

THE HIMALAYAN WOMAN

A study of Limbu women in
marriage and divorce



L. Jones
Iley Kurz Jones

The Himalayan Woman

A STUDY OF LIMBU WOMEN
IN MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Rex L. Jones and Shirley Kurz Jones

Waveland Press, Inc.
Prospect Heights, Illinois

*To Mahali, friend and assistant,
and to a learned
Limbu historian,
Nar Bir Tumbahangphe*

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Preface

Today in America and Europe, women's rights are very much on people's minds. Because women are so vocal—even militant—about these topics, men cannot ignore them, nor can they avoid frequent public and private discussions about the "woman's role" in society. To us, the women's movement is not a passing fad or simply one more temporary problem of a fast-changing technological society. We believe it might well be one of the most far-reaching revolutionary changes in human history, and for that reason it behooves us to learn as much as we can about women's lives everywhere.

The women's movement in Europe and America is primarily directed toward inequalities in salaries, jobs, education, and decision making; but much of the outcry focuses on the customary view of women in family life, the home, and the community. Many women who do not see themselves only as child-bearers, baby-sitters, and homemakers are challenging two traditions: women's conventional functions in Western society and men's and women's roles in the process of human evolution. Such questioning is making us rethink outmoded conceptions of how we became what we are now, and the parts men and women have played throughout history. These concerns have been uppermost in our thoughts during the writing of this book.

Of course, the women's movement is correct to question the division of human behavior into stereotyped ideas of what is "male" and what is

"female." Differences in men's and women's behavior certainly do exist, but they vary according to society and culture. This point of view is basic to our discussions throughout *The Himalayan Woman*.

The theme of our book is women's roles, especially in marriage and divorce, in Limbu, a community in the Nepal Himalaya. In portraying women more extensively than men we do not mean to suggest that we feel women are more important in Limbu society. Our reason is that women's roles are often taken for granted by anthropologists writing on south Asia, most of whom are men writing about male subjects. We also hope to dispel stereotyped thinking about the woman's "place" in that part of the world.

Our topic was chosen for three reasons. First, since much of our initial interest as anthropologists was in the field of marriage and the family, we acquired a great deal of information about that aspect of Limbu society. Second, because marriage and the family are institutions that may reach back as far as the beginning of human culture itself, they are good starting points in discussing men and women in any society. Third, Limbu marriage and the family are intrinsically fascinating because of the importance women seem to have in maintaining a successful marriage and a fruitful family life. The stability of Limbu marriage and the structure of the family are directly related to Limbu women's other activities at home and in the community.

We consider that marriage is a process rather than an act, involving not only the motivations and goals of husband and wife but those of the ambient society as a whole. We view with skepticism the findings of studies that purport to describe marriage stability and instability within a society solely on the basis of divorce rates. Such data afford a very static, unidimensional picture of marriage and family life. Thus, although we have not ignored divorce statistics altogether, our study is based heavily on personal contacts with the Limbu people and on participant observation.

Our research for *The Himalayan Woman* was first undertaken from 1967 to 1969. In that period we learned how the Limbu lived on a day-to-day basis and gathered most of the material in the case histories of marriage and divorce presented in chapter 5. These data were supplemented by the collection of ten genealogies which revealed a wide spectrum of marriages in past generations. We then formulated hypotheses and questions concerning Limbu marriage and divorce and women's roles, which were tested in the fall of 1975 in systematic interviews of eighty-six married women in three adjacent Limbu villages.

We would like to thank the Limbu people for their cooperation and

hospitality during our stay with them. We also appreciate the help we received from the Nepal government and various Peace Corps volunteers during our trip, in particular the mail service they provided and the medical aid at various points in our fieldwork.

The initial research was financed by ourselves. For subsequent research and completion of this book, Rex Jones would like to thank the State University of New York Research Foundation for a Summer Fellowship and Research Grant; and The American Council of Learned Societies and The Social Science Research Council for a grant which also helped finance a follow-up trip to gather information on the economic independence of Limbu women. Material from that trip has been incorporated throughout the text.

For assistance in our education, research, and writing, we are indebted to teachers, colleagues, students, friends, and family. To list them all would be impossible. Rex would like to thank especially Gene Hodges, a life-long friend, who first interested him in the study of anthropology. John Hitchcock, William Bright, Pedro Carrasco, and Robert Edgerton have been our teachers as graduate students, and we are particularly grateful to them. We thank Louis Faron, Richard Gardner, Nina Jody, Stavroula Christodoulou, Peter Brown, William Arens, and Theodore Kennedy for reading the manuscript and offering helpful comments. For clerical help and time-consuming labor in the preparation and editing of the manuscript, we would like to thank Edith Matlock, Mari Walker, Nancy Johnson, and Linda Brandt. We alone are responsible for the final contents of the book.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude and appreciation to our parents, Harry and Yeta Kurz, Kenneth Jones and Mary Haile, for their encouragement and financial help in our education and research.

Rex L. Jones
Shirley Kurz Jones

Editors' Preface

It is widely recognized in anthropology circles that anthropological studies of traditional societies have been oriented more to the activities and beliefs of men than women. This research imbalance has persisted despite the fact that many of the most distinguished anthropologists have been women. In recent years anthropologists have attempted to correct the situation by looking more closely at the role of women. This book by Rex and Shirley Jones is a contribution toward that end. It examines the social role of women in Limbuan, a community in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal. Although the Joneses focused their research primarily on women, they recognize that the lives of men and women in all societies are inseparably linked; thus in this book they also tell us a great deal about how men and women live together in Limbu society.

Perhaps because Nepal was not open to Western scholars before the 1950's, it remains in the minds of most Westerners an exotic and romantic place. The Joneses tell us of their quite personal feelings about doing research there, detailing the culture shock they experienced when they first arrived in a society so different from their own. But the bulk of their book is about the ways in which Limbu women relate to men in courtship, marriage, economic roles, and divorce. Unlike high-caste Hindu women in southern Asia, Limbu women are relatively free to divorce, remarry, possess a personal income, and sometimes even own property. The Joneses not only describe in detail the activities of these women; they

also attempt to explain why they are by no means subservient to men. In their own words, "The woman in south Asia is not typically a passive, shy, and secluded creature, but more often an active participant in the economy and social life of the village. In many regions, the woman has a culturally recognized right to make significant and far-reaching decisions about her own life, decisions which may have repercussions in many other areas of the society. We are not saying that Limbu women, or any women in south Asia, have achieved an ideal state of equality with men and a total independence in public activities. But their independence has frequently been overlooked and misunderstood. We hope that this book will have an impact on future research in the area, and on the already changing view of the role of women in marriage and the family."

Rex L. Jones received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1973. Since 1972 he has taught in the Department of Anthropology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. In addition to his research in Nepal, which has led to numerous publications, he has done research with various Southern California Indians, and since 1969 he has studied poker clubs in Southern California.

Shirley Kurz Jones has done post-graduate studies at UCLA, The University of Wisconsin, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook. She returned to Nepal in the summer of 1976 to collect a series of life histories of Limbu women. This research will form the basis of her doctoral dissertation.

Robert B. Edgerton
L. L. Langness

THE HIMALAYAN WOMAN



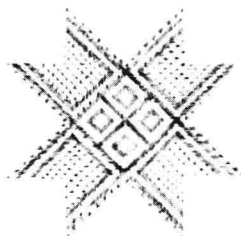
Hajur!

*When there is a fire in the forest
all men can see it,
When there is a fire inside you,
only you and God can see it!*

(a Limbu dance song)

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Meeting the People

1

As young anthropology graduate students in the early 1960s, we were captivated by the idea of doing field work in an exotic society thousands of miles away from Los Angeles. With its mountains and ten to twelve million people, some of whom thought America was "near London" which was "near Kashmir," Nepal seemed an ideal place for us to live out our fantasies.

When we began our field work in Nepal in 1967, the country and its people were still inadequately described in the literature of the West. Most of what was known about Nepalese lifestyles and beliefs was based on reports and descriptions by authors who had never been to Nepal, or who had visited only briefly. This was our chief reason for choosing to study the Limbu. Shortly after our arrival, we learned that a French ethnographer, Philippe Sagant, was also working with the Limbu, and that Lionel Caplan had just completed a research project among the Limbu of Ilam district. Today, even after field work by anthropologists from France, Great Britain, Germany, the United States, Japan, Australia, Italy, India, and Nepal itself, the Nepalese are still living relatively isolated lives and are not well understood by Westerners.

Nepal opened its doors to Westerners and scholars in 1951, yet throughout the 1950s and early 1960s only a handful of ethnographers had ventured into the hill areas for systematic research. Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf of the University of London, who con-

ducted extensive field work among tribal groups in India, was one of the pioneers. In the 1950s he conducted research on high-caste Hindu groups and the Newar in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal and then investigated the Sherpa, a Tibetan-speaking people near Mount Everest who achieved fame in mountaineering expeditions. Fürer-Haimendorf wrote one of the first full-scale ethnographies of a Nepali people in 1964.

At the School of Oriental & African Studies in London, under Professor Fürer-Haimendorf's direction, a number of ethnographers began research on eastern and central Nepal. Colin Rosser (1966) wrote an excellent article on the Newar caste system, and Lionel Caplan completed a Ph.D. dissertation on the Limbu, which was later revised and published (Caplan 1970). Charles Macdougall had conducted a year's research among the Rai in 1964-65 but had not yet published his work.

French ethnographers of the Centre d'Etudes Nepalaises of the Centre National de la Recherches Scientifique in Paris were exploring the ethnographic hinterlands, but much of the material at that time was still unpublished. Bernard Pignède's study (1966) of the Gurung appeared at that time, and other scholars, including A. W. Macdonald, Corneille Jest, Marc Gaborieau, and Mireille Helffer, were researching and publishing in scholarly French journals. These scholars continue to produce ethnographic investigations on the Nepal people.

Japanese ethnographers and geographers had made a brief investigation of parts of western Nepal, but did not follow this up with systematic ethnographies. In addition, Professor John Hitchcock of the United States, in a book published in 1966, had described a Tibeto-Burman-speaking group in western Nepal, the Magar, and he and his wife Pat had made four films of the area.

Classical scholars, Tibetologists, linguists, historians, and political scientists had begun to describe the Nepal Valley and its literary tradition to Westerners, but the ethnography of the hill people, who were largely illiterate, seemed very sketchy to us. Nepal and its cultural and linguistic diversity presented one of the few remaining challenges to anthropologists who wanted the romance of investigating a relatively unknown culture.

Our interest in Nepal began in 1965 under the tutelage of Professor John Hitchcock, who was then teaching in the Anthropology Department at UCLA. After serving as Professor Hitchcock's research assistant in 1964, Rex switched his interest from Africa to Asia almost immediately. Until then, he had probably not heard the name "Nepal" more than half a dozen times and would have had difficulty locating the country on the map. Like so many Americans, he vaguely associated the

word with Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world, and with the famous Gurkha soldiers of World Wars I and II. But Professor Hitchcock began to give him reading lists on the area, and in June 1965 Rex completed a master's essay entitled, "Cultural Diversity in the Himalayas." By the time Rex met Shirley that summer, he had received a 1960s "Sputnik Grant" (NDEA Title II Language Fellowship) to study the Nepali language and South Asian history at the University of Pennsylvania.

During the following two years, the two of us began to formulate a research plan that would take us to Nepal. The project that ultimately emerged from this planning was conceived as a cooperative effort. Rex concentrated on genealogical data, patterns of descent, and kinship terminology. Shirley focused on case studies, supplemented by genealogical charts or "family trees." Because so little had been published, our project was extremely flexible.

After we had set up housekeeping, we discovered that most Nepali women in the hills had never seen a Western woman. Throughout our field work, Shirley was an object of intense curiosity. She was the first woman anthropologist to visit Limbuan, and even the men, who were more worldly wise than the women because they had served with the army in different countries, were puzzled as to Shirley's intentions. At first Shirley wore trousers and boots, and this manner of dressing provoked amazed cries of "What is it, a man or a woman?" Shirley also wore glasses, and in the hills of Nepal where women seldom could afford such amenities, these glasses became a status symbol. Later, as people pestered us to take photographs, the women asked Shirley to let them wear the glasses for the photograph.

Shirley's excellent rapport with Limbu women not only resulted in the valuable "female-oriented" data on marriage stability incorporated in this book, but also influenced the direction of our investigations. We decided to examine the lives of women more than those of men because the information we were getting made us realize to what extent women had been overlooked in anthropological studies concerned with Nepal and India. The probable reason for this oversight, we concluded, is that most of those works were written by male anthropologists who more often interviewed male subjects.

Because marriage and kinship was from the outset a great interest of ours, we gathered more information on that aspect of Limbu society than any other. The institution of marriage may have started at the beginning of culture itself, and it is therefore an excellent jumping-off place for discussing the roles of men and women in any society. Finally, in Limbuan

the institution of marriage is intrinsically interesting because of the significant part the women of that society play in marital stability and change.

Method of Analysis

For the purpose of this study, marriage is defined as the legalized union of a man and woman that may produce legitimate offspring. We assess marriage stability not in simple terms of cohabitation and divorce, but rather in terms of *the degree to which a legally married couple maintains compatible conjugal relations free from long-term separations.*

A number of studies in anthropology have dealt with the subject of marriage stability. Early hypotheses were built on the use of the "divorce rate" as an indicator of marriage stability (Gluckman 1950; Fallers 1957; Leach 1957; and Lewis 1962). Attempts were made to link high divorce rates to patterns of descent (Gluckman 1950), or to the varying degrees to which a woman is integrated into her husband's descent group (Leach 1957; Fallers 1957; and Lewis 1962).

Limbu divorce rates, we found, cannot be calculated in terms of a ratio of marriages to divorces in a single year, since such statistics are unavailable. One study which correlated the number of recorded divorces and marriages in a sample cluster of villages (Caplan 1970:84) estimates Limbu divorce rates at 19.8 percent. Jones (1973:207) estimates the divorce rate from genealogical data at 13.4 percent of recorded marriages. A later study by Rex Jones in 1975, based on interviews of married women in three adjacent villages, revealed that 21 percent had been divorced at least once. On the basis of these data we can therefore estimate that Limbu divorce rates range from 13 to 21 percent. Compared to many societies, these percentages are extremely high; compared to American divorce rates in recent years, the figures are somewhat low.

Theories that treat the divorce rate alone as an indicator of marriage stability have been criticized sharply by Schneider (1953) and Cohen (1961). Schneider (1953:55) argues that this single indicator theory leads to confusion between "jural relations" and "conjugal relations," or situations in which a marriage is not broken legally even though the couple separate, as among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1951). Clearly a separation between spouses can be an unstable marriage in the most elementary sense and yet never be revealed in divorce statistics.

There are a number of other problems involved in an analysis of marriage stability using the divorce rate as an indicator. Divorce rates

conceal cultural meanings in marriage stability and lead to mistakes on a theoretical level. As indicated by Lloyd (1968:71),

A divorce rate, expressed as a ratio of divorces to marriages, is but an imperfect indication of marriage stability. A high rate may result from an indulgence in trial marriages (as among the Tallensi, for instance), after which each couple remains united until death. Equally, a high rate may result from the rapid circulation of a few sterile women; Lewis (1962:35), while giving a structural explanation of the Somali divorce rate, describes infertility as the principal cause of divorce and adds that barren women usually experience a series of short unions. Yet again, a high rate may arise when women return to their home compounds after menopause, as among the Gonja (Goody 1962). The matrilineal Ndembu have a very high rate of divorce; but it is their practice to divorce a chronically sick spouse in order to evade the obligations of a surviving partner (Turner 1957: 263).

We have attempted to incorporate these warnings into our analysis. The rate of Limbu divorce does not tell us the complete story of Limbu marriage stability since a Limbu marriage represents a form of "trial marriage" in the legal sense. The marriage may only be finalized at the death of the woman or up to fifteen years after the betrothal ceremony with the final marriage payment. At that time the Limbu woman assumes the clan name of her husband, and in effect loses her rights or claims to the property of her natal family. The Limbu recognize divorce before this final payment, both normatively, in that either a man or woman has the right to end a marriage after the betrothal ceremony, and realistically, in that a marriage ended after the initial brideprice payment must be followed by compensation and legal proceedings.

Between betrothal and the dissolution of a marriage, either through death or divorce, events may occur in the marriage and in the families of the husband and wife which will contribute to the stability of the marriage bond. To evaluate these forces, the observer must study the kinship system as a whole and the function that kinship behavior has in the total context of political and economic relations. The motivations, goals, and rewards of the individuals should be considered against the total background of cultural values. Idiosyncracies and individual pathologies that might contribute to marriage instability in a few instances will then stand out clearly.

Through a study of marriage case histories, a profile of the marriage process as it is "played out" by specific individuals emerges. The danger in this method lies in the choice of examples. The ethnographer may only

be presented with cases from a particular village or region, which may represent a provincial, economic, or political bias. We fully realized in writing this book that our description of Limbu marriage, divorce, and the woman's role in this process might embody such a bias, inasmuch as our own field experience took place primarily in the Tehrathum area of eastern Nepal. In order to offset this possibility and to round out as much as possible our own experiences and research, we have carefully taken note of the published work of the French ethnographer Philippe Sagant, who lived to the north of us, and the Canadian anthropologist Lionel Caplan, who worked in an entirely different area to the southeast.

The case studies we have used illustrate a broad range of situations in which Limbu men and women marry and divorce. The use of the case-history method allows the investigator to depict both what is expected in marriage by the society as a whole and what actually takes place. The method therefore helps us to understand to what degree individuals conform to the jural and moral rules that govern marriage and divorce—to assess what anthropologists often call “the difference between ideal and actual behavior.” (See Schneider 1953; Cohen 1961.) Obviously, a consideration of divorce rates alone could not give us this kind of understanding.

Finances and Research Permission

Beginning research students in anthropology face two basic problems that are less troublesome to the well established anthropologist: financing, and obtaining permission to study in a foreign country. For two years prior to field work we wrote grant proposals, all of which were rejected. We finally decided to finance the research on our own and in a year had saved, borrowed and scraped together enough money for a two-year round-the-world trip. (This venture, including transportation to and from Nepal, was actually less expensive than two years in the United States would have been.)

Obtaining a research visa in Nepal proved to be extremely difficult. Like many countries, Nepal does not grant such a visa until the student's intentions, background, and plans for publishing the information collected are thoroughly examined. Moreover, because Nepal will not grant a visa until after the would-be researcher arrives in the country, one needs a good deal more than a passport and identification on arrival. The government demands clearance of the research proposal through its channels, scrutinizes the procedures and sources of funding, and asks for