

My family was large, ten of us in all. There was my mother and then my four paternal aunts who, though they were celibate Buddhist nuns, mostly lived at home and provided the family with a significant labor force. There were also my paternal grandmother, two younger brothers, and my two fathers. I say two fathers because it is common in Tibetan society for brothers to take a wife jointly. It was only when I lived abroad that I learned how rare and shocking this marital custom was to Americans and even to other Asians like Chinese and Indians. I never thought about it then, and it does not bother me now. In our culture, it was completely natural for brothers to marry the same woman, and there was no stigma at all about brothers sharing a woman sexually. We saw this custom as an effective way to conserve resources and enhance the material well-being of the family. We believed that polyandry, as this custom is called by anthropologists in the West, prevents fragmentation of the family's land across generations. If each son in a family marries monogamously and brings in a new unrelated bride, we think the family is unstable and likely to split up, with each son and his wife and children taking a share of the land. By contrast, with polyandry, there is only one wife and one set of children, so fission is far less common.

Keeping brothers together was also important for us because not only was all of the work of our household done without machines—by people (and animals)—but our normal activities often involved the need to provide people for free corvée labor. For example, we had to provide animals and people to move goods and commodities for the government's transportation system. The more available the labor, the stronger the whole family unit became.

The older of the two brothers who were my fathers was the one we actually called "father." He also was the head of the household and slept with my mother in a separate room on the second floor of our stone house. My other father, his younger brother, was always called "uncle" in our region. In our household, he slept downstairs, where we kept the animals. I remember now that my mother would sometimes go downstairs to sleep with him, but I didn't think much about it at the time. In our culture the wife played the key role in holding such marriages together. She was responsible for visiting all the brothers regularly and making sure they were satisfied and that the marriage and household functioned effectively. My mother must have done a good job, because there was no friction between my fathers.

We never worried about who the biological father was, and I had no idea which of the two fathers was actually mine. My mother never told me anything, and it never occurred to me to ask. I don't think the brothers knew the truth themselves—or cared. Both "father" and "uncle" called me "son," and they treated all the children equally. To this day I cannot fathom why non-Tibetans find polyandry so strange and even disgusting. In America it is common for one woman to have two or three husbands in the course of her life and occasionally to have sexual relations with more than one man at a time. In Tibet it is the same; the only difference is that sometimes both husbands are there at the same time, and they are brothers. We find this system eminently logical and natural.