


Marriage, Kinship, and Inheritance in Zhi byed ri pa's Account of Mi la ras pa's Early Life*

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he preceding article presents Zhi byed ri pa's fourteenth-century account of Mi la ras pa's life. The purpose of this follow-up article is to analyze marital and inheritance practices related to Mi la's childhood as described in that text.

Marriage and Kinship

Mi la's grandfather, Rdo rje rgyal po, married a woman classified as Dge shes Tsa pa's *dbon mo* and had two sons: Rin rgyal and Sher rgyal. The text states that Rin rgyal and Sher rgyal both married women classified as *sru chung*. Sher rgyal's spouse, Dkar legs, was also classified as Dge shes Tsa pa's *dbon mo*.

In the Old Tibetan Annals *dbon* refers to grandchild, and in the compound form *sras dbon* connotes male descendants, which can include direct (son, grandson) and collateral (brother's son, brother's grandson) descendants (Uebach 1980). The term *dbon* later assumed the dual meanings of grandchild and nephew, and nowadays is used as an honorific for *tsha* (grandchild or niece/nephew). In the case of Zhi byed ri pa's text, we can interpret *dbon mo* (*mo* is a feminine suffix) to mean that Rdo rje rgyal po married Dge shes Tsa pa's niece. Sher rgyal, Rdo rje rgyal po's son, most likely married Dge shes Tsa pa's grand niece.

Sru mo commonly means maternal aunt (mother's sister), which opens two possible interpretations for *sru chung*. The first is "mother's younger sister", but it is unlikely that a man would marry such a relative. Although incest prohibitions vary from one place to another, no known Tibetan society condones marriage to one's mother's sister.

The second and more likely interpretation is "cousin". Several Tibetan dialects contain a variant of *sru mo* in their kinship terminology, specifically, *ushu* in Khumbo (Schicklgruber 1993:343), *uru* in Sherpa (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:76), and *sru ma* in Nyinba (Levine 1988:50). In addition to mother's sister, these terms refer to mother's brother's daughter. It therefore makes sense that *sru chung* (little/young *sru mo*) is used in Zhi byed ri pa's account to mean cousin, or more specifically, mother's brother's daughter. If this interpretation is correct, then Rin rgyal and Sher rgyal married first cousins—a liaison that would be considered incestuous in some, but not all, Tibetan societies.

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Tibetans generally prohibit marriage with a member of the same patrilineage (*rus*, or *rgyud*) unless a stipulated number of generations have passed since sharing a common ancestor. This guideline manifests in the distinction Tibetans make between kin who are classified as *spun* and *gnyen* (Levine 1988:50): the former connotes siblings and parallel-cousins (children of one's mother's sister or father's brother), the latter cross-cousins (children of one's mother's brother or father's sister). Marriage with *spun* is an unambiguous act of incest because that person is likely to share the same *rus*, or bone, which is understood by Tibetans to be the bodily substance a father contributes to his child through procreation. Marriage with *gnyen*, however, does not necessarily violate incest prohibitions because that person is unlikely to be "*rus gcig pa*," or "of the same bone." To illustrate, think of your own family as Tibetan. Your mother and her brother (your maternal uncle) are *rus gcig pa* through the principle of patrilineal descent. Because your mother was prohibited from marrying someone of the same *rus*, your father and mother's brother belong to different patrilineal descent groups and, by extension, you and your mother's brother's children (cross-cousins) also belong to different groups. Marriage with a cross-cousin does not violate the incest prohibition because a cross-cousin cannot be *rus gcig pa*.

Nevertheless, many Tibetans consider marriage with any first cousin (parallel or cross) to be incestuous (Stein 1972:95) on the principle that there needs to be several generations of separation on the matrilineal side as well. However, Benedict (1942) and Allen (1976) use linguistic analysis to argue that cross-cousin marriage was normative in Tibet's distant past (cf. Nagano 1994). Furthermore, anthropologists working throughout the Himalayan region have found cross-cousin marriage to be a common practice (Goldstein 1975; Hall 1978; Schuler 1987; Levine 1988; Mumford 1989; Schicklgruber 1993; Childs 2004). Specifically, Schuler (1987:130-131) reports that one-third of marriages among Chumik's commoner class are between cross-cousins, and Levine (1989:50) finds that Nyinba households prefer to repeat marriages with matrilineal cross-cousins over the course of generations. Schicklgruber (1993) argues that incentives for cross-cousin marriage include the ability to balance marital debts over time because a bride-receiving household is indebted to a bride-giving household, and a desire to ensure a daughter is well treated by sending her to a household consisting of close kin.

Based on the evidence presented above, we conclude that Rin rgyal and Sher rgyal each married cross-cousins, and that such relationships did not constitute incest in that particular Tibetan community at that time. In fact, the instrumental particle *pas* used in the text for this passage may demonstrate reason or cause. That is, the phrase "since she was a maternal cross-cousin she was betrothed to him" (*sru chung yin pas gnyen byas nas*) strongly implies that cross-cousins were not merely acceptable as spouses but sought after. Because only Sher rgyal's spouse is identified as Dge shes Tsa pa's *dbon mo* (grand-niece, as argued above), we can further deduce that the two women were not sisters.

Inheritance

Tibetan inheritance systems vary by place and time. For example, under the Dga' ldan pho brang government that administered Central Tibet from the mid seventeenth century to the 1950s, taxpayers (*khral pa*) held heritable rights to set amounts of land providing they met contractual tax obligations (Goldstein 1971). Technically, inheritance was on a per capita basis: each son had a right to an equal share. In reality, people took efforts to prevent dividing their property. For example, they engaged in polyandrous marriages to concentrate male labor within the household and pass assets intact from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the parents or eldest brother could refuse to bestow anything to a junior brother who wished to marry monogamously and establish a separate household (Goldstein 1978). Parents could also eliminate sons from the inheritance equation by sending one to a monastery, or to another household as a *mag pa* (matrilocally-resident husband) or *bu tshab* (adoptive son).

In contrast, many communities in the highlands of Nepal practice a system of partible inheritance. For example, in Nubri the eldest brother marries and brings his wife to his parents' home. After their first child is born the son claims his share of fields and livestock and moves into a separate house. When the youngest brother marries he brings his bride home and his parents bequeath their remaining assets to him. The parents can either remain with their youngest son who is expected to provide old age care, or move to a retirement home (Childs 2004, see also Schuler 1987 and Goldstein 1975).

Evidence from Zhi byed ri pa's account suggests that people in Mi la ras pa's village followed a system of partible inheritance. At the time of Rin rgyal's marriage the text states,

[His family] had commissioned many religious objects, including golden statues, extensive, medium-length, and [abbreviated] scriptures, and the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra*. Many such items in their possession, the extensive, intermediate, and [abbreviated] scriptures foremost among them, were given to Rin rgyal.

The text only specifies religious accoutrements and texts Rin rgyal inherited but does not mention the most fundamental assets for a rural Tibetan family—land and animals. Perhaps in the context of a *rnam thar* the author felt it would be trivial to mention mundane possessions. Regardless, the ensuing disputes constitute solid evidence that, upon marriage, Rin rgyal received part of his father's estate and moved out from his natal household to establish a separate residence.

Regarding Sher rgyal's marriage, the text states,

When Sher rgyal turned seventeen, Dge bshes Tsa pa had a grand-niece (*dbon mo*) named Nyang bza' dkar legs and since she was a maternal cousin (*sru chung*) she was betrothed (*gnyen byas*) to him. When he turned eighteen he had the means to welcome her and Mid la Rdo rje rgyal po brought the couple together (*khag shibs*). When

[Sher rgyal] turned nineteen, and Dkar legs was twenty-one, he took her as a bride (*bag mar blangs*).

First, the passage implies that a Tibetan marriage during Mi la ras pa's time could involve a sequence of events over time, as is common today. In this case it started with a betrothal (*gnyen byas*, perhaps similar to *slong chang* or engagement ceremony), followed by bringing the couple together or allowing them to become acquainted (*khag shibs*), and culminated in a formal ceremony whereby the groom brings his bride back to his home (*bag mar blangs*).

Furthermore, the phrase "means to welcome her" (*bsu tshis yin pa*) can be interpreted as "economic means to get married," that is, Rdo rje rgyal po agreed to provide Sher rgyal the requisite inheritance to start his own family. Because Rdo rje rgyal po and his wife made the arrangements, we can infer that Dkar legs (Mi la's mother) moved into a household consisting of her husband, father-in-law, and mother-in-law.

Regarding Sher rgyal's inheritance, the text states, "All of his parents' wealth, headed by the *Ratnakūta Sūtra*, was given to Sher rgyal." In this case "all of his parent's wealth" refers to all that was left after Rin rgyal had claimed his inheritance. This interpretation is confirmed in the subsequent passage when Rin rgyal's wife refers to Sher rgyal's inheritance as the parents' "remaining wealth" (*shul gyi nor*).

In summary, both sons received parts of their father's estate. Rin rgyal, the elder, established a separate residence upon marriage whereas Sher rgyal, the younger, continued to co-reside with his parents after marriage presumably as a means to support the elders. Tensions emerged when Rin rgyal's wife declared,

We have many children and our material conditions have deteriorated. Because the two youngest daughters will require a dowry from us, it is inappropriate for Sher rgyal to get all of the parents' remaining wealth.

Rin rgyal's wife's argument, that their economic condition was deteriorating because they had many children, was spurious. The only two people who mattered in the inheritance equation were Rin rgyal and Sher rgyal. Both were entitled to equal shares. Rin rgyal obviously had more children when Sher rgyal married because he was older and had a considerable head start on reproduction. Rin rgyal's wife made an unreasonable demand, an interpretation supported by the text which states she became mean-spirited and combative toward her husband albeit there was nothing they could do about it.

Rin rgyal and Sher rgyal should have been able to supervise independent households. However, Sher rgyal died when Mi la was a toddler, thereby setting in motion the next phase of the drama. Mi la, Sher rgyal's only legitimate son, was the rightful heir to his father's property. However, he was too young to work, let alone manage the agricultural land and domestic animals of his father's estate. Dkar legs, a young widow with two small children, was in no position to undertake the myriad chores required to run a rural household.

One option to resolve the dilemma would be for Dkar legs to marry Rin rgyal. Technically this would be possible because Tibetans practice levirate marriage, the custom whereby a man marries his deceased brother's widow (see Stein 1972:98, 102-103; Hall 1978:57; Schuler 1987:76; Childs 2004:135-139). Polygyny is also acceptable in many Tibetan societies, and presumably Rin rgyal's wife would have to approve of such an arrangement. But economically this would not be an ideal option. Although Rin rgyal would add assets to his own estate, he would also add more inheritors: Mi la and any subsequent sons born to Dkar legs. His wife was already complaining about the economic hardships incurred by having many children, so it is unlikely she would agree to add more to the equation.

Rin rgyal instead proposed that Dkar legs marry his son. Rin rgyal was older than Sher rgyal, so it is plausible that one of his sons was roughly the same age as Dkar legs or perhaps younger. Tibetans see no problem for a younger man to marry an older woman. Sher rgyal, for example, was three years younger than Dkar legs. From Rin rgyal's perspective, a marriage between Dkar legs and his son would make sense. With six sons, Rin rgyal had a motive to minimize the division of his assets. What he proposed was a variation of the *mag pa* (matrilocally-resident husband) option that would allow him to remove one son from his inheritance equation. That son would move in with Dkar legs; any male offspring resulting from the union would become eligible to inherit Sher rgyal's estate along with their half brother Mi la.

Based on the reactions of family and community members, the option described above seems to have been appropriate. However, Dkar legs declined the marriage proposal and from the ensuing dialogue we can infer that she was concerned for the welfare of her children. On the one hand, she feared they would be ill treated by their uncle and stepfather, while on the other hand she did not want to dilute Mi la's future inheritance by bearing more children. Dkar legs' refusal prompted Rin rgyal to take action.

At this, Rin rgyal said, "If you won't live with my son, I will take your possessions." He then carried away all her possessions, beginning with the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra*. All the relatives said that Rin rgyal was in the right and they turned belligerent toward Dkar legs.

Apparently, Rin rgyal was entitled to assume control over his deceased brother's possessions—at least in the capacity as caretaker until the legitimate heir, Mi la, came of age. That Mi la was considered the rightful heir is supported in subsequent sections. When Mi la was 17 years old, an appropriate age for initiating a marriage proposal, Dkar legs tried to reclaim her son's property.

The mother and two children were on the verge of starvation when a friendly former monk gave them ingredients for making *chang*, which they prepared. [The mother] gathered her relatives together, poured [*chang*] for the uncle [Rin rgyal], and said, "Now mother and children will take a share of the possessions." [The uncle Rin rgyal] replied, "I will give you a share," but then his wife changed his mind, and he no longer wished to give it.

Rin rgyal's initial consent supports the viewpoint that he was acting as caretaker of his nephew's property until Mi la reached a suitable age for marriage. Unfortunately, Rin rgyal's wife intervened to scuttle the agreement. Rin rgyal not only refused a subsequent request, but flew into a drunken rage beating and abusing his destitute and powerless kin. Dispossessed of his rightful inheritance, Mi la and family were destined for a life of poverty. Perhaps one can now better understand why he and his mother developed such a keen desire to avenge the loss.

Concluding Remarks

Our purpose in writing this essay is to exemplify how analysis of social and cultural norms can lead to a greater appreciation for conflicts presented in Tibetan historical narratives. Zhi byed ri pa no doubt had an intuitive understanding about the issues he documented, and felt little need to explain the significance of kinship relationships and norms of inheritance. His contemporaries would easily grasp the relationships and obligations created and maintained through marriage, and would be aghast at the breach of protocol when Mi la was dispossessed of his rightful inheritance. But for a foreign readership, and even for a Tibetan raised in an ever-changing cultural environment, the full significance of events is not always obvious. Moreover, Zhi byed ri pa's text provides an early and exceptionally detailed description of village life on Tibet's southern border with Nepal. For the modern reader, it offers a rare window into the complex events that shaped the childhood of Tibet's great religious figure as well as the famed story of his life. We therefore hope that the above analysis provides a greater appreciation for the tribulations faced by Mi la ras pa in his youth, and the social complexities of Tibetan village society.

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