rank and privilege is through marriage into the Chini Lama family.