The Status of Bride-Givers in Tibet, the Himalayas and Beyond: Notes on the Tibetic Kin Terms *sru*, *zhang*, and *tsha*[1]

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1. Kin terminologies

In the so-called 'new kinship studies' that followed the work of David Schneider (e.g., 1984), the study of kinship terminology, a topic that had already gone out of fashion, faded further into the background still. In the critical view of Janet Carsten, "studies of kin classification [had become] quite divorced from the messier realities of social and political processes as well as the everyday experience of kinship" (2004: 16). There is surely some truth to this critique. Some analyses of kin terminology became more about abstract logic than sociology (e.g., Parkin 1997: 156), and terminologies often do not, or only vaguely, reflect social practice. Yet technical and abstract approaches had plenty of detractors already, while the misalignment between terminology and practice had long been acknowledged — at least since the days of John Ferguson McLennan and Alfred Kroeber.[2] With the study of kin terminologies having now fallen out of favor so thoroughly, particularly in North-American academia, perhaps the theoretical pendulum has swung back too far. The neglect of kin terminology has, to be sure,

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[2] For instance, in 1961, Edmund Leach, in a new preface to a republication of his famous analysis of Jinghpaw kinship terminology, cautioned against analyses that revolve around "delightful series of mathematical abstractions" yet bear "little relation to sociological facts" (1971 [1961]: 30). He also concluded that kin terminologies (the study of which was already "decidedly out of fashion" in British anthropology, ibid.: 29) may bear "a specific relationship to an idealized form of the social order, but that there is no such obvious relationship between the kinship terminology and the social order as manifested in actual behaviour" (ibid.: 51).

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left much recent anthropological work on kinship vulnerable to a number of compelling critiques, especially when it comes to the purported irrelevance, in many societies, of procreative kinship and genealogy (Shapiro 2015 & 2018: 22-24).

Moreover, kinship terms themselves need not be far removed from the "everyday experience of kinship" at all. Some examples from ethnographies of Tibeto-Burman-speaking people might suffice to illustrate just part of the relevance of kin terminologies. Charles Ramble writes of the village of Te in Mustang, Nepal: "To address a senior fellow-villager by name without the conventional prefix of the appropriate kinship term is not a serious fault, but anyone present would cringe at the boorishness of it. I have never even heard a child infringe this convention: it is acquired with language, and everyone knows the rules" (Ramble 2008: 267). Seventy years prior, another ethnographer wrote: "Personal names are of practically no importance to the Lepchas of Zongu and they have no sort of permanence." Much like in Mustang, "call[ing] a person by name, rather than by their title or a kinship term is considered to be somewhat ill-mannered" (Gorer 1967 [1938]: 145). Among the Kachin of northern Myanmar, too, equals and seniors alike are addressed with kin terms, not names (Leach 1971 [1961]: 49). In other words, proper acquaintance with the kin terminology[3] is part of basic sociality.

Knowledge of such terms and systems is not only necessary for understanding relations inside communities, but can also help elucidate historical sources that use kin terms. The way in which kinsmen are terminologically classified is often associated with patterns of expectations and obligations in the realms of marriage and everyday life, where and whence it can flow over into other analytic domains such as 'religion' and 'politics' (for an instance of the latter in the Tibetan context, see Dotson 2009). As such, kin terminologies can function as pieces of the puzzle in the larger study of kinship and societies at large. Even if they do not constitute the puzzle in its entirety, which they certainly do not, kin terminologies are not necessarily irrelevant to it, either. If "everyone knows the rules", shouldn't we?

In this spirit, and in our longstanding shared interest in kinship and clans, this contribution in honor of Guntram Hazod tentatively digs into some aspects of Tibetic kinship terminologies. It revisits and partly departs from two earlier contributions on this topic, one by Paul Benedict (1942) and one by Nicholas 'Nick' Allen (1976), although it is far more modest in scope. It chiefly aims to 1) pool evidence of historical Tibetic kin terminologies that were marked by (derivative) vertical

[3] Note that the terms of direct address are often different, and less complicated, than those used in reference.

equations, often styled 'Omaha' equations, which group together matrilateral and patrilateral cross cousins, respectively, with relatives from higher and lower generations (*infra*). Furthermore, 2) it suggests, more in line with Benedict than Allen, that this terminological feature is related to the elevated status of bride-givers, a feature typical of Tibetan and Himalayan marriage patterns of asymmetric alliance (in which one group serves as bride-givers, but not bride-receivers, to another group). This combination of kin terminological features and preferred marriage practice is attested across multiple societies in the larger region, suggesting a broader pattern. Lastly, 3) the article seeks to instill in readers a vigilance of colloquial usage of Tibetic kin terms in (historical) source materials, whose non-standard meanings might otherwise easily go undetected. This paper itself provides notes — some firm, some tentative — on the kin terms *sru*, *zhang*, and *tsha* (as well as on compounded forms such as *sru-chung* and *tsha-byug*).

2. Tibetic languages, cross cousins and Omaha-type vertical equations

Paul Benedict has suggested, based on linguistic analysis of historical and contemporary evidence, that "the Tibetan kinship nomenclature can be construed as a modified variety of the 'Omaha' pattern" (1942: 326). So-called 'Omaha terminologies,' whose status as a meaningful type has since been subject to substantial controversy in the anthropological literature (e.g., Needham 1971, Barnes 1984, also see the discussion in Parkin 1997: 109–17), are typically, though not exclusively, found in societies with patrilineal descent. They are marked above all by a series of cross-generational applications of kin terms, which group together matrilateral and patrilateral cross cousins with some of their lineal relatives in ascending and descending generations.

As such, matrilateral cross cousins (i.e., the mother's brother's sons and daughters, or MBS and MBD)[4] are, on the one hand, referred to by the same term as the mother's brother (MB) and his sisters (the MZ) (with the latter generally being equated with the mother, M). These equations thus identify certain members of ego's own generation (g0) with members of the ascending generation (g+1). On the other hand,

[4] In this article, I use standard abbreviations and combinations thereof to refer to specific genealogical positions: F = Father, M = Mother, P = Parent, B = Brother, Z = Sister, G = Sibling, S = Son, D = Daughter, C = Child, H = Husband, W = Wife, E = Spouse. Thus, ZD denotes the 'sister's daughter,' and MBD the 'mother's brother's daughter.' Additional specifications are: (ms) 'male speaking,' (ws) 'woman speaking,' e = elder, y = younger, ss = same sex, os = opposite sex. Hence, BS (ms) denotes that a term refers to the brother's son from a male frame of reference, MyB denotes the mother's younger brother, and PosG refers to the "parents' opposite-sex siblings" (i.e. the father's sisters and mother's brothers).

the patrilateral cross cousins (the father's sister's children, or FZC) are grouped together with male ego's cross nieces and cross nephews (ZC [ms]), who of course belong to a *lower* generation (g-1) (see Fig. 1). Thus, one set of cross cousins is raised a generation, while the other is lowered a generation.

This phenomenon of raising and lowering relatives in generation is known as 'skewing.' These particular vertical equations are also referred to as Omaha-type equations because they gained fame in the anthropological literature through the terminology reported from among the Omaha of the Nebraska plains of North America.

The basic pattern of an Omaha terminology is plotted in Fig. 1. I should stress at the outset that I in no way aim to discuss, let alone explain, an entire kin terminological system, but rather limit myself to making remarks on these vertically skewed kin terms in particular[5] (marked 1 and 2, and 7 and 8 in Fig. 1):

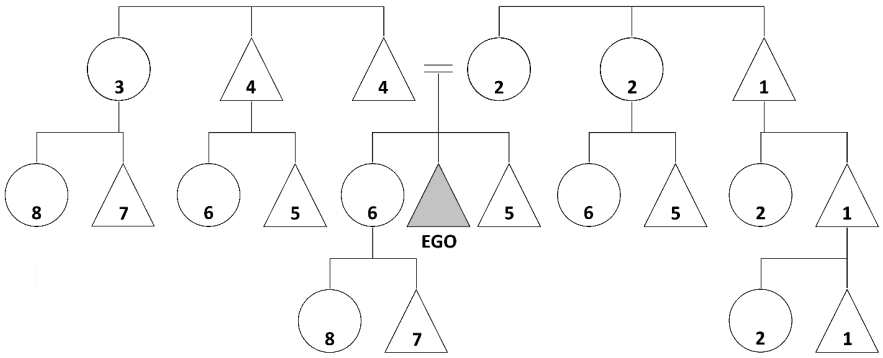


Fig. 1 — In vertical equations of the 'Omaha' type, terms for the cross cousins are skewed: descendants of the mother's brother are generationally elevated and equated with the mother's brother and his sisters (nos. 1 & 2), while the father's sister's children are lowered, and thus equated with male ego's sister's children (nos. 7 & 8) (after Parkin 1997: 111, fig. 9.2).

Authors differ in what constitutes a supposed Omaha 'system,' if they believe anything does at all. While some authors stress only such vertical equations, these alone do not constitute a terminological system in a meaningful sense (Parkin 1997: 113). Many theorists, moreover, chief among which Claude Lévi-Strauss, add a sociological aspect to

[5] The equations F = FB and M = MZ, the bifurcate merging typical for Omaha (as well as Iroquois and Crow), I first believed not to be particularly widespread in Tibetic terminologies, yet this may well be a reflection of my biased approach to the matter, in which written Tibetan is overrepresented. Fn. 19 provides some examples of 'derivative bifurcate merging' (Murdock 1959: 673) in Tibetic languages. Moreover, bifurcate merging may also appear in terms of direct address, yet be absent from the terms of reference (e.g., von Fürer-Haimendorf 1964: 47; cf. 289).

the definition, namely the system's association with a dispersal of alliance: when members of two descent groups contract a marriage, that same type of union is avoided for multiple generations (ibid.: 114).[6] Rodney Needham famously rejected Omaha as a meaningful type altogether because the relevant terminologies could not convincingly be tied to any specific sociological pattern (1971).

With this laid out, let us return to Tibetic kin terminologies. Benedict's analysis of kin terms (1942) is successful on a number of fronts. At the same time, it is arguably less convincing when it comes to his claim that Tibetic kin terminologies reflect and derive from an older Omaha terminology.[7] For this thesis, Benedict heavily relies on a hypothetical parallel with other languages such as "Lushei and other Kuki languages of Assam" (1942: 325), presupposing structural continuity across much time and space. In the end, his reconstruction is to a large degree presupposition, as he has to assume both the terminological structure and the terms themselves. He appears, furthermore, to have been unable to cite evidence for "the application of the term 'grandchild' to sister's child (man sp[eaking])" to the exclusion of the meaning 'brother's child' (ibid.: 327, see also 320-22). The original meanings of *tshan* and *spun* that he suggested, too, remained wholly hypothetical (ibid.: 325-26).[8] A reference to a historical source, approvingly cited by Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]: 372), is in fact missing, as is a second one (Benedict 1942: 322). Lévi-Strauss trusted Benedict's reconstruction of the terminology, although he disagreed with its identification as a reflection of an Omaha system (1964: 372–73) (albeit not for linguistic reasons, but because of Lévi-Strauss's sociologically inflected definition of what constitutes such a system).

Allen (1976) has offered a different approach concerning the history of Tibetic kin terminologies in a hypothesis-driven diachronic analysis of one specific Sherpa kinship terminology, which actually has a series of vertical Omaha-type equations (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1964: 289–91, Oppitz 1968: 147, see also Schicklgruber 1991). Allen does not offer any "attempt to localise" his reconstruction of the kin terminology "within the linguistic family tree", and hence does not claim that it necessarily reflects proto-Bodish (1976: 583). In any case, he hypothe-

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6 Notably, this multi-generational avoidance of repeating a marriage also appears to have been typical of the Tibetan imperial line (Dotson 2004).

7 Jonathan Samuels largely discards Benedict's study as lacking "sufficiently cogent arguments or evidence", yet does not elaborate (2013: 440).

8 Evidence gathered at a later point in time seems to undermine some of his presuppositions on this point, too, e.g., his claim "that the basic sibling terms (*che*, *phu*, *nu*) are never [...] extended" in order "to cover collateral kin of Ego's own generation" (ibid.: 324), that is to say, that sibling terms never covered cousins. Later ethnography from Nepal would record various such Tibetic terminologies, including but not limited to Sherpa ones.

sizes that the terminology had earlier been of a symmetrical Dravidian type, meaning that it was logically organized around a presumption of bilateral cross cousin marriage, or 'direct exchange.'[9] According to this analysis, the ancestral terminology lacked the vertical equations that marked the terminology of the Sherpa of Khumbu. Allen is frank about the theoretical presuppositions that underpin his analysis, which, in his words, "may appear circular" (ibid.: 572).

What is more, diachronic approaches such as Allen's are controversial from the start, as they assume that terminologies develop in but a single direction, generally away from a primordial Dravidian system and towards the loss of symmetry and, eventually, cross cousin marriage altogether.[10] Detractors of such approaches contest this unidirectionality of change, criticizing their evolutionist underpinning as unwarrantedly deterministic. Pascal Bouchery (2021), for instance, argues that the Dravidian system of the Pagro Mising of Assam, India, developed from the asymmetric Omaha-type terminology of the Adi of Arunachal Pradesh. If correct, this takes the wind out of the sails of Allen's presuppositions concerning Sherpa, and questions more broadly the wisdom of such sweeping statements that several major historical transformations of kinship, such as those away from Dravidian systems, "are *irreversible*" (Godelier 2011 [2004]: 500).[11]

In any case, in Allen's view, the vertical equations of the Sherpa terminology constituted an innovative terminological response to the loss of positive marriage rules that enjoined bilateral cross cousin marriage. In contradistinction to Benedict, then, he considered vertical equations as a later development rather than an ancestral trait. In a Dravidian terminology, the terms for cross cousins (and other consanguines) have affinal meaning too, as the cross cousins represent potential marriage partners (see also fn. 9).[12] When, Allen's reasoning goes, the

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[9] I.e., marriage with the (or a classificatory) MBD who is also the (or a classificatory) FZD. The coincidence of these two genealogical positions is the result of people of the category MB marrying those of the category FZ. Such terminologies presuppose two intermarrying descent groups, resulting in affines also being consanguines. This is to be distinguished from the practice of matrilateral cross cousin marriage, where wife-givers are not simultaneously wife-receivers, and accordingly a minimum of three groups is needed. The latter is accordingly also described as indirect exchange.

[10] Parkin (2021) offers an interesting recent example of such a diachronic approach.

[11] For what it's worth, I myself deem it inadvisable to underestimate the human propensity for social innovation and the role of historical contingency in rearranging marriage patterns in ad-hoc directions, especially in small and relatively isolated communities. Demographic collapse or the acts (and opinions) of charismatic or powerful figures may steer the communal ship in directions that logic might not portend.

[12] Such overlaps are illustrated by the Brokpa, among whom cross cousin marriages are allowed, and where "one might jokingly call unrelated people *ɛaŋsin* ('male

speech community abandoned cross cousin marriage, these terms became awkward due to their now incestuous implications, equating as they did consanguines and affines. Speakers responded by adopting new terms for the cross cousins, and did so specifically by vertically extending the usage of terms for the mother's siblings on the one side, and the term for the sister's children on the other side, creating vertical equations.[13] Allen's interpretation of the ultimately Dravidian origins of Sherpa terminology was later followed by Sacherer (2006)[14] and Schicklgruber (1991).[15]

Both Benedict and Allen aimed to reconstruct a primordial system of a rather ill-defined past. As already stated, my aims will be rather more modest.

3. Cross cousin terminology in Mi-la-ras-pa's biography and beyond: Evidence of Tibetic Omaha terminologies

3.1. Sru

Childs and Quintman (2012) have analyzed the early portion of a 14th-c. biography from the perspective of marriage and inheritance patterns. These passages, authored or compiled by Zhi-byed-ri-pa and translated in Quintman 2012, shed tentative yet tantalizing light on colloquial kin terminologies, which historically must have often differed substantially from Literary Tibetan (LT) ones. The passages cover the early life of the 11th-12th-c. Buddhist saint Mi-la-ras-pa. One key finding that emerged from their study is that Mi-la-ras-pa's community, on the

cross-cousin'/'brother-in-law') [doubtless a cognate of Literary Tibetan *zhang*, RL] to tease them by implying that one would marry them or their sister ..." (Funk et al. 2020: 69-70).

13 Other possible responses to problematic cross cousin terminology include coining novel words, adopting terms from another language, or horizontally extending the terms previously used to refer to parallel cousins.

14 Note that Sacherer briefly reports from her earlier fieldwork that a few Sherpa villages in the north-east did, in fact, practice bilateral cross cousin marriage, in agreement with ancestral marriage practices as hypothesized by Allen. The article (of which I could only consult a pre-print version) does not elaborate. In this context, however, consider Schicklgruber 1993: 348, 352, n. 9, who highlights recent socio-economic developments that may have stimulated a move towards direct exchange in an attempt to shed, or minimize, responsibilities towards hierarchically superior bride-givers.

15 Cf. Levine 1988: 52, n. 14, which voices a note of disagreement with Allen but does not go into an argument. (Hildegard Diemberger summarily states her belief that the vertical equations in Khumbo "emphasize the closeness and the prestige of the ties with the maternal clan," while they supposedly "radically distanc[e] the 'blood' ties of the father". She also adds that "[t]he category of *azhang* ... (mother's brother) defines bride-givers" [1993: 92]).

south-western Tibetan Plateau, appears to have embraced preferential or even prescriptive matrilateral cross cousin marriage. Both Mi-la-ras-pa's father and father's brother married women the text identifies as *sru-chung*. Childs and Quintman's conclusion concerning matrilateral cross cousin marriage relies on this term's (*sru-chung*) interpretation as "mother's brother's daughter" (2012: 43). Because this identification is of central relevance both to the marriage pattern and the terminology, yet a number of objections could be raised against it, it is, for our present purposes, worth probing the meaning of this kin term further.

Sru-chung is a lexically marked version of a kin root, LT *sru*, that is wide-spread in Tibetic languages and typically denotes the mother's sister (e.g., *sru-mo*, *a-sru*,[16] *ushu*, *uru*, *sru-[phy]i-ma*, etc.). The *chung* in *sru-chung* is most likely a modifier that means 'small.'[17] Such modifiers can mark relative age, a shift in generation, or some other extension away from a 'focal' (the semantically central genealogical position to which a term refers) and thus create derivative kin terms.[18] Such constructions are widely attested in kin terminologies from both Tibetic as well as more distantly related languages,[19] and in completely unrelated languages, too. If Childs and Quintman are correct in their interpretation, *sru-chung* reflects a derivative vertical equation, in which a

[16] Many kin terms in Tibetic (and related languages, too) start with *a-*. On that prefix, see Laufer 1915.

[17] Alternatively, one might interpret *sru-chung* as an abbreviated compound of the consanguineous term *sru/sru-mo/a-sru* "maternal aunt" and the affinal term *chung-ma* "wife." Sacherer has in fact recorded *uru jungma* (likely reflecting LT *a sru chung ma*) in use for the maternal second cross cousin in an otherwise unspecified Sherpa village (2006: fig. 2). Yet because 1) modifiers denoting (relative) age are wide-spread in Tibetic kin terms (see fn. 19), and 2) the exact meaning of the *jungma* in *uru jungma* is unclear (the appearance of *jung* in parallel male terms such as *ajang shangjung* rather suggests it, too, actually means "small", rather than being part of a term for "wife"), I prefer the interpretation "small."

[18] I use the term derivative in emulation of Murdock, who awarded the presence of such derivations of elementary terms several separate entries in his tabular classification of kin terminologies (1957: 672–73). In his "derivative bifurcate merging avuncular terminology", for instance, the FB can be referred to as "little father," rather than as "father" (as we would expect in full bifurcate merging) (673).

[19] Benedict (1942: 316) cites examples from Lahuli and Balti. Aziz reports the usage of *rgan* 'old' and *chen* 'big' as one set of such distinguishing markers in Dingri Tibetan, where both denote the person's affiliation with a higher generation, as well as relative age within it (1978: 131, 265). On the other hand, 'small mother' (*a-ma-chung*) can denote the MZ if she is a co-resident wife in a polyandrous union (1978: 132). In certain Chin terminologies, "little/junior mother" can denote the mother's brother's daughter (Bouchery 2012: 129). In certain communities in Amdo, "big" and "small mothers" respectively denote the mother's older sister (MeZ) and mother's younger sister (MyZ) (Chenaktsang 2013: 212). In Ladakhi, too, *ma-chung* can refer to the MyZ (Kaplanian 2015: fig. 3), and Nyinba, too, uses various suffixed forms of *a-ma* 'mother' to distinguish the MZ from M (Levine 1988: 50, fig. 3.1).

kin root in use for relatives in g+1 (the maternal aunts) is applied to relatives in g0, too.

Most, though not all, such vertical equations attested in Tibetic languages are derivative,[20] and thus seem to be lexically marked for generation (sometimes possibly by duplicating the terms marked for junior relative age in g+1 [i.e., MBS = MyB ≠ MeB]).[21]

The variety in usage of modifiers raises the question whether *sru-chung* might not denote one of ego's maternal aunts instead, particularly the mother's younger sister.[22] Childs and Quintman reject this interpretation out of hand, noting that "no known Tibetan society condones marriage to one's mother's sister" and that "it is unlikely that a man would marry such a relative" (2012: 43). Although this might be true, it does not exhaust all arguments. It is conceivable, after all, that *sru-chung* may simultaneously denote, say, a second, third, or

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[20] Using the respective authors' spellings: Khumbo Sherpa *shangbu* [LT: *zhang-bu*] 'MBS' (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1964: 290), Khumbo Sherpa *azhang zhangbu* [LT: *a-zhang-zhang-bu*] 'MBS' (Schicklgruber 1991: 111, fig. 8), Nyinba *a-zhang-chi-ma* [LT: **a-zhang-phyi-ma* (see fn. 22)] 'MBS' (Levine 1988: 50, fig. 3.1), Brokpa *ɕaŋsin* [LT: *zhang-(?)*] 'MBS' and 'FZS' (Funk et al. 2020: 71, fig. 1), and, in a historical western Tibetan context, LT *sru-chung* 'MBD' (Childs and Quintman 2012). Kawakita's brief incursion into the kin terminology of Tsumje provides a likely echo of another instance: *ajhang shangjung* [LT: *a-zhang-zhang-chung*] (1957: 289, on this term and its application, see fn. 44 below). But cf. Allen 1976: 575, who notes that a few of his own Sherpa informants in fact employed full rather than derivative vertical equations, and who suggests that the derivative ones reflect later attempts at disambiguation. The term for the female matrilateral cross cousin reported for Khumbo Sherpa, too, reflects a full equation (*ushu* 'MZ' = MBD = MBSD [= FBW]) (Schicklgruber 1991: 111).

[21] See the following footnote for more on possible ties between the raised terms for the matrilateral cross cousins and the same words' parallel usage elsewhere to denote junior members of the ascending generation.

[22] A structural parallel to such an interpretation of *sru-chung* as meaning MZ is offered by the term *ajhang chhima* in Tsumje (in the Gorkha district), in use for the MyB (Kawakita 1957: 288). This term doubtless reflects Literary Tibetan *a-zhang-phyi-ma*, with *phyi-ma* 'the last,' i.e., 'the youngest,' marking junior relative age in a generation. Interestingly, we find the very same term, rendered as *a-zhang chi-ma* by Levine, in *generationally skewed* usage among the Nyinba, where it accordingly refers to the MBS (Levine 1988: 50, fig. 3.1). This is one indication that the skewed terminology for cross cousins may bank on terms for junior members of the ascending generation. Schicklgruber, moreover, glosses the generationally skewed Khumbo term for the MBS, *azhang zhangbu*, as "Onkelchen", or "little [maternal] uncle" (1991: 113), to be distinguished from his father, the *azhang* (MB). Cognates of the suffixed term *zhangbu* (LT *zhang-bu*, with *bu* being a diminutive) in the Khumbu designation are found, elsewhere in the Nepali highlands, to denote junior counterparts to an *a-zhang*, such as in Gyalsumdo and Helambu/Yolmo (where these two terms respectively refer, among others, to WyB and WeB [Dhakal 2020: 34, table 3] and to WBe and WBy [Clarke 1980: 288, table 8], i.e., they express age difference). The apparently exact same term that Schicklgruber reports for Khumbo 'MBS,' moreover, refers to the MB among the Nyinba (Levine 1981: 50, fig. 3.1).

fourth aunt (e.g., the MFBD, MFFBSD, MFFFBSSD), who might be more acceptable marriage partners and could be far closer in age. It is similarly conceivable that *sru-chung* denotes the FBW,[23] who may, upon her husband's death, expect and be expected to continue the marriage with a different male of her husband's lineage, possibly with a man of a lower generation. Indeed, this expectation appears to have been taken for granted in Mi-la-ras-pa's community.[24]

Yet Mi-la-ras-pa's biography records not just one, but two marriages to a *sru-chung*. Both of them, moreover, seem to have been primary marriages, which substantially decreases the chance that they were intergenerational.[25] After all, the first such marriage produced no less than nine offspring, while the second was concluded when both partners were very young. The latter union, furthermore, was accompanied by a series of betrothal and wedding stages (Quintman 2012: 30–31), an elaborate process that we are far less likely to encounter if a marriage had already been in place and a deceased husband was simply being replaced by a clansman of his. Moreover, as Childs and Quintman point out, the text gives voice to an explicit preference for the *sru-chung* as a marriage partner. The biography notes: "since she was a [*sru-chung*] ... she was betrothed to him."[26] All of this strongly suggests that a generic marriageable *sru-chung* would indeed be of the same generation as her envisioned partner, which suggests it indeed denotes a matrilateral cross cousin or some classificatory equivalent.[27]

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[23] In many terminologies, the term for the FBW mirrors that of the MZ (e.g., in the Khumbo terminology, see Schicklgruber 1991: 111, fig. 8). (Incidentally, note that the same kin term diagram appears, without reference to Schicklgruber, in Diemberger 1993: 93, fig. 1a, which also adds a kin term diagram with a female ego, see p. 94, fig. 1b).

[24] The community expected Mi-la-ras-pa's mother, after the death of her husband, to partner up with her husband's elder brother's son, a plan that Mi-la-ras-pa's mother famously refused. Unfortunately, no kin terms are invoked in the passage in question (Childs and Quintman 2012, for the Tibetan, see Quintman 2012).

[25] So-called oblique (or intergenerational) marriages are more common as secondary marriage after the death of a spouse, as would have happened if Mi-la-ras-pa's mother had married her HeBS after her husband passed away.

[26] Quintman 2012: 30–31. The relevant Tibetan, with some additional context, reads: *dge-bshes-tsa-pa'i-dbon-mo-nyang-bza'-dkar-legs-zer-ba-de-sru-chung-yin-pas-gnyen-byas-* ... (p. 34).

[27] Sacherer in fact records *uru jungma* (likely reflecting LT *a-sru-chung-ma*) for the maternal cross *second* cousin (2006: fig. 2). Note that the ethnographic record also provides attestations of *sru-chung*'s hypothetical male counterpart, *zhang-chung*, as denoting a male matrilateral cross cousin. This has been recorded among both Sherpa populations (Sacherer 2006, *shangjung* and *ajang shangjung*) and, in a different meaning, in Tsumje (Kawakita 1957: 289, *ajhang shangjung*; on its usage, see fn. 44 below). Both authors' *jung*, again, presumably reflects LT *chung* "small."

In this context, I should point out that even when ethnographers in Tibetan and Himalayan contexts did collect and publish kin terminologies, their recording rarely went beyond the terms for cross *first* cousins. Sacherer 2006 is an exception,

Yet another potential chink in the armor of *sru-chung*'s interpretation as a uterine cross cousin is the interpretation's reliance on etymology, namely *sru*'s dictionary definition as "mother's sister." What makes this tricky, of course, is that terms can and do get attached to other kin positions: *sru*, for instance, has been recorded in skewed usage on the patrilateral side as well, albeit haphazardly in terminologies that were in obvious flux in the late 20th c. (Schicklgruber 1991: 111, 113, Kawakita 1957: 289). Fortunately, the narrative context in Zhi-byed-ri-pa's composition makes clear that the *sru-chung* whom Mi-la-ras-pa's father married was, in fact, a matrilateral consanguine: the father's marriage repeated that of the father's father (Quintman 2012: 30–31). That is to say, the father married a woman from his own mother's descent group.[28] The conclusion that *sru-chung* signifies a matrilateral cross cousin or a classificatory equivalent therefore appears rather robust.

One final caveat remains, however, one that we cannot easily put to the side: it is possible that *sru-chung* denoted not only matrilateral cross cousins, but also patrilateral ones. As noted above, some ethnographers have recorded the skewed usage of *sru* on the patrilateral side as well. Without evidence of what the patrilateral cross cousins were called, therefore, we cannot be absolutely certain whether we are indeed, in Zhi-byed-ri-pa's biography of Mi-la-ras-pa, dealing with asymmetric skewing — in which the patrilateral and matrilateral cross cousins are distinguished from one another — or rather with undifferentiated cross cousin terminology. (The latter, indeed, could theoretically be associated not with matrilateral cross cousin marriage, along the lines of Benedict, but with bilateral cross cousin marriage, in line

although that article too unfortunately does not present any single terminology in its entirety. It is quite possible that in many historical communities on and around the Tibetan Plateau, marriages were at some point preferred with, say, cross *third* or even fourth cousins, while unions with cross first cousins would have been considered incestuous. Such differences may well have been reflected in terminological distinctions of which we at present have no knowledge whatsoever.

[28] Quintman 2012: 30-31, 34. Mi-la-ras-pa's paternal grandfather was "given" (*gnang-ba*) a wife by one *dge-bshes* Tsa-pa Grags-pa-bsod-nams. This was likely a relative of, or was himself, "the man of the Tsa-pa-Nyang of Mnga'-ris-gung-thang" (my transl.) who is mentioned immediately prior, and who was befriended by Mi-la-ras-pa's grandfather. Quintman reads *mnga'-ris-gung-thang-tsa-pa-nyang* (34) as a straightforward toponym, but certainly Nyang and perhaps even Tsa-pa Nyang is in fact a clan name, or the name of a local clan branch (consider, e.g., *Kha-rag Gnyos* for a similar construction). The clan Nyang, in turn, is the same descent group that is explicitly mentioned a little further down as the group of Mi-la-ras-pa's mother: "the Nyang wife Dkar legs" (*nyang-bza'-dkar-legs*) (30 [English], 34 [Tibetan]). Both were of the same clan. Moreover, both Mi-la-ras-pa's FFW and FW are said to have been *dbon-mo* of *dge-bshes* Tsa-pa (Quintman accordingly translates the first *dbon-mo* as "niece" and the second as "grand-niece").

with Allen). The passages unfortunately yield no further information on whom the women of Mi-la-ras-pa's lineage married.

3.2. Tsha

We do, however, find a potential hint in Zhi-byed-ri-pa's biography that might point to a differentiated cross cousin terminology after all. This is retained in Mi-la-ras-pa's clan name, Khyung-tsha-stod, "the Upper [Branch] of the Khyung-tsha." The final syllable of Khyung-tsha is, in fact, a kin term, and its usage, though ambivalent, is potentially telling. Whereas the *sru* discussed above reflects generational elevation, namely reference to a member of g0 by a kin root from g+1, *tsha* has at times reflected the exact opposite phenomenon, namely generational lowering of members of g0 by referring to them with a term from g-1 (and perhaps ultimately g-2, as *tsha* in Tibetan also means 'grandchild').[29] *Tsha* stands in reciprocal relationship to *sru* 'MZ' and *zhang* 'MB.' As such, the *tsha* in Mi-la-ras-pa's reported clan name might represent the reciprocal, or mirror term, of a generationally skewed *sru* 'MBD' and/or *zhang* 'MBS.'[30] This would be in line with some earlier historical evidence.

To wit, documented usage of *tsha*, or rather of its honorific counterpart (*dbon*), goes back as far as the days of the Tibetan Empire (7th–9th c.). It is found perhaps most prominently in the politically salient notion of the *dbon-zhang* relationship, a concept encountered in Old Tibetan sources that denoted the tie between "bride-receiver and bride-giver," or, at times, "nephew and maternal uncle," which has been studied by Dotson (2009). These terms carried over to groups far larger than just the individual men involved, "extend[ing] to include these individuals' families, their clans and, in the case of dynastic marriages between ruling houses, to their countries" (Dotson 2009: 224). What is more, as Dotson argues, the term cannot in fact accurately be translated as "uncle-nephew" in the context of the Tibetan Empire, since neither of the two marriages conducted between the Tibetan and Tang Empires (in 641 and 710), the unions that inspired these polities' relations to be described as *dbon-zhang*, actually produced any heirs

[29] Note that cognate forms of *tsha* in related languages can denote 'children,' too. Bialek 2023: 129 simply glosses *tsha* as "offspring." The chronological order and logical relation of *tsha*'s meanings 'grandchild' and 'nephew' require further clarification, though below I pursue the initial scenario 'grandchild' > 'cross nephew.' (Incidentally, this process could in part mirror the development of the Latin term *nepos*, which also developed the meaning 'nephew' from its earlier more restricted usage as 'grandchild, descendant').

[30] I.e., if ego refers to MBD and MBS as 'aunts' and 'uncles,' they would logically reciprocate by calling ego 'niece' or 'nephew.'

(229). The terms did, however, stick to descendants of both parties (231). For that reason, Dotson interprets the compound chiefly along the lines of affinity, concluding that it indicates "a lasting relationship that could be based on little more than [a single] marriage" (229), and hence signified entire groups as bride-givers and bride-receivers.

If this same logic were to be applied at the level of a kin terminology at large, it would produce vertical equations. Various members of a group, regardless of generation, would be referred to by a single term by virtue of their association with the group as a whole. It is conceivable that such a kin terminology is, in fact, the ultimate source of the *dbon-zhang* notion. The fact that we need not look far afield for an ethnographic parallel indicates this is not a far-fetched scenario. Among the Adi of Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, a man's children "automatically become maternal uncle and aunt for his sister's children" (Bouchery 2021: 10). This skewing principle can, furthermore, "be extended to encompass larger units": all members of group X — regardless of generation — are "uncles and aunts" to the children of one of their kinswomen who married into another group (*loc. cit.*).

Moreover, the overtones of Tibetic *tsha* as 'bride-receivers' and *zhang* as 'bride-givers' are wide-spread outside of kin terminologies as well.[31] In the area of Co-ne on the eastern Tibetan Plateau, far away from Mi-la-ras-pa's homeland and far from that of the Sherpa, we find that on wedding days, *tsha* is used to refer to the groom and all his companions, while the people who escort the bride are referred to as *zhang* (Bendi Tso et al 2023: 704). A few hundred kilometers to the northeast, in a village in gCan-tsha County (eastern Qinghai), it is the related term *a-zhang* that denotes the people in the bride's party.[32] In various parts of A-mdo, the north-eastern parts of the Tibetan Plateau in which Co-ne and gCan-tsha are also situated, the terms *sru* and *zhang* have lost consanguineal meaning altogether, yet continue to cling to the field of affinity. *Sru* "often refers to an elder sister-in-law or to a woman in general", while in some speech communities, *a-zhang* 'MB' solely denotes the father-in-law (while FB and MB have been merged under the root *khu* 'FB', Chenaktsang 2013: 214-15). In the same region, entire groups could be classified as *tsha-zhang*, apparently based on their affinal relations with communities with whom they confederated over time (Langelaar 2019: 17-18). *Tsha* could also

[31] Few detailed reports of kin terminologies from Tibetic languages spoken inside the PRC are available to me. These may shed further light on this matter.

[32] Blo brtan rdo rje & Stuart 2008: 40, fn. 34 glosses *a-zhang* simply as "maternal uncles", but the usage of the term in the wedding songs recorded in the book demonstrate it refers to the bridegroom's wedding party at large (indeed, the sentence immediately after the cited footnote already implies the term also includes the bride's father).

explicitly denote affinal kin, as in the case of Khumbu Sherpa, where it came to refer to the marriage partners of siblings and parallel cousins (Schicklgruber 1991: 111, figure 8). A comparable dynamic is evident in Co-ne ("uncle-in-law and brother-in-law", Bendi Tso et al. 2023: 704), among the Nyinba (Levine 1976: 66, n. 28, "sons-in-law" in direct address), in Yolmo (Goldstein 1975: 60), and elsewhere, too.

On the level of actual kin terminologies, moreover, the kin root *tsha* and its various cognates and derivatives are attested as denoting patrilateral cross cousins in a variety of communities along the Himalayan mountain chain that spans the Nepali-Tibetan border. This is generally a term that simultaneously denoted 'nephew' and 'grandchild,' the latter a genealogical position whose term was sometimes subsequently reoccupied by a loan word from Nepali, surely for purposes of disambiguation. We find such *tsha*-terms denoting patrilateral cross cousins in various terminologies of the Sherpa studied by von Fürer-Haimendorf (1964: 290, FZS and FZD),[33] as well as those by Schicklgruber (1991: 111), some by Sacherer (2006: fig. 1), and also in the kin terminology of the Nyinba (1988: 50). Here, incidentally, we are not far removed geographically from Mi-la-ras-pa's homeland in Gung-thang.

It stands to reason, then, though it remains far from certain, that the *tsha* in the clan name Khyung-tsha in fact represents the reciprocal to the generationally skewed *sru* (and *zhang*): a multi-generational kin term that includes the patrilateral cross cousins, potentially marking out the entire group[34] as bride-receivers to the Khyung clan, and lowering it a generation in the terminology. As such, it may provide, at the group level, the mirror image to the generational raising of the bride-givers evident in the term for a female matrilateral cross cousin, *sru-chung*, as attested in the very same biography. The wife-givers are elevated a generation, the wife-receivers are lowered.

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[33] N.b.! von Fürer-Haimendorf confuses the meanings for the nephews under the entry *tsabyuk* [LT *tsha-byug*], which should be cross not parallel kin: BS [ws] and ZS [ms], rather than BS [ms] and ZS [ws] (cf. the correct meanings listed for its female equivalent *tsabyung*).

[34] Note that the term clearly does not apply to a single generation of individuals, as similar terms can also do in genealogies (e.g., the *'Bro-tsha-spun-bdun* known from Sa-skya-'Khon genealogies). Instead, it is explicitly presented as a sub-division of a larger descent group that, moreover, has further subdivisions itself: Upper Khyung-tsha and Lower Khyung-tsha (Quintman 2012: 29). Still, it cannot be ruled out that the name originated as a reference to a set of siblings that ended up sticking to the entire group. Hence, without detailed understanding of the history of this descent group's name, and what the *tsha* referred to exactly (a single generation of maternal nephews or the entire lineage's standing as another group's bride-receivers), it remains unclear whether it indeed reflects generational lowering of the complete lineage.

3.3. Zhang

Interestingly, Zhi-byed-ri-pa's biography of Mi-la-ras-pa also applies the term *zhang-po*, which dictionaries universally define as 'mother's brother' and which is also wide-spread in Tibetic languages, to a different generational level than we might expect. The man referred to as such from Mi-la-ras-pa's perspective, *dge-bshes* Tsa-pa,[35] was not his mother's brother, but, according to this narrative, appears to have been of a higher generation: the MFB, a maternal "grand-uncle."[36] Still, the text has Mi-la-ras-pa repeatedly refer to this figure as *zhang-po*.[37] Nils Martin, incidentally, has documented a similar multi-generational usage of *khu-bo* 'FB' in an old inscription from Ladakh, where it also refers to the FFB, and reports a similar usage in the *Bka'-gdams-chos-'byung*.[38] If we plot the Mi-la-ras-pa narrative's repeated marriages, and merge the uses of kin roots used in the biography from the respective perspectives of Mi-la-ras-pa (*zhang*) and his father (*sru-chung*), we recover the following composite diagram:

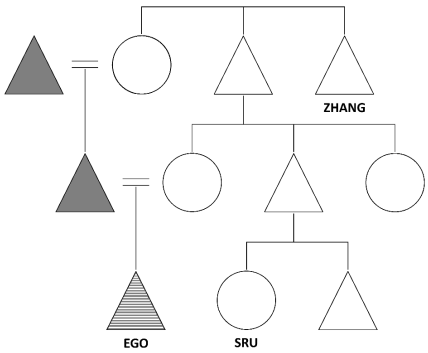


Fig. 2 — Composite kin diagram based on the usage of the kin terms zhang-po *and* sru-chung *in Zhi-byed-ri-pa's biography of Mi-la-ras-pa. Bride-givers in white, bride-receivers in grey.*[39]

We may reasonably assume that *zhang*, being applied at g+2, was applied to g+1 as well, namely to its typical genealogical position of

[35] On the name Tsa-pa, see fn. 28 above.

[36] Quintman 2012: 30, fn. 59. Furthermore, Mi-la-ras-pa's grandfather is also reported to have married a *dbon-mo* ('niece'? 'female relative'?) of this same figure, so it is even conceivable that Tsa-pa was also Mi-la-ras-pa's FMFB, and potentially even his MFFB, too, although this seems unlikely for chronological reasons.

[37] Zhi-byed-ri-khrod-pa: fol. 263.7: *mid-la'i-zhal-nas-zhang-po-de-sku-drin-che-gsung-skad-/*. For a second reference, see fol. 294.2: *zhang-po-dge-bshes-tsa-pa-de/ /da-lta-sku-khams-bzang-ngam-lta/*

[38] Martin, *forthcoming*.

[39] In the diagram, I proceed from the simplified assumption that the *sru-chung* denotes a matrilateral cross first cousin, i.e., the MBD proper.

the mother's brother. The same holds for *sru* and the mother's sister.[40] Moreover, in line with both logic and ethnographic parallels, we can similarly assume that the kin root *zhang* skewed down to ego's generation as well, mirroring the skewing of *sru*.[41] If we supply these terms to the diagram, and combine them, speculatively, with the possible usage of *tsha* as the reciprocal of *sru* and *zhang* (and perhaps reflected as such in Mi-la-ras-pa's clan name, and mirrored in ethnographically attested terminologies), we obtain the following hypothetical picture:

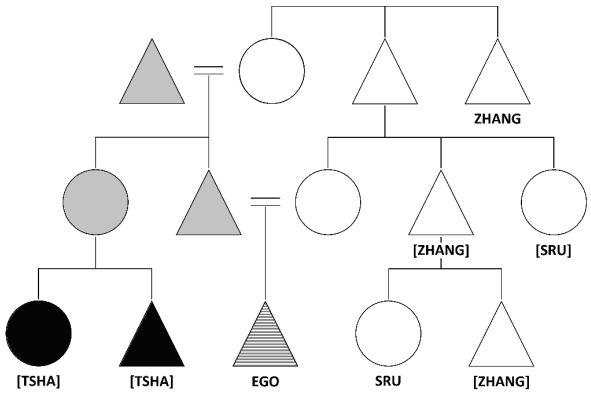


Fig. 3 — Composite kin diagram (see Fig. 2), complemented with likely additional uses of zhang *and* sru*, and the hypothetical usage of* tsha*.*

It is possible that terminologies like these were historically quite widespread. To repeat: we find hints of them in Old Tibetan materials (Dotson 2009; see, of course, also Benedict 1942), suggestions of them in Mi-la-ras-pa's biography, and they are ethnographically attested

[40] Incidentally, elsewhere in the work, we find the combined term *ma-sru*, pairing *sru* 'mother's sister(s)' (?) with *ma* 'mother' (Zhi-byed-ri-khrod-pa: fol. 409.7).

[41] Such joint skewing of both the terms for MZ and MB happens in, to the best of my knowledge, all comparable vertical equations that ethnography has uncovered in Tibetic languages (references in the main text below). Perhaps the skewed counterpart to *zhang* 'MB' was some derivative form comparable to *sru-chung*, e.g., *zhang-chung*, *zhang-bu*, *a-zhang phyi-ma*, or *a-zhang zhang-bu*. The sole ethnographic exception to this joint skewing of which I am aware is the case of Brokpa, which has a symmetric terminology in which both the MBS and the FZS are derivatively equated with *zhang*, while the MBD and FZD are grouped with the parallel cousins and siblings (Funk et al. 2020: 71, fig. 1). Still, if anything, this shows that if either of the two terms (MBS and MBD) fails to skew, it would be that of the female. This is logically consistent with the fact that in a patrilineal, patrilocal setting, the MBS is more like the MB than the MBD is like the MZ. The latter two are merely niece and (matrilateral) aunt, who may never live together and may marry into different groups, while the former two are father and son, part of the same household, and (envisioned) reproducers of the same lineage.

among various Sherpa populations (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1964: 289–91, Schicklgruber 1991: 111,[42] Sacherer 2006), and among the Nyinba (Levine 1988: 50).[43] A similar terminology may actually have historically been present in Tsumje, too.[44]

Because the usage of kin terms in such a terminology differs quite radically from standard dictionary entries, historians and ethnographers working on historical sources would be well-advised to keep an eye out for clues that kin terms might be used in a fashion that deviates from dictionaries and contemporary 'standard' usage alike, especially when dealing with colloquially inflected materials and family episodes. It is conceivable that Mi-la-ras-pa biography's usage of *sru* 'MZ' to denote matrilateral cross cousins can in fact be attested in more historical sources, yet that such colloquial meaning continues to go undetected, hiding under the cloak of dictionary lemmas that invariably render *sru* as "mother's sister." Relevant findings from other sources might produce a similar picture of Omaha-type skewing as hypothesized above, yet in a more conclusive fashion. Other phenomena to look out for include the horizontal extension of sibling terms (e.g., *phu-nu* denoting not merely brothers but also parallel cousins),[45] the usage of *tsha* to refer to cross nieces and nephews (ZC

[42] Note that the kin roots *zhang* and *sru* (*azhang* and *ushu*) skew downward from g+1 to not just the MBC (*azhang zhangbu* and *ushu*) but also the MBSS and MBSD (*azhang mauli* and – still unchanged – *ushu*).

[43] Though absent from the published diagram, Nancy Levine informs me that the skewed terms do not continue in lower generations (pers. comm., 24/3/2025).

[44] Kawakita's report provides indications that he may have encountered a system in flux, with Omaha-type vertical equations that were in the process of collapsing. Informants' answers were "contradictory", and while one informant addressed both matrilateral and patrilateral cross cousins with *tsau* and *tsamu* (LT: *tsha-bo*, *tsha-mo*), another in fact "informed that" the patrilateral ones were called *ajhang shangjung* (LT: *a-zhang-zhang-chung*) and *hhuru* (cognate with LT *sru*) (1957: 289). These contradictory statements make sense if a terminological distinction between the two sets of cross cousins was collapsing, and some speakers started referring to both the patrilateral and matrilateral cousins with the terms for the one set, and others instead started calling them by the terms for the other set. Another interpretation, favored by Schicklgruber for the Khumbo (1991: 113), is that such discrepancies might actually reflect the *breakdown* of symmetrical cross cousin terminology, i.e., that the vertical equations are innovative (in line with Allen 1976). However, the minimal data available for Tsumje suggests that this is unlikely, as we would in that case expect *ajhang shangjung* and *hhuru* to have been coined or used for the matrilateral side, where the terms *ajhang* and *hhuru* are actually in use (see Kawakita 1957: 287, fig. 150).

[45] This is one terminological phenomenon that Benedict believed did not occur in Tibetic languages (1942: 324). A series of later ethnographic reports from the Nepali highlands, however, indicate exactly such extensions of sibling terminology (also see Stein 1972 [1962]: 95). The early presence of such usage would also explain, still more straightforwardly, why the term *phu-nu* could historically de-

[ms] and BC [ws]) but not parallel ones (ZC [ws] and BC [ms]), and the presence of prescriptive terminology (equations of consanguines with affines, a classic example being WF = MB).

4. Conclusion: Asymmetric alliance and vertical equations

As Benedict already pointed out, a number of Tibeto-Burman language-speaking communities combine vertical equations in their cross cousin terminology with a preference for matrilateral cross cousin marriage (Benedict 1942), the very same combination of features that we appear to see in Mi-la-ras-pa's native community. On a more general level, too, Parkin notes that "many asymmetric prescriptive terminologies", which are often logically structured around matrilateral cross cousin marriage, "have very similar vertical equations to Crow-Omaha ones, a quite frequent example being MB = MBS = MBSS etc." He thus highlights a similar co-occurrence of vertical equations and asymmetric alliance (Parkin 2021: 199, see also Parkin 1997: 114–115). In Parkin's view, much like in Lévi-Strauss's, these systems deviate from Omaha ones in being closely associated with sustained cross cousin marriage between fixed groups of bride-givers and bride-receivers, whereas Omaha systems are "widely associated with bans on such arrangements" (Parkin 2021: 199).

Relatedly, Bouchery points out that many kinship systems of India's northeast "that have been labeled 'Omaha' in anthropological literature (Kachin, various Naga and Kuki-Chin groups) exhibit only a minimal set of Omaha-type terminological equivalences such as MB = MBS and FZS = ZS, coupled with an asymmetric alliance pattern based on prescriptive or preferential rules, usually enjoining a man to marry one of his real or classificatory maternal cross cousins" (Bouchery 2021: 16). He himself has elsewhere studied the example of the Meirong Naga, where matrilateral cross cousin marriage is well-attested (Bouchery and Gangmei 2012: 124ff.) and the cross cousin terminology is skewed (ibid.: 113). This same association, he stresses, is indeed prevalent in Kuki-Chin systems, too, where the "affinal dissymmetry between [bride-givers and bride-receivers is] expressed in the terminology by using the senior/junior generation terms" (ibid.: 130), i.e., in generational skewing.

Adding to this broader regional context, Tangut- and Rgyalrong-speaking societies may fit this pattern, too. It has been suggested that

note 'clansmen' as it would, assuming patrilocality, have included the locally residing male patrilateral parallel cousins along with one's brothers.

Tangut had Omaha skewing rules,[46] while it is simultaneously "well-known [...] that cross cousin marriage was widely practiced in Tangut society" (Jacques 2012: 214). Omaha skewing rules are evident in Japhug Rgyalrong, too (216), and has been historically hypothesised for Brag-bar, a dialect of Situ Rgyalrong (Zhang 2020). Jacques even suggests that they may be "widespread among languages of western Sìchūan" (2012: 216). And although practices may vary locally, Tenzin Jinba informs me that in Rgyalrong-speaking societies "matrilateral cross-cousin marriage [...] is particularly prevalent and socially accepted" (pers. comm., 8/5/2025).

Although many questions surrounding the exact terminology and marriage dynamics of Mi-la-ras-pa's native community cannot be answered, what limited evidence is available suggests that it slots in nicely with the cases listed above. Not only does Zhi-byed-ri-pa's biography of Mi-la-ras-pa relay hints of vertical equations that elevate members of the bride-giving group, but it also describes what seems to be asymmetric alliance, documenting as it does successive intermarriage between men from Mi-la-ras-pa's patriline (his father and father's father) and women from a branch of another clan.[47] All of this combines to suggest that the pattern that Bouchery describes for northeast India may historically have extended far further, northeastward into what is at present PRC territory and westward along the Himalaya, constituting a large swath of territory where vertical equations in the kin terminology may historically have accompanied patterns of marriage with matrilateral cross cousins.[48]

From a globally informed perspective, it seems that there are several reasons why vertical equations may arise in kin terminologies, as Désvaux has pointed out (2015: 87, synthesizing various contributions in Trautmann and Whiteley 2012).[49] This observation is in line with the different marriage dynamics underlying the distinction drawn by authors such as Lévi-Strauss, Parkin, and others between asymmetric systems with some vertical equations on the one hand,

[46] Despite Jacques's insistence that the equation MB = MBS = MBSS is "the defining feature of Omaha kinship systems" (2012: 216), this is, as discussed above, a highly minimalist definition.

[47] Such a marriage dynamic deviates from the marriage practice of the Tibetan imperial line and the Khumbo of the late 20th c., which both display a dispersal of alliances through avoidance of intermarriage with the MB's clan for several generations (Dotson 2004, Schicklgruber 1993: 346).

[48] As concerns the Nyinba of Nepal, Levine notes that while "the practice of marrying cross-cousins is seen as neither a right nor an obligation" and "there is no consistently expressed preference for one type of cross-cousin over the other, all marriages repeated over generations that I could document involved matrilateral cross-cousins" (1988: 59).

[49] Trautmann & Whiteley (eds.), 2012. *Crow-Omaha: New Light on a Classic Problem of Kinship Analysis*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

and Omaha systems proper. Yet be that as it may, in those parts of eastern Eurasia under study here, the phenomenon of generational skewing would seem to relate chiefly to matrilateral cross cousin marriage, and reflect the high standing of bride-givers. (As such, vertical equations in Tibetic kin terminologies may serve as a diagnostic hint, though not as evidence, of asymmetric alliance).

This hypothesis, which in itself is certainly not new, suggests a new etymological line of approach, though again highly hypothetical in nature. Dotson (2004: 82) and Bialek (2026, ch. 17.2.2) have suggested that the Tibetan imperial honorific title *zhang* developed out of the kin terminology, originally denoting the mother's brother. Without necessarily contradicting their point, the opposite may simultaneously be true, too. Benedict has argued that at some early point, *zhang* replaced *khu* in the meaning 'MB' (317–18). If correct, the term *zhang* may have had honorific meaning from the start.[50] It was (or certainly came to be) used in Old Tibetan in titles,[51] has a cognate meaning 'lord, master' in Burmese (Benedict 1942: 318), and Matisoff connects it, albeit with an uncertain level of conviction, to an Old Chinese term for upwards, high, admirable, and, indeed, "superior (used as a title)" (2015: 755). Some such meaning may have made it a fitting candidate for 'MB' in systems of matrilateral asymmetric alliance that accord particular standing to the bride-givers. In that way, the term *zhang* itself may originally reflect a status-raising of sorts akin to generational raising.[52]

This interpretation of *zhang* finds some tentative support in ethnographically attested usages of its reciprocal, *tsha/dbon* 'nephew, niece,' a term that simultaneously denotes the 'grandchild' and hence appears to lower the referent/addressee in g-1 by a generation, to g-2.[53] Notably, in many recorded terminologies, this *tsha* in g-1 denotes only, for a male speaker, his sister's children (ZC [ms]), and not his brother's children (BC [ms]), thus excluding those consanguines who belong to

[50] Note that the incorporation of honorific terms is not without parallel in Tibetan: *jo* 'lord' was also incorporated into kin terms such as *a-jo* and *pha-jo* (as perhaps first pointed out in Stein 1972 [1962]: 95).

[51] Note that after I composed this article, Joanna Bialek pointed out that she, in a forthcoming monograph, argues that the development of *zhang* as a title in the Tibetan imperial administration postdates its usage as a strict kin term and can be dated to some point around the middle of the 8th c. CE (Bialek 2026, ch. 17.2.2). Yet as stated above in relation to Dotson's (2004: 82) and her point, this need not conflict with my suggested trajectory (which may still very well prove wrong for other reasons).

[52] We may also consider the possibility that it might have been difficult or impossible to raise the term *zhang-po* by a generation, if that same term was applied to both MB and MFB, as seems to be the case in Zhi-byed-ri-pa's 14th-c. biography of Mi-la-ras-pa.

[53] Cf. Benedict 1942: 327, which forwards an explanation based on teknonymy.

ego's own patriline.[54] The apparent generational lowering, in other words, solely affects members of that lineage into which male ego, under matrilateral cross cousin marriage, might expect his daughters to marry. This skewing could thus have lexically encoded the distinction *and* hierarchy between wife-givers and wife-receivers in a system of asymmetric alliance.

Moreover, as already noted, it is attested in multiple terminologies that *tsha* or its cognates spread yet higher, namely into g0 to refer to the patrilateral cross cousin (e.g., *tsha-byug* in Sherpa and *tsha-bo* in Nyinba). This could be elegantly explained as a straightforward continuation of the same logic, namely the generational lowering of the cross kin that in the idealized terminological structure receive brides from ego's lineage.[55] This would replicate the historical logic described by Dotson for imperial Tibet: The bride-givers (*zhang*) "are the classificatory elders of their [bride-receivers]", and the former "stand in a position of superiority vis-à-vis" the latter (Dotson 2009: 231).

Regardless of the exact historical development of *tsha*, the social superiority of the role denoted by its reciprocal, *zhang*, is in wide evidence. This superiority is sometimes quite explicitly tied to *zhang*'s meaning as 'bride-giver,' rather than to its cognatic meaning 'MB'.[56] In certain passages that describe the mythical origins of the Tibetan proto-clans (one of which we will discuss below), the audience is often informed that in addition to a certain number of original clans, there

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[54] This is the case in, for instance, Gyalsumdo (Dhakal 2020: 37, see also Vinding 1979: 219) (where *bhidza* S = BS ≠ *tʃhau* ZS), Baragaon (Vinding 1979: 218) (where male speakers equate S and BS [*bica*, reflecting LT *bu-tsha*] yet group ZC with CC [LT *tsha-bo* and *tsha-mo*]), and Chusangtan Tibetan (Vinding 1979: 217). Further examples include Nyinba, Sherpa, Brokpa (references given below), and so on.

[55] This newly developed meaning may explain why, in some terminologies, the meaning 'grandchild' (CC) was subsequently dropped from the category *tsha*: the grandchildren as a whole no longer fitted the association of *tsha* as cross kin that are potential bride-receivers. Hence, the old term *tsha-byug* (rendered *tsabyuk* in von Fürer-Haimendorf 1964, and *tshaphiuk* and *tshabyuk* in Schicklgruber 1991 & 1993) in the meaning 'grandson' had disappeared from the Sherpa terminologies reported by von Fürer-Haimendorf and Schicklgruber, and been replaced with the Nepali term *nāti*. *Tsha-byug*, an otherwise obscure term, is in fact attested, both historically and ethnographically, in the meaning 'grandchild' in, for instance, the *Jātakamāla* (*Skyes-pa'i-rabs-kyi-rgyud*: fol. 49b2) and in the kin terminology reported from Yolmo (Helambu) by Goldstein (1975: 60, *tshəpyu* and *tshəpyoŋma*, LT: *tsha-byug* and **tsha-byug-ma*). I have also come across *tsha-byug* in materials from Khams. It may also appear in Tibetic dialects in Amdo, where it perhaps was erroneously recorded in writing as *tsha-gzhug* (reflecting the palatalized pronunciation of the LT ligature *by-* in most parts of Amdo) and is reported to denote the generations following the grandchildren in the compound rendered as *tsha'u tsha gzhug* (Wu Qi 2013: 95). Despite the term's relative obscurity, then, it is in fact geographically widespread.

[56] Cf. Samuels 2013: 441, which suggests that *zhang* never strictly means 'bride-giver.'

subsequently appeared a *zhang-po* clan, too. This unique context allows us the rare opportunity to tease the term's consanguineal and affinal meanings apart. It makes very little sense to read *zhang-po* as 'MB' in such contexts, because the descent group in question is introduced only when the other clans are already in existence — and hence in need of *wives*; not mother's relatives. The appearance of the *zhang-po* clan from outside the established structure at this point seems to solve a structural problem, namely the otherwise potentially incestuous implications of intermarriage between the proto-clans at the dawn of their existence, when they still share a close patrilineal ascendant (a theoretical bar to intermarriage). To avoid the semblance of impropriety, a marriage needs to be contracted with a partner from the outside.

Indeed, an older passage that is adduced in a 19th-c. genealogy of the royal house of Sde-dge offers a perfect illustration. Presupposing the prior existence of four Tibetan proto-clans, it claims that its protagonists' ancestral descent group was descended from *abhāsvara* deities in "long-lived heaven" and that the group was therefore from outside — and above — the newly established society of the proto-clans. Importantly, it is this alien group that "was worthy of being the *zhang-po* to all these [aforementioned Tibetan clans]." The meaning of *zhang-po* is here clearly affinal: these lofty outsiders can provide brides to the already established clans. The passage goes on to state that this clan "arrived as lords of humans," thus firmly bringing out the homology between gods, rulers, and bride-givers.[57]

Another mythological narrative is perhaps worth adducing briefly because it similarly displays the high standing of bride-givers. It features an earthly lord pleading with a heavenly figure to send down his daughter in marriage. The latter rhetorically asks the terrestrial petitioner whether he has ever seen the sun and moon fall from their heavenly expanse. Not shy for words, the man answers that "even the sun and moon that shine in the sky / [have their] light-rays appear on the ground." He foretells that "as soon as humans and gods mix [in marriage] / Humans shall pray and make offerings to the gods / [And] the gods shall protect the humans."[58] In other words, bride-givers relate to bride-receivers as gods do to humans, and as protective lords do to reverent subjects: effectively the same homology evident in the genealogy adduced prior.

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[57] *bod-chen-ljongs-kyi-'gro-ba-'di-dag-kun/ /sga-'bru-spra-gdong-bzhi-las-chad-mod-kyang-/ /de-dag-kun-gyi-zhang-por-'os-pa-yi/ /tshe-ring-gnam-gyi-mthongs-nas-'od-gsal-lha/ /bsam-bzhin-mi-yi-rje-bor-phebs-pa-yi/ /zhang-po-lha-sde-dkar-po-sgo-rigs- ...* (*Sde-dge*: 13.18–14.2).

[58] *gnam-la-nyi-zla-shar-ba-yang-/ 'od-zer-sa-la-'byung-ba-lags/* (*Ming-sring-dpal-bgos*: 217.15); *mi-dang-lha-ru-sdeb-tsam-na/ mi-yis-lha-la-gsol-mchod-byed/ lha-yis-mi-la-mgon-skyobs-byed/* (*Ming-sring-dpal-bgos*: 217.14).

Just like Tibetan myth elevated bride-givers (*zhang*) into heaven, I have argued that Tibetic kin terminologies sometimes elevated them a generation. In this analysis, vertical equations that equate matrilateral cross cousins with some of their senior kin (*zhang*, *sru*) reflect the high status of bride-givers in societies (historically) associated with matrilateral asymmetric alliance. This might prove a decent working hypothesis — quite distinct from Allen's (1976) — for approaching skewed kin terminologies on and around the Tibetan Plateau.

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