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Coming of Age : Gurung Women (Mustang, Nepal) and Ute Women (Colorado, USA)

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Abstract

Gurung women of Mustang, Nepal, and Ute women of Colorado, USA, are fascinating people and subjects. They have upheld matriarchy in the predominantly patriarchal world. Their free, symphonic life presents a model for other women. The two tribal womenfolk living in two different poles show keen relations regarding many customs and rituals as well as in displaying women power. It is an interesting and meaningful study to compare the societies of these two tribal womenfolk and trace their relationship with one another. They may have been distantly related to each other in their origin as such studies imply about them.

Keywords: Gurung and Ute women, matriarchy, menses, padonomy, puberty rite, polyandry

Background

Gurung women of Mustang, Nepal, and Ute women of Colorado, USA, are fascinating people and subjects. They have upheld matriarchy in the predominantly patriarchal world. Their free, symphonic life presents a model for other women. However, few people know about them as there is little substantial work done about them, and their kinship, and menstrual taboos and marriage customs that I took as my Fulbright project in 2018. I was short-listed and interviewed but not selected. Still the concept and project are pertinent forever. The reason is, first, authors describe about Gurungs in general, and mostly those belonging to Pokhara and other accessible places of Nepal. Second, there are some random writings about the Gurungsenis of Mustang but there are scant materials about the puberty rites and feelings and power of these women during their menses and marriages. Likewise, few writers have treated Ute women and their rites extensively. They concentrate more on the Utes beyond the Great Basin of Colorado, Denver. Moreover, the anthropological study of kinship in Nepal as a scientific subject is very limited.

Nepal is a multiethnic country. Every community of people has their own kinship features. The academia has not been able to cover all of them. The research proposed to focus on how these two indigenous nationalities separated in time and place show striking kinship affinities with one another. It aimed to create a comparative course plan for working anthropologists and other multiple disciplinarians. It also aimed to develop a working bibliography, and devise suitable artifacts and pedagogical matters and documentaries for teaching about them at different levels. The detailed findings might be used for better understanding the issues and uplifting other women elsewhere, who mostly live alienated and discriminated. Above all, it will make the Governments of Nepal and the USA and concerned agencies and organizations (especially those working in the fields of gender, ethnicities, and social uplifting) accountable towards mass awakening and forming core groups to address any such anomalies.

Objectives

The present study tries to achieve following goals:

1. To acquaint the students-readers with theory and practice of comparative anthropology;
2. To enable them to understand the similarities and differences between the customs and conceptions that prevail among the two women folks of two different countries and continents.
3. To help them to apply suitable research methodologies to form groups and focus groups, hold interviews with the target groups and concerned faculty and experts, analyze data and findings, and write reports thereof.
4. To publish the findings for teaching and learning, and for arousing global awareness on the issues and creating an egalitarian and equitable society.
5. To use the findings (mainly anthropological ones) to make the course interdisciplinary and “learner-centered.”

Methodology

The project has proposed to follow a participatory and observatory qualitative research method in order to help the students to form and work with a focus group, concentrating on the marriage customs and menstrual myths regarding Gurungsenis and Ute women. Together they can study Gurungseni artifacts. In USA, they can visit Colorado ranches, observe and interview the Ute women, and collect information about these issues now and then, and how they and their communities regard these. They can also explore relevant materials through libraries and archives notable universities like California State University-Northridge (CSU-N), in particular and the greater Los Angeles, in general.

Significance

The research findings can help empower these and other tribal women that suffer alienation and discrimination due to their body and odor besides color, race, sex, ethnicity, and origin. These can be included in the curricula of language, literature, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies of Nepalese universities. These will broaden our perspective about kinship and women power.

In Nepal, this will upgrade women literacy, especially about their rights and responsibilities. It will also enhance critical, liberal pedagogy focusing on gender and ethnicity as Freire and Darder respectively propounded. For Freire labor lurks in liberation more so that of the oppressed (31), even more so that of the oppressed women. But it is worth—it gives birth to a new thought, new concept, and “new woman.”

I did my PhD dissertation as a socio-anthropological research. Earlier, I studied Critical Pedagogy at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), USA. I also did library and archival search at American Studies and Research Centre (ASRC), Hyderabad, India. I also visited Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2017-18 for Sabbatical study on “Diasporic Nepalese Children.” All these enthused me to pursue the project, and I wish someone took this up, and upgraded it. For, this will help women and others to launch programs of teaching about puberty, sanitation, and hygiene and removing any marital anomalies. The courses will highlight the women power they gain through their independent relations and decisions and through defying unscientific taboos of their periods. The findings will further broaden the researcher’s pedagogy and perspective and research about other women and marginalized groups that I myself belong to.

The inter-university exchange, if feasible, in Nepal and USA, and the visits of the Fulbright scholars will shift patriarchal pedagogy to a matriarchal one. Personally, it will prepare the researcher for better student counseling, making documentaries and translating and subtitling related documentaries for global audience, particularly females. For that, they can work with the related departments of universities, governments, and international organizations. Socially, it will effect racial harmony by uplifting multiple ethnicities of Nepal, and eliminating the said taboos and malpractices, and other male domination. Economically and ecologically, it will flourish “padonomy,” enabling women to use their muscles round the clock and year without polluting themselves and surroundings, and earn their own bread, without any hatred and hesitation. Specifically, it will liberate women and make them responsible and active towards family, nature, and kinship. Indeed, it will mainstream them and their study by establishing a two-way “vagina discourse.” For, women, like men, have the same blood, body, and brain everywhere. Anything that happens to a woman anywhere affects her “sisters” everywhere. Treating these two women tribes will benefit Nepal and USA in particular, and the world in general.

Evaluation and Dissemination

The project/research will lead learners and educators to observe things afresh. They will learn about these women’s lifestyle, stories, customs, and rituals. They will talk with their kin and community about how things were in the past, how they changed, and where they are moving. They will also pick up suggestions and measures to improve their conditions. Back home, they will relate the Ute story and encourage the Gurungsenis to relate similar stories, which they can transcribe in English for the Ute. These will enlighten other marginalized women about health and hygiene, focusing on natural menstrual cycle, using or making and disposing of hygienic sanitary pads, and avoiding any patriarchal taboos and customs. They can make pictures, posters, and pamphlets to educate the grassroots to fight against social malpractices like early and multiple

marriage, forced marriage, dowry, family feud, and land and property division. They can motivate them to hold all the domestic and social activities freely and confidently.

Rationale

1. The researcher must visit US to make the research foolproof. There they can observe the Ute women in the neighborhood of Los Angeles, and acquaint their freshers and faculty about the similar issues in Nepal and elsewhere.
2. California State University-Northridge (CSU-N), for example, is the right place to work with if one could access a qualified mentor, especially an Asian or Asian-American. They know both East and West. They can communicate freely about the nitty-gritty of the two different linguistic and ethnic groups. Moreover, their Department and university library and inter-university library facility will provide the researcher enough space to work, and materials and access to valuable archives to conduct the research. Its interdisciplinary and cross-cultural atmosphere, several specialists and research methods plus connectivity with the Departments of Anthropology and Native Americans will help the researcher put the theory into practice.
3. The vibrant cultural, intellectual, and interactive life of the University will help disseminate the research findings through guest lectures truly “productively.” The researcher can also interact with other Asian/Nepalese faculty and scholars, and “fit” cross-culturally and academically in the vein of René Descarte, “I blend, therefore I am.”
4. The research will also enrich the researcher’s host institution and other visiting Fulbrighters with the “new knowledge.” This collective will inform the University faculty about the state of Mustangi Gurungsenis and their affinity with the Ute women. Thus, it will bridge a gap in the isolated studies of the respective native scholars, widen the academic spectrum on both sides, and complete the picture frame that fits both.

Research Statement

The proposed research should focus on menstrual taboos and matrimonial customs of Gurung women (Mustang, Nepal) and Ute women (Colorado, USA). Both defy common menstrual taboos and marital systems, and display unique women power in their kinship. Kinship makes for the evolution of father-mother relationships along blood and breast lines. The relationship runs along linear and collateral lines. A child is thus related with the father, cousins, aunts, and uncles, and the kin of both father and mother. Kinship also considers gender subversion through eco-feminism, Neo-Paganism, and Goddess movement (Carsten 2018), specifically among Gurung women and Ute women.

Pussy, Pad, and Power of Gurungsenis

Gurungsenis bear a Sino *saino* (Tibetan tie). They exhibit a “stronger sex” in marriage, and menstruation stands for their maturity or “coming of age.” They love their labia and lunacy. They take puberty as natural. So they avoid *chhaupadi* (isolation) in menses. For instance, in Lower Mustang, Nepali adolescent girls like Kunsang Gurung freely talk about menses, which is normally a taboo in Nepali society. They care for their

pussy and use pads for purgation unlike other tribal and rural women, who do not take any such protective measures and, in fact, they are isolated as untouchables. They believe these endow women power upon them. Some Gurungsenis even enter monasteries and consult doctors for menstrual cramps. They regard menstrual blood as natural as pisses and feces. At Muktinath temple, according to Hare-Grogg (2018: 19-25), one even manages *puja* as a nun during her period.

Reversed Polyandry

Gurungsenis marry siblings and save any partition of family and land. These Tamus live with the in-laws and under *Ama Samuha* (Elderly Women's Organization) in Himalayas away from others and spouses that bake bread in the barracks of soldiers (as Gurkhas) or diasporas (as *lahures*). They freely decide domestic and other matters. Long before the promulgation of the new Civil Code (August 17, 2018) which made mandatory the minimum age of twenty-one years for marriage, they married among the clans at twenty through *magi* (arrangement) or *bhagi* (elopement). Today they select partner(s) or first cousins from *char*, *nau*, or *soraha jats* (clan of four, nine, or sixteen groups). They may be father's sister's son/s (FZS) or mother's brother's son/s (MBS). Those without a brother bring in their spouses as *gharjwains* (resident sons-in-law) to live with their parents. But only years later do they enter the groom's lineage when her heavily gifted father passes it on to her. But they can divorce and claim collateral or "bride wealth" when the spouses are incompatible and sterile, disown family, or bring (though rarely) concubines. The single Gurungsenis can even inherit parental property in accordance with the recent law enforced by the Republic Government of Nepal though it is against the Gurung customs.

Women Worship

The Gurungsenis make premarital affairs in now somewhat anachronistic *rodighar* (youth club) for supposed promiscuity therein. Chene, however, claims that it promotes certain "core values and forms" (June 1996: 116). Married either way, the Gurungsenis in their matriarchal society manage the household and farming, children's education, and property single-handedly and almost "patriarchally." In 2008, with the declaration of federalism in the country, Mustang kingship was rendered obsolete. But these women have retained their own "queenship," and booze themselves liberally on the abundant apple orchards in Mustang. Meanwhile, they maintain their integrity and tribal culture.

Ute's Puberty Rite

The Ute women (Colorado), though dependent on their men folks, are physically strong, and fight, according to Allen, the oppositions while carrying their colonized kinship or "bicultural bind" (34). These "Nu Ci" observe the first menses by avoiding some activities and food like deer meat so as not to spoil their spouses' kill (*Ute Encyclopedia*, 1996). The men, on the other hand, hunt deer to prove their puberty but do not eat it, and observe their women folks' puberty rites. According to Allen, "the un-Indian, non-Indian" critics see Indians segregating and preventing unclean, menstruating women from festivities, and confining them to a set space (32). They regard Ute as "sick, cursed, sinful, and weak." However, Indians trust in their own "occult power . . . innately the blood-given power to kill—with a glance, with a step, or with a judicious mixing

of menstrual blood into somebody's soup" (33-34). They believe their maturity gained through menses and hormonal growth helped God to bear Christ out of a woman. It also enabled Eve to capsize Eden, and can enable modern *mujeres*, particularly Ute, to re-right it (Sojourner Truth, qtd. in Allen, p. 33).

Ute Matrimony

Ute live in the Great Basin with maternal kinsfolk. They share work and shamanistic rituals with men. They marry beyond twelve bands through arrangement and indulge in premarital intercourse at their home. Spouses are mostly monogamous and loyal. While alive, women make relations, unlike Gurungsenis, with their brothers-in-law. On death or sterility, their sisters marry the widower brother-in-law. Ute, however, seek divorce if men prove barren, disloyal, and disharmonious, and control children and property under single, independent families. When widowed, they share sheer springs, eagle aeries, and garden plots as most personal belongings of the deceased are burnt (*Ute Encyclopedia*). When grown, these "Spiderwomen" command respect, and help otros ángeles to mature. They also join the Bear Dance to increase their hunting and virility. Besides, they instill the same spirit in the now "grown-up" girls. They also participate in the Sun Dance for individuals or community (barrio). These Red Hoods, thus, retain their native or Uterine "redhood," orality, and posterity.

Imperatives

The two tribal womenfolk living in two different poles show keen relations regarding many customs and rituals as well as in displaying women power. It will be an interesting and meaningful study to compare the societies of these two tribal womenfolk and trace their relationship with one another. Maybe in the distant pasts they had a common lineage and ancestry. They display a striking similarity in their indigenous look and language, food, and dress, headdress and hair-do (plaits). They wear beads garments and rings, and pierce ears and noses for that purpose. They drink and dance liberally. They also worship nature, and perform circumambulation and shamanic rites. Besides, they till farm and ranch sheep and other cattle, and preserve land through collective or their sole proprietorship. All these affect an ilk of Paleolithic bondage that probably owes to the easy migration and intermingling of the Asian, mostly Mongloid, and American hunters and gatherers sometime in the dim past.

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