

## ***mNa'-mas* and *nyal-bus*: Tibetan marriage, fertility, and illegitimacy through time and space**

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A combination of anthropological and demographic approaches is employed to interpret reproductive outcomes in one historical population (Kyirong, Tibet) and two contemporary populations (Nubri, Nepal; Tibetan exiles in Nepal and India). Marriage, nonmarriage, and illegitimacy are used as focal points to highlight sociocultural, economic, and political factors that shape markedly different birth rates (Kyirong 4.5, Nubri 5.3, Exiles 1.2 births/woman) among these ethnically Tibetan populations.

The analysis of fertility in Kyirong demonstrates that conventional interpretations of Tibetan polyandry fail to account for the significance of informal marital arrangements and a tolerance for illegitimacy in traditional Tibetan settings. Whereas polyandry does result in a high level of female nonmarriage, those women excluded from formal marriage gave birth to enough children to engender moderate population growth. In Nubri, the high level of female nonmarriage is related to the cultural practice of using daughters who are nuns as primary caregivers for the elderly. Illegitimacy, although tolerated, is moderated by the fact that most nonmarried women are nuns who have taken vows of celibacy. In this case, religious celibacy in relation to old-age care restrains aggregate fertility. Among Tibetan exiles the birth rate has fallen well below replacement level, a trend that is related to several factors including the prevalence of contraceptive usage, the high cost of raising children, and the delay in marriage. In the meantime, illegitimacy has become disparaged and extremely rare.

The connecting point between these three studies is the interplay between parental strategies, individual aspirations, and political-economic forces that influence, but do not determine, decisions about whether or not to marry, the timing of marriage, and reproduction. As a contribution to Tibetan Studies, the paper demonstrates why a nuanced understanding of local context is critical for assessing different reproductive outcomes in the settings where Tibetans live.