

Polyandry Still Flourishes Among Tibetans

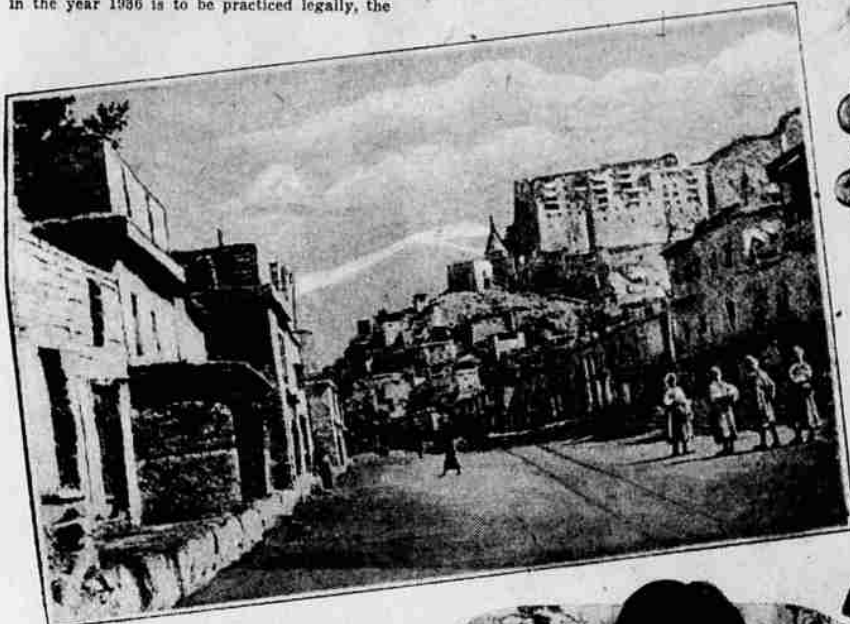
Strange Marital Customs In Distant Land Where Premium Is Placed On Bridegroom

By John Richard Finch

THERE'S an old Mother Goose rhyme — or maybe it's a proverb—that ends, after some inconsequential preamble about pins and needles: "When a man marries his troubles begin." True perhaps—but so do a woman's—especially if she lives in the curious province of Ladakh in Tibet, where the strange custom of polyandry is practiced. Polyandry, as we all know—I hope—is the interesting and unusual (I might add rare when practiced legally) custom of a woman taking unto herself various and sundry husbands.

To the best of my knowledge, if polyandry in the year 1936 is to be practiced legally, the

ing down the back of another point at the waist. It is studded with graduated rows of turquoise stones, sometimes more than two hundred in number, which represents not only the entire wealth of the owner, but of generations of previous ancestral owners. While the stones on these unusual and elaborate adornments would not create a sensation on the Rue de la Paix, Bond Street, or Fifth Avenue, they are of a beautiful color and possess considerable value. Attached to the leather are large ear-flaps made of black wool, which protruding at each side of the face, have a strong resemblance to horse blinkers.



The Ladakh city of Leh, more than two miles above sea level, and the curious capitol where polyandry flourishes.

Ladies interested must travel first to India, then overland through that great country to the Tibetan border and finally up steep mountain passes in the fastness of the Asian interior to the city of Leh, more than two miles above sea level, and reputedly the highest inhabited city in the world. There the lucky lady may not only marry the man of her choice, providing there is a choice, but all of his brothers as well, regardless of number. There's one catch, however! According to tradition, the eldest brother rules supreme, and his word is generally law—at least where his brothers are concerned.

Strange to say, the Ladakhi wife, in spite of her many mates, is often left entirely alone, her retinue of husbands spending much time away from home. When a husband returns he leaves his shoes on the door-step as a warning for rival husbands to keep away, and only the eldest brother, whose shoes are inviolate, dares disturb them. No wonder one sees so few children in this far land. But perhaps it is just as well, for it's a wise child that knows his own father in Ladakh.

IN KEEPING with the rest of the country, the city of Leh, with its ten thousand people, is a fantastic and picturesque little city, composed of a tumble-down cluster of ancient stone huts leaning at all angles and in all stages of disrepair. It boasts, however, of its Main street, a broad straight avenue lined with poplar trees and swarming with a heterogeneous crowd from a hundred different races and sects. The city is not far from where India, Russia, and China unite, and one finds evidences of this proximity in the features and costumes seen about the bazaars.

It seems incredible that people can not only exist year after year in the rarity of the atmosphere more than two miles high, but can rear their children, their cattle, and raise barley and rice at the same lofty altitude. But the Ladakhi are a contented people despite the abnormalities of their country. There is no real poverty, due perhaps to the controlled birth rate. Rain seldom falls in Ladakh, and the land that can be irrigated is unalterably limited, which in turn limits the food supply. The wise lamas, or priests, who completely rule the people in the religious-mad land, cognizant of the danger of overpopulation, centuries ago, as a means of checking the birth rate inaugurated the practice of polyandry. Today in 35,000 square miles of territory there are only 25,000 people, or a square mile for every man, woman, and child in Ladakh.

Now let us leap the thousands of miles over land and sea from America to Tibet to look in on the intimate life of a Ladakhi family. For purposes of simplicity, let us take a modest family of ten—the wife, the eldest brother and lord of the household, four brother-husbands, and four "community" children. The Ladakhi woman is invariably a vision of gaudy glory. Jewelry is as essential and as indispensable to her as shoes and stockings or a toothbrush are to her American sister. Added to yards of beads and a conglomeration of barbaric rings and bracelets, the Ladakhi woman effects an elaborate headdress, and this indispensable and inseparable ornament is the most important part of her costume. Even the poorest man's daughter or wife, though she be in rags, maintains this bit of finery. It consists of a strip of leather in the shape of a very much elongated diamond, some five inches wide, coming to a point over the forehead and taper-



Above is pictured the little "Skushok" of Ladakh, who, being the living incarnation of Bakola, a saintly contemporary of Buddha, is the holiest and highest lama in the district. He is held in the arms of one of the lamasery servants.

WITH all the glory of her jewels and spangles, the Ladakhi woman is less familiar with soap and water than the men. Her peacock headdress covers braids of unspeakable grimy hair, and the ear-flaps invariably kindly conceal a face which might, in some cases, be pretty if not almost completely masked over with dirt.

The Ladakhi have an excuse for not bathing in winter—it's too cold; and then in the summer they are out of the habit. In consequence they never remove their clothes until they rot and fall off, which, judging from appearances, happens only once in a decade.

Some families are much larger than our modest family of ten. Often there are seven, eight and nine brothers, and in cases of this kind the conjugal felicity of the wife and her sundry husbands is often marred by discontent. Despite their religious fervor, and centuries of tradition husbands are "going modern," even in far-off Ladakh, and many are demanding equal rights with women. The modern young man in Ladakh today is turning from sufferance to suzerainty. As a matter of fact, many complications, strange and humorous to those who are not themselves involved. Often a youngest brother, who takes

unto himself a wife resents the fact that he must share her with his 50-year-old brother. In fact, not only share her, but place himself in subjection to his eldest brother's every wish insofar as his marital life is concerned. On the other hand, the aging bachelor brother, content with his single blessedness, is often greatly annoyed by the foisting of a wife upon him—a dictator perhaps, who will heap unwanted responsibilities upon him.

THERE is the problem of an overabundance of unmarried women in Ladakh. Due to the practice of polyandry, husbands are so scarce that there is an endless scramble for every unmarried man in the country. Parents hoping for a husband for their daughters, hire professional marriage brokers, paying them large sums to snare a mate. The iron hand of the lamas alone prevent "racketeering" among the numerous match-makers.

Missionaries in Ladakh report that polyandry is doomed, due to its economic and moral problems which is making it unpopular with the present generation. Family ties are being dangerously loosened by the habitual infidelity of younger husbands, while the large number of unmarried mothers and unsupported children is fast becoming a serious detriment to social order. But release from the custom must come from "the temple," for religion is the ruling passion of Ladakh.

Being essentially a part of Tibet, Ladakh clings tenaciously to the lama form of the Buddhist faith professed by the mother country, and there are few districts in Tibet where the population is as priest-ridden and as monastery-dominated as in this western portion of the country. Almost every village has its lamasery to support, with its swarms of robe-clad monks who live in a realm of holiness far above the people. These buildings, erected three or four centuries ago when the power of Lhasa was at its height, are perched dramatically on the points of crags so difficult to scale that in extreme cases they can be reached only by basket elevators. One is led to believe that religion of that era enjoyed desolate surroundings, and sought to isolate itself among the wildest peaks.

With one son from every family in some religious order there are far too many priests who are of no practical value, and in consequence a great majority of them are left free to meditate, an occupation into which they plunge with vigor, taking a recess only long enough to instruct the boy lamas in the art so that when they are grown they may be able to meditate as well as their instructors.



An elaborate headdress is worn by all Ladakhi women. It is studded with turquoise stones, sometimes more than two hundred in number, representing not only the entire wealth of the owner, but of generations of previous ancestral owners.

THE lamas ascribe to themselves supernatural powers, and control over the elements. Richard Halliburton, famous adventurer-writer, who visited Ladakh a few years ago, tells of a lama in the city of Leh who, during a recent water famine, promised rain if he were paid well enough. He was paid handsomely, whereupon one of the heaviest rains ever recorded fell, reviving the perishing crops, and thus bringing renewed faith in the supernatural power of the priests, and despair to the foreign missions which were promptly deserted.

The lamas are said to be extortionate money-lenders, and by this means have little difficulty in keeping possession of the tillable land. Indeed, between the dread of earthly spoliation and threats of spiritual disaster, the Ladakhi is kept in eternal subjection. The rank and file of the people take their religion with great seriousness. Since their prayers and exhortations can be offered, so they believe, much oftener by mechanics than by thought, they take advantage of this dispensation made to them by Buddha and spin and roll and waft prayers to heaven in a hundred different ways that demand no effort or attention on their part. It is not the man who follows their moral code with the most diligence who soonest attains Nirvana, but the man who manufactures the most prayers. There are several which, if offered a sufficient number of times, no matter how automatically, are sure to win salvation.

Many people have prayer-wheels of brass cylinders, which they twirl by hand as they sit idly or walk behind their pack-ponies. These cylinders are filled with thousands of printed prayer papers and every spin of the wheel brings them a step closer to Nirvana. Most ingenious of all is the water-wheel, which, filled as it often is with hundreds of pounds of prayer cloth, makes the other contrivances seem a waste of time.

RICHARD HALLIBURTON'S first book, "The Royal Road to Romance," published in 1925 by the Bobbs-Merrill Company, among countless other fascinating adventures encountered on his unique world tour, gives an interesting account of the strange Tibetan province of Ladakh and its quaint capital city of Leh. Regarding its religion and the lamas he says:

"As well as being the commercial center, Leh is also the religious center of the province, and the home of the 'Skushok' who, being the living incarnation of Bakola, a saintly contemporary of Buddha, is the holiest and highest lama in the district. He has died about thirty times since he first became lord of the Leh monastic area, only to be reborn of noble parentage in the neighborhood of his demise. Finding a child fulfilling all the requirements of wealth and born at the proper interval after the death of Skushok, the monastery elders choose him as the incarnation of their departed master, and to prove to the people's satisfaction that he is the true saint they place personal possessions of the former lama before him, along with unfamiliar articles. The child never fails to recognize his property it is said—probably because the elders tutor him thoroughly.

"It was my good fortune to be in Leh in time to attend the inauguration of the child Skushok

at the local lamasery. There was a festival connected with it in his honor such as occurs only once in a lifetime, and which, lasting three days, had drawn the population from long distances.

"On this momentous day, previous to being carried out for public observation, the boy was placed in state within the inner temple, where the leading monks from far and near came to prostrate themselves, and in return receive a strip of colored cloth from him as his blessing. Through a secluded lattice, I watched the entire ceremony. It was indeed a solemn occasion, rendered doubly so by the dim light prevailing in the temple. The gold images and brass jars of oil shone dully and garish Chinese portraits of demons and frescoes depicting the horrors of hell covered the walls, while from the ceiling hung scores of grotesque devil-masks.

"THE only fresh and beautiful thing in the room filled with depressing ornaments and evil-looking priests was the silk-robed child, whose sweet face and guileless eyes gave him the expression of an infant seraph. He was not more than four years old and, while obviously bored with this unnatural life, seems to have resigned himself to it and to be enduring it manfully.

"When he was carried out to his throne on the covered stage in the courtyard, from which he was to observe the entertainment, the hundreds of expectant people greeted him with enthusiasm and gave way to festivity. During the acclamation and entertainment that followed, the baby on the throne fell fast asleep, and, as sunset came, his guardian lifted him from his pile of cushions and carried him back to the terrifying devil-infested 'playroom.' No divinity this, no superhuman saint—only a natural and homesick baby boy, who, after such a strenuous day, was more interested in his crib and his porridge than in the spiritual welfare of his fold.

"I could not resist an urge to follow them into the monastery, nor did anyone seem to object. From a distance, I watched the monk, holding the sleepy child on his lap, remove the yellow robes of state, and wrap him in a voluminous woolen shawl. A bowl of warm barley porridge was given him, laddled out with a rough wooden spoon. Nearby stood an ancient blackened cradle that had nestled previous incarnations. Into it the heavy-eyed cherub was lifted, a wooden doll given him, and a shaggy sheep skin covering pulled over him. Then, as wild, fantastic music and the babble of the multitude celebrating outside the monastery wafted in on the breeze, his Holiness, with the last ray of sunlight slanting in through the latticed window from the western Himalayas, gently the baby God was rocked to sleep."

And so, between the problems of polyandry and religion, the citizens of Ladakh often find life most complex and perplexing. This, at least, they have in common with their western brothers for, after all, don't we all? So instead of the little proverb, "when a man marries his troubles begin," with which our story started, in Ladakh it should be rewritten to read: "When a woman marries her troubles increase—in proportion to the number of her husband's brothers."

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