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HIERARCHY, STATUS AND SOCIAL HISTORY IN NEPAL

THIS paper explores some potential applications of Dumont's notion of hierarchy to the social history of a people of Tibetan Buddhist culture from the High Himalaya of Nepal.[1] In general terms, the main problem I consider is the contrast between idealist and empirical modes of explanation. I argue that important insights are to be gained from Dumont's notion of hierarchy; but at the same time I point to some major limitations of such an idealist approach, if used alone to characterize an observed society.

One early natural-language meaning attached to the word 'hierarchy' is that of a 'divine order' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This is one main sense in which the term has been used by Dumont: with it, he contrasts a traditional and holistic world-view to a modern, discontinuous, and domain-specific, perspective.

There is another major sense that the term 'hierarchy' has in English, namely that of a system or series of terms of successive rank used in classification. This is the sense in which it is used in natural science and logic. In as far as he analyses the 'divine order', that is, hierarchy in terms of concepts such as level, segmentation, and other formal notions, Dumont can be seen as creating a

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1. For reasons of space I am assuming some familiarity with Dumont's theoretical notion of hierarchy, and the associated ideas of encompassment, reversal and the link between fact and value in the 'idea-value'. An exposition of these ideas can be found in Dumont's work listed in the references below. This paper concerns the possible relation of these ideas to certain Himalayan ethnographic data, and of course interpretations and emphases other than those of this paper can be derived from his ideas. The only comment I wish to make here at the purely theoretical level is the following. In places in Dumont's work, hierarchy is at one and the same time characterised as a traditional concept, and also as our analysis of that concept.

hierarchic system in this second sense of the term.[2] But here, bar one further preliminary exception, I shall be using the term 'hierarchy' only in the first sense of a 'divine order'.

Hierarchy in Helambu

This other meaning of the term in English is that of 'priestly domination'; there is also the related sense of a collective term for an organized body of clergy. These senses bring together power and priestly status, and aptly characterize the people of Tibetan Buddhist culture looked at here.

These are known, quite simply, as the Lama People, and they live in a part of the Nepalese Himalaya known as Yolmo or Helambu. They are the dominant group of the region, whether this dominance is looked at from the viewpoint of religious status, or economic or political power, or as an all-encompassing valuation. They are a married priesthood, and are at once householders and religious officiants: they are anything but a community of world-renouncers.

Their economy depends to a degree on their own direct farming activities, but their wealth derives from their ownership of tenanted landholdings, long-distance trade, and work outside the region. While the Lama People live in villages tightly clustered around temples high up the hillside, their sharecropping tenants live in open settlements down the valley, set in the fields which they farm. These latter people are often known as Tamang, which is an ethnic label. This contrast between Lama and Tamang, and the significance of the dominant term 'lama', is the focal point of application of Dumont's notion of hierarchy as 'divine order' in this analysis.

They all, both Lama and Tamang, speak related Tibeto-Burman languages or dialects. Apart from the superimposition of Tibetan Buddhist culture on or by the Lama People, the two groups share the same material culture. Both Lama and Tamang have patrilineages, some of which are recognised as being the same groups: hence the lineages cut across this ethnic divide. But these lineages have little corporate existence beyond the local lineage of any one village, and mainly act to define the exogamic group. The kinship nomenclature of both Lamas and Tamangs conforms to the Dravidian or 'two-line symmetrical' form, with similar terms. In a simple sense, they practise cross-cousin marriage combined with a value for hypogamy: for both groupings the 'wife-givers' are generally thought of as higher in rank than the 'wife-takers'. Hence in a broad sense Lama and Tamang peoples in Helambu are related groups.

2.   This point applies to any such model which does more than just mirror the data. But it does not follow from this that hierarchy is necessarily the same thing as taxonomy: the number and type of formal mathematical arrangements available is in principle open-ended. For example, there are distinctions between taxonomies, paradigms, keys and stress according to various criteria, such as static or sequential, inclusive or exclusive, symmetrical or asymmetrical, labelled or unlabelled; and this list, of course, is not exhaustive.

The Lamas are the dominant group. But at the present day their society does not have the high degree of division of labour and separate spheres of activity that one associates with the monk and layman of 'High Buddhism'. Rather, their society appears as a primitive condensation of Tibetan Buddhism into a more homogeneous social form, a 'total classification' in which the spheres of kinship, religion and economics and that of nature itself are rendered homologous. It can be shown that this total classification, as a hierarchy in Dumont's sense, is based on the contrast of 'above' and 'below', with the former, the notion of above or 'superior' as the dominant pole.

In this sense, Lama and Tamang are an aspect of a total hierarchy, namely a natural, social and moral order in which altitude, wealth and virtue are linked together. The people 'above' are said to have ample food, wood, and water, to be fully clothed, to have Buddhist temples and to keep their word. The people 'below' are said (by those 'above') not to have enough food, wood or water, to walk around without trousers, to slaughter animals for sacrifice and to be untrustworthy.

For a person 'below', that is, one who does not include himself with Lamas, the term 'lama' has the sense of a person who lives on top of the hillside in a village with a temple, a wealthy landlord who does not himself carry out manual labour but who uses his time and energy for Tibetan ceremonial. The culture above is usually seen from the outside as a unitary whole, an amalgam of authority, wealth and religion.

From a categorical perspective, it is the contrast between the two terms Lama and Tamang which is of importance, with the accent on the former: both are used in a relative, contextual and 'weighted' manner. There is no simple absolute sense in which a place is 'above', with a line between it and those 'below'. Rather, this classification is just one way of looking at things in certain contexts by some people: one person's Lama can be another's Tamang. Empirically, it is not the case that half-way down the hillside people start to refer to themselves as immoral and untrustworthy Tamangs. Certainly there are places where people claim to be both poor and Tamang; but they are far more likely to explain their poverty by the fact that they do not own the land, rather than that it forms, along with 'immorality', part of their nature.

Often people put themselves in the upper rather than the lower category, include themselves with people up the hillside, and place the dividing line of the contrast below them. Together with this pattern there often goes some justificatory juggling with ethnic labels. People, especially those up the hillside, can give an elaborate picture of status differences in an ethnic idiom. They may place themselves at the top as Lama, have Sherpa below, Tamang below them, and Hindu peoples at the bottom. Others lower down will contrast Lama or Lama-Tamang to Hindu alone. But to the observer, though the contrast between a village at the top and bottom of the hillside may appear to epitomize the cultural contrast of Lama to Tamang, there is at the empirical level a continuum up and down the hillside.

It appears that the ethnic constellation up and down the hillside can be viewed as a segmentary 'Great Chain of Being' (a representation of the universe

as a linear hierarchy in Western thought), with infinitesimally small rungs between each step of the divine ladder, which are a feature of hierarchy in this sense (Dumont 1982: 227). At the same time we have to note that there are conflicting representations: one can argue that it is only to the extent that those who proffer an ideology of Lamaism are in some way dominant, be it only by virtue of being the interpreters of the ideology, that this hierarchy gives a clear representation of the local status differences. If this is so, then to explain the dominance in terms of this ideology alone would be circular. Such a circularity is interesting as an indigenous classification. But it is not self-evident that it can contain, rather than explain away, other orders and perspectives, whether these are indigenous ideologies or observer's analytical models.

Fundamental Value

To what extent can this hierarchy be characterized, in Dumont's terms, by a 'fundamental value' or 'idea-value' (Dumont 1977: 19–20; 1979: 814; 1982: 224)?[3] 'Lama' is a candidate here, but I shall argue that its wideness of use clearly represents not so much a single coherent value, as a multitude of senses which have a historical link. 'Lama', as introduced so far, is a status category used to refer to a member of a Lama village, as superior up the hillside. At its widest in the Tibetan cultural area the term 'lama' (Tibetan *bLa-ma*) has the sense of priest or ecclesiastic, as it does in this part of the Himalaya too. However, here it can also carry one literal sense of the root *bLa*—that of 'higher one' or 'superior'.

In some villages, rather than 'lama' with its manifold reference, another term, *cho-wa*, is used for priest. This is the Tibetan term *chos-pa* 'a religious man, a divine, a monk'. The root *chos* is the Tibetan literary translation of the Sanskrit *dharma*, which is often glossed as 'religion' or 'religious work'. In Helambu as in Tibet it has the connotation of moral doctrine, custom, religion and Buddhism; a more apt gloss from our perspective would be the 'proper order', which by its very nature would be sacred or divine.

The local conception of *cho* implies a cosmology, and moreover one ordered vertically in layered worlds with a descending hierarchy from the upper to the lower levels. From the relative viewpoint of the individual there are levels that are up or 'above' him, his own level, and levels that are down or 'below' him. This ego-centred classification is possibly the basis for the absolute division into a

3.   One understanding of Dumont is that a basic, fundamental, or idea-value possesses this quality because of its property of 'encompassing the contrary'. This posits it, not only in opposition to, but also at a superordinate and inclusive level to the subordinant term. This, in turn, indicates a core significance to the culture concerned. There are particular problems with some aspects of this formulation, which are mentioned in notes 2 and 8. The main logic of the idea-value derives from this 'hierarchical opposition', which is discussed more fully (in the context of the Lama People) in the next section, and also elsewhere in this volume, as well as in Dumont's cited works themselves.

three-layered 'heaven, earth and hell' that characterizes much popular Tibetan thought (Stein 1972: 211).

This classificatory order is, of course, the same hierarchy as before: above is to the ridge and north, towards the snow and Buddhist temples; down is to the river and south, towards the fields and trade. The hierarchy is presumed within the order which is *cho*.

The same weighted binary distinction for relative rank is carried through within the village itself, into areas that from an absolute perspective would serve to mark ever finer gradations of difference and distinctions of context. Whether in the temple, the village square, a household or a field, relative rank is shown in seating positions, in the sequence of making offerings or of being served food, and other signs of attention. The ranking that results applies as much to divinities, spirits, animals—all beings—in their relations to men and each other, as to the relations between men themselves. If context is put to one side, then there is a hierarchy in the sense of a 'great chain of being'. *Cho* is an all-encompassing order.

However, at least in social contexts there are rotations of position of superior and inferior which reflect or create a discrete and egalitarian order that contrasts with hierarchy. Of course, equality and hierarchy must combine in some manner in any social system (Dumont 1977: 4, following Talcott Parsons). And these exchanges, which imply an equality, closure and even competition at any one social level, may be viewed in some sense as 'contained in' a more general social hierarchy in the region as a whole. For example, all Lama villagers may be seen as equals together, in contrast to the lower level peoples. But it is not clear exactly in what sense this equality may be subsumed within an all-embracing hierarchy, that is, an order based on difference. Moreover, given the significance of relations to outsiders in state-wide contexts, there is a sense in which, if not equality, then at least unity in opposition to outsiders contains hierarchy both in ideological terms and at an empirical level. I will return to this last point presently.

Although *cho* can be translated as 'morality' or 'correctness', it is not just the religious order in the modern sense. Indeed, the problem of translation here epitomizes precisely the contrast that Dumont introduces between traditional total thought and modern atomizing or individuating areas of discourse. *Cho* is *the* proper order which stands behind all aspects of nature, behind all possible worlds. If there is a landslide, if there is a storm, if a person is sick, if a building collapses, if trade is bad, the answer ultimately is in *cho*. In village as in doctrinal explanations everything is finally reducible to one and the same: there is no separation into separate technical areas of discourse, as in Western thought. *Cho* is a unitary overarching intellectual schemata.

The idea of *cho* as a Buddhist order is implicit, and all customs associated with Tibetan Buddhist culture are from this ideological perspective expressions and instruments of *cho*. An individual, as an individual, may be willing to accept that there is such a thing as a Muslim or Christian *cho*. As one might expect, a people who engage in trade are quite aware that what is 'truth one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other' (Pascal). In their travels they make offerings to gods of

different localities who may not be Tibetan or Buddhist, much as they do to rulers or officials through whose territory they pass.

The view can be taken that these variations of practice are all subject to, if not incorporated within, the order of things that is *cho*. But this viewpoint, whether it is put forward by a local theologian or a Western theoretician, is a higher level analysis: the everyday pattern of thought does not make a coherent intellectual schemata, so much as reflect a contextual variety of senses.[4]

The theory of *karma* or of just returns for one's actions, together with the associated idea of 'accumulation of merit', almost by definition stands as the dominant ideology of this Buddhist culture. However, there is no simple sense in which it can explain all actions, even those customarily viewed as religious. First, the idea of 'merit' may not always be present in the minds of the actors. For example, motivation is often more directly economic. Second, though all villagers may agree that a term such as 'merit' conveys an important idea, different people understand different things by this term. The concepts of a shepherd and a retired monk are not one and the same: hence public unity is often based only on a common nomenclature, rather than on a commonly held substantive understanding of a term. In many ways this is a society held together by common words and practices, rather than by unitary collective representations.

However, in the dominant cultural ideology, namely a popular form of Buddhism, the explanation of the position of the individual is justified as follows. It is seen as an expression of his 'accumulation of merit' that extends beyond the moment and beyond any one lifetime. While there may be a temporary imbalance in this order, ultimately it asserts itself. For example, if an individual appears to have a financial success beyond his religious position, this can be put down to meritorious works in a previous lifetime, or to a pact with non-benevolent deities which will ultimately have bad repercussions. It can be seen that the schema is not in principle falsifiable: these concepts can generally be invoked as secondary elaborations to explain away the differences between fortune and the expected norms of the hierarchy.

A tenant farmer may be well aware that the direct cause of his misfortune is economic, and that he cannot make offerings at the temple because he has no surplus. But from the viewpoint of the ideology the explanation is in terms of a deficit of merit, with the rider that the best way to improve one's position is to act according to the local interpretation of Buddhist precepts—namely to support the lama landlord. Hence the delivery of crops by a tenant is not only a legal duty, but a reflection of a divine order and an opportunity for the sharecropper to raise his status by acquiring merit. And while in strict Buddhist terms a landlord could make gifts to his tenant, he would be well advised, like the tenant, to give to his 'superior'. In terms of this proper order, *cho*, he should give, quite literally, to the *bLa-ma* (Tibetan), the 'higher one'.

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4. The extent to which a mode of thought should be represented by culture or ideological value, as well as by a cognitive psychology, is an open question.

Hence this ideology, in which spiritual progress, status and material wealth are not just analogous to each other, but stand as fundamentally interconnected spheres, provides the Lama People with a justification of the social order and the reasons for good and bad fortune. In these terms, as health and material success are the lot of those who live up the hill, so sickness and poverty belong to those below.

It is not so much lama alone, as lama and *cho* together which give the key to this ideology. This link poses some analytical problems. Dumont advises us that in certain cases there will be no single overt term for an 'idea-value', merely a plethora of terms in the 'zone' where it is located (Dumont 1977: 19; 1979: 814). Certainly such an argument covers the situation where we have linked ideas such as lama and *cho-wa*, and others such as *karma* and merit. It is in any case a useful methodological directive.[5]

Insights from Holism

Beyond any representation of the dominant local ideology, the holism of hierarchy can give fresh analytical insight into this data. To recapitulate, the relationships up and down the hillside would be as Lama to Tamang, priest to client, landlord to tenant, and wife-giver to wife-taker, all as expressions of a basic underlying and unitary hierarchy. Women and blessings travelling down the hillside as material goods flowed up would correspond to the empirical expression of this hierarchy.

Certain practices take on a new significance in this holistic framework. For example, the practice of women at the bottom of the hillside going to work in India as 'maids' now has an explanation beyond mere economic necessity. If women move down the hillside from Lama to Tamang, then it would follow— simply from the characteristics of a transitive and non-cyclical regime of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage—that there would be an accumulation of women at the bottom of the hillside without men to marry. Hence the structure of the kinship relations would reinforce the economic pattern.

Conversely, that men at the top of the hierarchy prefer their sons to become monks rather than marry takes on a new value. This preference comes not just

5. One well-known case of this would, of course, be the classic example of the Innuit (Eskimo), with many terms for types of snow, but without a generic term for snow, following the analysis of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956: 216). However, such an argument does not accord well with Dumont's own emphasis on coming closer to indigenous modes of discourse. Nor does it fit that well with the notion of an idea-value significant to the degree that it can encompass its contrary and stand as the dominant term of a hierarchical opposition. What does it mean to have an encompassing term which is not overtly expressed but is implicit in a 'zone'? One would need some independent index of dominance. These might exist—for example, certain psychological measures such as 'clustering in free-recall' or repertory grid analysis would be ways of finding such independent indices. However, these would be expressed in an analytic language separate from that of the culture itself.

from a concern for virtue and merit, nor even does it appear just as an emulation of the priestly founding lineages from Tibet. The avoidance of marriage by sons also avoids the unfavourable status implications that would come from living next to 'wife-givers', given a hypogamous ideology.

Another example comes from the middle levels of the hillside. The practice of Tamang cultivators lodging a son as a servant up the hill in the house of a lama villager is not just an economic necessity, but also an expression of this basic status hierarchy.

Hence the notion of hierarchy in the sense of an all-embracing divine order not only represents an important concept of the people, but also gives a unitary insight into exchanges and practices that, from a discontinuous, atomistic perspective, belong to different domains.

Empirical Variations and a Historical Order

The problem still remains of whether or not such an ideological perspective is capable of containing and giving an account of the people as a whole that allows for patterns of order behind historical and other empirical variations.

In the above account I have not concentrated on the indigenous idea-value so much as taken the idea of coherence, in order to look for links between hierarchic aspects from the spheres of kinship, economics and religion. For example, an analysis in terms of hypogamy and cross-cousin marriage derives from kinship theory. While it is reinforced by the notion of a total hierarchy, it does not come from the indigenous idea-value of lama or *cho*.

These technical spheres of kinship, economics and religion may profitably be considered as aspects of hierarchy. Yet by pursuing the analysis in terms of these separate, 'outsider' spheres of knowledge, further insights are achieved. As I show below, these compound insights are particularly relevant when empirical variations and historical changes, both of the people, and in the general region, are taken into account as part of the 'whole' to be explained. Here the underlying order cannot be found simply in terms of the 'divine order' of hierarchy.

The ethnogenesis of the Lama people themselves is an example of one such historical development. A brief and idealized outline of this development is as follows (for a more detailed account see Clarke 1980a, b, c; 1983). Under conditions of economic growth, Tamang tenants from the valley made donations to the (lama) priest's temple up the hillside, and sent their sons to study there. These sons intermarried with the priest's daughters, and eventually settled at the temple as subordinate priests, with their erstwhile relatives remaining on the land below, now as their tenants.

In the village, in the first generation, there was an asymmetrical reinforcement of a status hierarchy from superior to subordinate, through hypogamy combined with uxorilocal residence. In the next generation there was a new local lineage in the village and hence virilocal residence, and all male villagers could be priests. This change negated the former asymmetries of rank. Eventually this resulted in the rise of an egalitarian ethos and institutions, with rotation of offices and positions as priest or client in the temple, and FZD rather than just MBD marriage.

In some ways the historical growth of such villages follows the same process as that of the Kachin described by Leach (1961). The above analysis derives from a structural insight in general kinship theory. It applies across cultural regions, and does not in itself come either from the indigenous idea-value of hierarchy, or from a general analytical notion of hierarchy. This theoretical development derives from the distinction between 'harmonic' and 'disharmonic' regimes, as identified by Lévi-Strauss in his account of the change from generalized to restricted exchange (1969). Here, there would be a break-up of hypothesized long, integrative chains, which empirically would accord with this 'divine order' of hierarchy.

Another example is given by social changes under conditions of economic decline, in which not just women, but men and whole villages move down the hillside, as the people are forced onto the soil for their livelihood. Then the ceremony of the temple is largely forgotten, and a lama is just another local lineage of farmers. This development too can lead to the rise of egalitarian developments within the village unit.

Yet with respect to all these changes the hierarchic schema is indeterminate. From the viewpoint of hierarchy the movement of women down the hillside is the same thing as the movement of men up the hillside. Yet the difference between the two is crucial in understanding the common forms and differences in the social history of the Lama and Tamang villages in the region.

An explanation of these changes involves more than just a consideration of the relation between hierarchic and egalitarian social forms, or even of the relation between these and local economic processes. The influence of the state and the world beyond play a part in these changes. For example, in the above historical account, the fixed and non-cyclical aspect of the social differentiation between Lama and Tamang, and its encapsulation within economic class, has occurred under the influence of outside forces. Changes in the form of land-tenure by the Nepalese state, partial monetization of the economy, and subsequent changes in prices on world markets after the First World War were major factors that led both to the creation of wealth separate from labour and goods, and to rural indebtedness. Capital wealth in turn ossified, if not further exacerbated, the distinctions of status between superior and inferior which existed prior to the existence of such economic classes. At some periods, it was the rise of labour and land as commodities that could be bought and sold, and the link to an externally driven cash economy, that were the central aspects of social change, rather than the pre-existing hierarchic ideology. Such socio-economic processes have their own pattern, which is best understood in their own technical terms. Hence a

process such as a progressive cycle of rural indebtedness would not easily be contained in the fixed order of hierarchy.[6]

It is difficult to see how the notion of hierarchy, however useful it may be in coming to grips with the peoples' own notions, can fully accommodate these wider patterns of order that cut across it, in space and time, at an empirical level.[7]

The Hierarchical Opposition

One theoretical motif behind the all-embracing notion of hierarchy is the hierarchical opposition (Dumont 1979: 810 − 14; 1980: 139 − 245).[8] In what way does the hierarchical opposition account for the use of the term 'lama' in Helambu? Can we recast the dominance of 'lama' in this idiom; and if we can, then in what sense does this salience actually come from a dominant position in a hierarchical opposition?

I will look at the data with regard to the setting and the multi-levelled use of terms, focusing on the ethnic contrast of Lama to Tamang. Here I have already pointed out that we can see Lama as the superior pole, a weighted contrast to Tamang. Is there a higher level in which Lama subsumes Tamang?

6.   Dumont's work, of course, allows that the rise of economic ideology, or the encompassment of all that went before it by economics, was the main characteristic of culture contact or modernization (1977), and his work would allow the same to individualism (1982: 239). But recognising the rise of individualistic and economic ideology is not the same things as containing the regularities and patterns of these orders within hierarchy.

7.   In his work Dumont does not emphasise the working-out of the factors behind particular encompassments as part of a social history. Instead there is a rapid movement to a comparison of ideologies and the history of ideas, which is more a contrast of ideal types than a study of changes in any particular time and place.

One of the main historical progressions that he details—apart from the rise of individualism itself—is the differentiation of the political and the economic from the categories of the social and the religious (1977). In looking at this in the context of the rise of individualism in modern thought, what we see is the encompassment of that which went before it by the economic, which is the *last* term of the series. In another case, namely the oft-quoted example of 'Adam and Eve', we see the opposite, the *first* term of a series englobing that which follows.

Hence encompassment is bi-directional: in itself it gives us no clue as to which will be the dominant 'idea-value' of a sequence. It follows that we will need another set of rules to allow us to work out which term will become potent in this manner. This lack in itself is no great weakness: but it implies that encompassment is indeterminate with respect to seriality. Hence alone it does not have much to tell us about history or the form of social change.

8.   Dumont's mathematical models for the derivation of the hierarchical opposition may well not be all that they appear to be: there are problems arising from contradictions that result from a term holding two positions within one system. It may well be more constructive to see this logic as a mirror to popular discourse and thought that operates by a 'logical slippage of level' of a term, rather than as itself a formal mathematical analysis of such a process.

In terms of empirical reference this is so. Whereas inside the region people may be differentiated as Lama and Tamang, outside they may all be included as one, as Lama, in contrast to Hindus. These settings may be large-scale political or religious meetings where the people, as a whole, are linked to the Nepalese polity and contrasted to Hindus (referred to as 'Brahmin-Chhetri and the like' by the Lama people). But is this a matter of level, or one of contrast by opposition to outsiders in a wider empirical context? Is this a higher-order encompassment within a single ideology, or is it a contrast that has come about from political circumstance? And if it is both, then how are these areas of analysis related?

The incorporation of Tamang within Lama is not solely a matter of internal ideology, nor a result of any endogenous factor alone. To a degree it relies on the association of the two terms Lama and Tamang within the wider Nepalese polity, with which the people of Helambu have had an interchange throughout their history (Clarke 1980a, b, c; 1983). In Nepal, Lama is often a polite epithet for Tamang. Traditionally, in this context the term Lama is dominant because of its association with the Buddhist religion of Tibet which, though it may not be Hindu orthodoxy, is at least superior to the religious ways of the non-literate Tamang. Tamang is often subsumed because of the low position of this ethnic group in the Hindu caste-ranking of the state of Nepal, in which they rank as an unclean 'drinking caste' just above slaves (Sharma 1977).

If one widens the area of analysis to include culturally cognate and genetically related peoples close to Helambu, the picture becomes more varied. In the region immediately to the east of Helambu the people refer to themselves as Lama-Tamang or Tamang-Lama. Indeed, this is quite a common appellation in many areas of eastern Nepal. Lama-Tamang is used in relation to state-wide interactions, in which the 'negative' term Tamang may here be dropped; and Tamang-Lama or Tamang is used in the local ethnic context, where the valuations are other than those of Hinduism, and all people are recognised as being in some ethnic sense Tamang.

The reasons for the difference between these other regions and Helambu can be understood by a historical comparison. In Helambu the early dominant group were Tibetan priests who received land-grants from a Hindu king. As outlined earlier, they later intermarried with local Tamang who adopted their culture, giving rise to the Lama People. By contrast, to the east there was a later *de facto* recognition of land-grants to Tamangs by the state, who only latterly adopted the cultural practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

In some contexts, it is not so much the particular state-wide associations between Lama and Tamang, nor their internal contrast, which is the issue. Rather it is the general contrast of these non-Hindu peoples to Hindu peoples. In places the term 'Sherpa' rather than Lama is now used to make this contrast.

In the present generation, the Lama People of Helambu themselves have begun to use the term Sherpa instead of Lama in state-wide contexts. The Sherpas are a people of a cognate Tibetan culture and origin from even further to the east, with whom the Lama have had frequent contact and cultural interchange; indeed they now intermarry with them. However, to understand

the force of this ethnic equation one has to look at the context of the Nepalese polity as a whole, not solely at Helambu. Because of their economic success and international reputation, the Sherpas have been accepted into the 'caste' hierarchy of a modernizing Nepal at a superior level to Tamang lamas. Sherpa lacks the slight taint of Tamang that attaches by association to the term Lama: hence the Lama People, in their concern with rank and status, have quite deliberately associated with them, and are now known in Kathmandu circles as 'Helambu Sherpa'.

Within the region there is now a contrast that follows on from this state-wide rise of Sherpa, namely one of Sherpa Lama to Tamang Lama, with Sherpa having the higher value. In this case one could regard the term 'lama' not as an ethnic label, but as having the sense of a priest of Tibetan culture; but in popular thought it would be a mistake to see these various senses as dissociated.

These are not solely externally-induced changes in nomenclature but also depend on meaning, which of course is linked to both ideology and practice. The term Sherpa has an egalitarian connotation which it would be difficult for the term Lama, with its sense of 'superior', to carry in Helambu. The contexts where the term Sherpa is used are spheres where equality and co-operation are stressed, such as the case of a landlord and a tenant working jointly over the apportionment of the crops. Of course, the same landlord may refer to the tenant as a Tamang back in his own Lama village, when he is complaining about the harvest.

To summarize, the people referred to as Lama, Tamang and Sherpa are evidently part of the same broad Tibeto-Burman-speaking cultural milieu, and often have direct historical links. But the exact relationship between term and people differs in different areas. We may in all cases have the ideas of 'inferior' and 'superior' as accessible modes of local thought: but in culturally and genetically cognate areas the terms that carry these weightings differ, and the terms that carry the contrast in one area may be associated, if not equated, elsewhere. The ideological subordination of Tamang to Lama is not something that is the same throughout, nor does it come from internal factors alone.

Similar variations of labelling exist for other directed contrasts in which the term 'lama' is used. To summarize these as a list, they are: founding lineage versus other village priests; temple owners versus other villagers; male villagers literate in Tibetan versus non-literate male villagers; village member versus an itinerant; landlord contrasted to tenant; and male household-head in contrast to other male members of the household. In a number of these instances, the subordinate term is not well-defined. In some cases the equivalent dominant term may be other than lama itself, but there would be a general association to lama, as with the term *cho-wa* considered earlier.

Circumstantial and external as well as ideological factors are behind the present-day use of one of these terms rather than another, such as the substitution of the term Sherpa for Lama, and the particular differentiation and contrast of the terms Lama and Tamang in Helambu. Ideology, especially where there is contact with a 'great tradition', can also be seen as an external factor. The point is that if the variation in labelling or nomenclature reflects

varied political and economic history, then whatever the formal structural isomorphisms, it is difficult to see how these contrasts may be encompassed within a single hierarchical opposition.

If each such case were seen as a single type, then there would be the strange situation of links being denied between cognate peoples and influences, with a vast number of separate hierarchical oppositions and their attendant 'idea-values'. If there is only a limited number of cases, then we have no single opposition, but a structural notion of dominance and a logical slippage in certain cases.

Furthermore, this slippage or variation in the meaning of terms is not always worked out in terms of the contrast and the higher level subsumption of the contrary of the hierarchical opposition. Within the same cultural area, even between intermarrying villages on two sides of the valley, the standard mode of logic can change. In one village there may be this structured, hierarchic use of the term; in another the relations of the levels might be taxonomic, with 'lama' used solely as the label of the higher-order category. And though at times there may be some unintended local confusion, worldly individuals take this village context into account in interpreting what is meant in any instance.

A relative and contextual, rather than absolute, sense to the term 'lama' is apparent in much of its use in Helambu. It is the very move from the particular case to a general framework which may be responsible for 'logical slippage'. Not all lamas are landlords, neither are all lamas priests, but many are both. Hence a generalization from such an individual may create this linking together of phenomena from different categories that appears as the logical slippage of the hierarchical opposition.

Contrast and association dependent on context appear as relatively standard processes of popular thought here. In brief, the present-day salience in thought of the term 'lama' comes from its presence as a dominant term in many differing contexts or spheres. People play with the multi-dimensional connotations of the term in much the same way as they play with other ambiguous terms. This variation in emphasis of meaning of the term 'lama' occurs in many Himalayan parts of the Tibetan cultural area. It can be seen as the cumulative result of such alterations by different developmental transformations and progressions from an original common starting-point. Of this history the hierarchical opposition tells us little.

Conclusions

In institutional terms there is a marked variation in social form from village to village, as there is historically within a single village. One might refer to these as variations on a theme or themes, but they can only be explained fully by reference to different kinds of factor: ideological, institutional, and economic. Moreover, these factors have to be considered in a particular historical sequence

if they are to explain the present pattern of a single community. The main progression in Helambu, from ecclesiastic to founding lineage to ethnic group, is particular and contingent on other factors, besides the solely ideological.

Hence both the local constructs and analysis are marked by heterogeneity. If a multitude of factors have to be considered in historical context in order to ascertain which is dominant in any particular case, then it is not clear that any one is dominant in any holistic or principled sense.

This complexity is perhaps not unexpected. Dumont's original notion of hierarchy was culturally specific, dependent on the Hindu value of purity. One of the areas where this idea is least able to cope is on the peripheries of the civilization, both in the geographical sense and in the sense of relations to non-Hindu tribes. It is not at all clear that 'purity' encompasses power in such interactions, at least from the viewpoint of the 'tribal' groups prior to 'sanskritization'. It is also reasonable to entertain reservations on the utility of the notion of reversal between purity and power, and between an ideological and empirical order, as being capable of explaining such interactions.[9] In the case of the Lama People, and of the High Himalaya generally, the problem is compounded by their situation on the periphery of two civilizations—Tibetan Buddhist as well as Hindu.

One important fact highlighted by this complexity is the degree to which we tend to simplify situations in our societal explanations, that is, to make *ceterus paribus* assumptions. In his early work on India Dumont quite rightly draws attention to the fact that in the centre of Indian civilization structural-functional theories act themselves out against a constant backdrop of Hindu culture, that is, an ideology of status based on purity rather than power. In these situations we can quite usefully regard hierarchy as the general case which encompasses the particular. Here we invoke structure as an explanation, but have to recognise that culture or ideology is 'in the order of things'.

However, perhaps we should equally well guard against the reverse, that is, an implicit assumption of structural-functional, economic or even ecological factors as a constant backdrop, and invoking ideology alone as the superordinate explanation. For example, if we compared two Himalayan

9. In the normal type of hierarchical opposition looked at here the superior pole is coterminous with the whole: reversal is seen to occur 'only on the empirical level—and thus not within the ideology proper' (Dumont 1982: 225). Here the empirical is implicitly taken as subordinate to the ideology (or as one might say as the submerged pole of a hierarchic opposition).

Dumont introduces another type of hierarchic opposition known as the articulate type. Here, there is no clear superiority or dominance of one logical domain over another. He gives the example of the priest and king in medieval Europe, each with his own sphere of influence. It is difficult to see precisely what is gained by the notion of reversal of dominance between the two spheres here. If we can label any situation where there is no clear superior level a situation of reversal, then under what conditions is the schema falsifiable? There is a danger of creating an indeterminate intellectual schema which is capable of dealing with any objection by the *ad hoc* introduction of new levels and reversals. It is reasonable to make an Occamist objection to this extension, unless there is some independent evidence for these levels and reversals. For example, what is to be gained, other than the idea of a cultural link which is already evident, by seeing Sherpa equality as a subordinate pole to a Lamaist hierarchy?

valleys, identical in all these factors bar that of ideology, we might well run the danger of missing these general factors, which act as a continual backdrop to our ideological explanation. The point is that the 'other-things-being-equal' assumption tends to make us look at only a part of an explanation, to ignore the backdrop which is an essential part of a holistic explanation at a societal level. This criticism applies to approaches based on the dominance of ideology as much as on any other single factor or dimension. And here it is possible that the notion of context implies that we can view a theory from perspectives other than those given by itself, and can consider its relation to data other than that which it contains itself.[10]

It may well be that such complex areas are not amenable to being characterised in any such clear-cut ideological terms.[11] Perhaps hierarchy tends more to the analysis of ideal types, and particular examples of ritual, than to the complex area of multiple social relations over time in different contexts. It is one thing to detect or work out the logical holism of an ideology; it is quite another to follow, in a holistic sense, the cumulative pattern of ideas or changes that affect a people or region.

One analytical alternative might be to admit this difference, to take by definition the hierarchical valuation as the conceptual unit, and to incorporate the empirical variations as required within it. Though such a procedure is more a theological apologia, perhaps, than a characterization of any observed society, it is a way of putting forward an abstraction for further comparison in some model.

But if we wished to look at the whole which is the society, rather than contrast the properties of ideal symbolic orders, then we would have to integrate the picture from one particular ideology with those from other local ideologies. We would have to take account of circumstantial factors and patterns at a structural and economic level, and this would again give rise to the thorny problem of context and frame of reference.

Certainly some valid redaction of the social—including empirical—variation can be achieved in terms of such ideal types. It is almost a necessity to do so for symbolic comparisons, and we do so whenever a simplification such as 'the Sherpa believe...' is made. But to do so ignores both the holistic form of the society itself, and parallels at the levels of form and process between societies with different orders. We also have to be capable of subsuming the idealist view within an empirical order. Possibly Dumont is referring to this double

10.   Dumont sees context as being inscribed in the ideology. One important sense of context is being able to descend with a theory to the level of a descriptive account, rather than to consider it purely in its own terms. Hence one problem with having contexts inscribed in an ideology, or in any theory, is that one then may need to resort to a 'context of contexts' to make kinds of contextual statements other than those allowed by that analytical framework itself. In treating context Dumont introduces a further notion, namely bi-dimensionality. It is not clear to me whether this refers to a local change of dominance by reversal in a hierarchy, or to a separate plane for contexts apart from, yet dependent on, the hierarchy (1982: 225).

11.   Possibly these complex cases are where *Gesellschaft* intrudes onto *Gemeinschaft* (see Dumont 1979: 294; 1982: 218, 233).

standpoint in the concluding paragraph of *On Value*, with his distinction between 'practical forms of integration' and ideals (1982: 239).

In practice, we may have to go in both directions at the same time, that is, to consider both the symbolism and the ideology from the insider's perspective, and the empirical and historical relation of this order to economic and other outsider's theoretical perspectives. Without the latter, one has not so much holistic analysis as a redaction from a single point of view. We may appreciate the aesthetic ideal of seeing the world in a rose: however, in reconstituting the whole, one has to account not just for a rose or even a world of roses, but for a very mixed garden and at times a veritable undergrowth.

In this paper important insights have come from seeing how cho and 'lama', constituting together a central 'idea-value', represent the dominant local cultural perspective. And by allowing these ideas to order the data, a coherent level of analysis in terms of this indigenous ideology has been achieved. However, I have also shown that an attention to empirical and historical variation, and the notion of dominance itself, requires that this and other data be capable of being viewed from other perspectives. I have also suggested that in this region of the Himalaya, at any rate, regularities in societal wholes are likely to be found at a complex level of process rather than in terms of ideological or structural form, and that an open-ended notion of context involving more than one perspective is important to such a holistic account.

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