

神戸市外国語大学 学術情報リポジトリ

An Avuncular Profile: An Examination of the Maternal Uncle (Azhang) and his Significance in Tibetan Culture

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2014-03-01 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Samuels, Jonathan メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/1963

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 International License.



An Avuncular Profile:
An Examination of the Maternal Uncle (*Azhang*)
and his Significance in Tibetan Culture

Jonathan Samuels
Heidelberg University

1. Introduction

Due largely to the patrilineal character of the society, historical descriptions of Tibet have placed an emphasis upon agnates and the relationships between them. In these historical descriptions, as well as later academic works, affine figures and their traditional roles have attracted far less attention. There has been a certain amount of interest in the term *zhang* (understood to mean ‘maternal uncle’), within the context of attempts to understand the significance of the Tibetan imperial-era minister known as the *zhang-lon* or *zhang-blon* – the most detailed treatment of the topic thus far being that by Dotson (2004). Earlier, based primarily upon analysis of kinship terminology, Benedict (1942), Lévi-Strauss (1969), and Nagano (1998) also made reference to the maternal uncle figure, when proposing theories regarding certain marriage practices. Aside from this, little direct interest has been shown in the figure. No studies to date have explored the more general profile and traditional functions of the maternal uncle (*a-zhang*),¹ let alone consider whether these functions might have some relevance to understanding how Tibetan culture and society have evolved. Utilising sources which were often either unavailable or unknown to earlier scholars, I here examine the broader cultural significance of the figure and what this might tell us about the past.

2. Observations Regarding Kinship Characterisations

My personal interest in the *azhang* pre-dates my involvement in academic work or exposure to any of the writings mentioned above: instead it springs from observations made during many years of residence in Tibetan communities, where I

¹ Tibetan terms in italics represent spellings according to the Wylie transliteration system. The term *a-zhang* (simplified to *azhang*) – the most common one used to denote this kinship figure – will be employed throughout the article.

gradually became aware of marked characterisations relating to specific kinship figures, particularly uncles. These characterisations seemed largely to be supported during subsequent contact with members of the Tamang community.² The Tamang – a group residing predominantly in Nepal – are officially counted as ethnically distinct from Tibetans, and speak a non-Tibetan language. Despite this, elements within their culture, religion, and language which are assumed to be of Tibetan origin are so numerous that amongst the various non-Tibetan groups in Nepal who speak Tibeto-Burman languages they are commonly judged to be one of the most ‘Tibetanised.’ Of particular relevance here is the fact that the Tamang social structure is clan-based, and that the kinship terms in general, and those referring to uncles in particular correspond closely to those found in Tibet.

Although the study of kinship terminology is not alien to the field of Tibetan Studies, little consideration has been given to the custom of using kinship terms for non-kin; i.e. where, without any belief that he/she is related to another individual, either by birth or marriage, a speaker still chooses to address or refer to that individual (even in the case of a complete stranger) by a kinship term. This phenomenon features in many cultures, and there are numerous instances where usage of the terms is extended, in order to communicate respect or even disdain, with terms equivalent to ‘uncle’ and ‘aunt’ particularly freighted with implication (see, for example, the studies by Hentschel: 2012, and Turin: 2001). Of the factors guiding the speaker’s choice of which term to assign, Hentschel (*ibid.*: 41) points to the obvious ones of gender and age. However, in languages which distinguish between paternal and maternal uncles and aunts (such as Tibetan and Tamang), the person using the kinship term must exercise a choice (i.e. whether to assign a term associated with the paternal or maternal side) in which, it must be presumed, reference to factors beyond gender and age is made.³ What might those factors be, and what might they tell us about characterisations of specific kinship figures?⁴

² The title of my forthcoming (April 2014) PhD thesis is ‘Tamang Clan-culture and its Relevance to the Archaic Culture of Tibet.’ This will also include a section upon the *azhang*, covering some of the territory explored in the present article, as well as some issues (e.g. the origin of the links between Tibetan and Tamang cultures, reasons for similarities in their kinship terminology, the concept of Tibetanisation, etc.) which are not dealt with at length here.

³ A possible proviso related to age will be mentioned below.

⁴ It should be acknowledged that this route is not always taken; Hindi and Nepali for instance, do distinguish between paternal and maternal uncles and aunts, but the issue of choice is often sidestepped (particularly with strangers), as *aṅkal* (uncle) and *āṅṅī* (auntie) are commonly employed; for discussion of this in Nepal see Turin (2001: 280-1).

In the case of the uncles, having satisfied myself that the choice of terms was not entirely arbitrary, and displayed a degree of consistency, the obvious assumption to be made was that the respective attributions find their source in two distinct sets of associations the attributors have with the uncle figures. Assuming that these images could be isolated, it seemed to raise a number of questions: Firstly, could they offer a window of insight into traditional cultural images and stereotypes, regularly drawn from, but rarely articulated overtly (particularly in written literature)? Secondly, by stating a preference, might the designator be *inviting* the individual to play to the stereotype (thereby perhaps setting boundaries, or implicitly asserting that interaction should follow a certain pattern, mimicking one prescribed for true relatives)? Thirdly, rather than dismissing these characterisations as ‘popular’ depictions, might we not hypothesize that they are linked to (and can perhaps inform us about) deeply-rooted, sociocultural roles that these kinship figures were traditionally expected to perform?

Regarding the first question; in a broader cultural context, ‘avuncular’ (according to the Oxford Dictionary Online 2013) is defined as ‘kind, friendly towards a younger or less experienced person,’ and derives from the Latin *avunculus*; the same term from which ‘uncle’ (with cognates in many European languages) is derived; suggesting strong cultural associations between the uncle and notions of kindness shown towards younger persons. Examples from numerous cultures demonstrate that it is the kinship figure, rather than the term in any single, or any single group of languages to which the positive connotations are attached. Premised upon these positive associations, another cross-cultural phenomenon; that of evoking the ‘uncle’ image in an ironic fashion is observed – Hentschel (*ibid.*: 31-2) provides some examples from Serbian; ‘Uncle’ Joe Stalin, or perhaps ‘Uncle’ Sam also spring to mind as illustrations. The use of the term *A-zhang chos-rgyal*, in which the ‘Lord of Death’ (understood in this popular sense as a figurative embodiment of death itself) is referred to as ‘maternal uncle’ would also suggest that the phenomenon is not unknown in Tibet.

Putting aside the ‘archetypal’ uncle image, and returning to its maternal-paternal bifurcation, what seemed apparent in the choices of Tibetans and Tamangs (both when the age and gender-applicable individual was someone they actually interacted with, or simply observed at a distance) was this; a greater tendency for the

paternal uncle (Tib: *a-khu*, Tam: *agu*)⁵ to be associated with sternness, seriousness, if not a degree of remoteness and aloofness (sometimes even disapproval), whereas the maternal uncle (Tam: *asyang*) was associated more with strength and lively energy, geniality, playfulness, and friendliness inviting intimacy.⁶

Regarding the second question, about the manipulation of kinship terminology; aside from the *azhang*-term, addressing someone as ‘elder brother’ (Tib: *co-co* or *jo-lags*, Tam: *jyo-jyo*) immediately injects intimacy into the interactions. Use of the term by a Tibetan child or younger female seems to present the speaker as a ward, and calls upon the addressee to reciprocate, by adopting the role of a kindly guardian. However the tenderness that the use of such terms invites can also serve as a cover for flirtation, as under the pretence of their being siblings, unrelated members of the opposite sex can engage in a degree of intimacy and physical contact in public that would otherwise be frowned upon. A not unrelated example cited by Campbell (1998: 233 n.15) involves some Tamang females seeking to control possibilities of erotic liaisons (i.e. either encouraging or repelling potential suitors) through the manipulation of terminology, so as either to stress or conceal purported kinship ties. Largely reflecting differences in social organisation, the phenomenon of using kinship terms for non-kin is more keenly observed amongst Tamangs than Tibetans. For one thing, terminology linked with hierarchical structures (associated with religion, social rank, etc.) are extremely marked in exchanges between Tibetans, and where applicable, will be used in preference to kinship terms; amongst Tamangs, such terminology is almost absent. Also, the general sense of the individual’s enmeshment within a web of kinship is far more profound for Tamangs; kinship ties are considered to exist not only between

⁵ There are some variations on this term in Tamang communities; the most important is referred to below.

⁶ Given the subjective nature of these observations, I tried to devise a test to support them, in which certain Tibetans would be presented with images of two faces, each of which was supposed to instantiate the respective sets of characteristics. They would then be asked to judge which represented the *akhu*, and which the *azhang*. However, the *azhang* figure was purposely drawn to look younger than the *akhu* one, as youth and energy seemed to be characteristics more regularly associated with the maternal figure. It soon became clear, with a small group of Tibetans I initially asked, that it was primarily the feature of youth that was latched on to; the response of more than one person being that the younger-looking one must be the *azhang*, because brides are always younger than grooms (an age disparity, it was felt, which would normally also be reflected in the siblings of the two). Having decided that the representation of age was going to overshadow the other characteristics, I discontinued the test, concluding that the design would have to be more carefully thought out.

Questions regarding the perceptions of the two uncle figures obviously remain: are they, for instance, attributions which occur with any consistency in stories or popular expressions? Does their appearance in the names of various animals, (such as, *A-khu sdom-thag* for ‘spider’), etc. strengthen or harm the case? And does the somewhat anarchic figure of *A-khu ston-pa* simply contradict the proposed characterisation, or represent a subversion of it? Consideration of such questions lies beyond the scope of this study.

immediate and extended family members, but between all members of one's own, and certain affiliated clans; something which has major implications in the realm of social interaction.⁷ As for the invitations to 'play' the uncle role, I have certainly witnessed examples of Tibetan males who, having been labelled 'azhang,' have appeared to respond, by adopting an affable, fun-loving persona.⁸

Returning now to the crucial third question, about whether the source of the characterisations may be linked to the conventional roles of these kinship figures: in the deeply patriarchal Tibetan and Tamang societies, characterisation of the paternal uncle as a stricter and perhaps more conservative figure would seem to make perfect sense; with succession and inheritance – including the 'genetic' inheritance in the figure of the bone (Tibetan: *rus*, Tamang: *rui*) – and family and religious traditions passing primarily through the male line, it would be unsurprising if persons belonging to that line became associated with the preservation of tradition, and the enforcement of discipline which this would probably entail. Therefore it seems unlikely to be purely coincidental that the only two kinship terms which have effectively been co-opted as designations for religious roles are those of the *paternal* line; i.e. *a-ne* (father's sister) for 'nun,' and *a-khu* (father's brother) for 'monk,' in Amdo.

Standard Tibetan literature about history and religion report from within traditions predicated upon the belief that continuity – in the form of dynastic and spiritual identities – passes through the male line. As hinted earlier, these works seem to confirm the domination of male descent lineages; in which paternal uncles feature prominently (see for example, Stein 1972: 106). However, as the illustrations discussed below will demonstrate, when one looks beyond these standard sources, a quite different picture emerges, in which it is the azhang figure who steps into the foreground. This presents something of a conundrum. Why, in these societies which practice patrilineal exogamy, should it be the figure of the azhang, from the maternal side of the family, who enjoys the more substantive profile? An understanding of the azhang's traditional role will surely go a long way to answering this question.

⁷ The Tibetan (and Tamang) practice of using kinship terms for non-kin is one which warrants further consideration in a separate study. I limit myself here to drawing attention to the phenomenon, and citing a few examples relevant to the main topic of discussion.

⁸ Uncle designations certainly do not form the most common class of kinship term employed for non-kin. With regard to the regularity of usage of the various terms; for both Tibetans and Tamangs, parental ones are not usual. The most favoured designations are sibling terms, with an emphasis upon age differences. These are closely followed by grandparent terms, with uncle-aunt terms probably forming a third rank.

3. Tibetan Studies and the Avunculate

Although unaware of it at the time of my original observations, the phenomenon that I referred to, with the characterisation of the uncles, and particularly that of the special place of the maternal uncle, was one long noted in the Western scholarly tradition in relation to other cultures (see for example, Bremmer 1976: 65).⁹ It was judged no accident that the term avunculus derived from the maternal uncle, indicating to a special relationship between that uncle and the nephew. This was designated the ‘avunculate,’ which the Oxford Dictionary Online (2013) defines as ‘the special relationship in some societies between a man and his sister’s son.’ The notion of the avunculate pattern in relation to Tibet was certainly proposed by Benedict (1942: 329) in his, the first detailed study of Tibetan kinship terms. Basing himself almost exclusively on Benedict’s study, Lévi-Strauss (1969: 371-6) offered his own analysis of what the kinship terms revealed. Benedict occasionally supports his theories with observations made by those who visited Tibet, but his suppositions regarding social practices essentially derive from his philological analysis of kinship terms, drawing his examples from a small number of secondary works. He reached major conclusions about ancient Tibetan marriage patterns without providing sufficiently cogent arguments or evidence. Benedict and Lévi-Strauss (who both adhered to the notion of the avunculate) became involved in other, related debates about marriage in ancient Tibetan (or proto-Tibetan) culture. Both proposed that cross-cousin marriage had been the dominant pattern, something which Stein (1972: 94) describes as an ‘over-simplified supposition.’ Even more controversially, Benedict (1942: 317-8), having noted what he believed was a change in kinship terminology, attributed this to a shift in social patterns, through the adoption of a polyandrous marriage scheme (a position that has been largely discounted). Lévi-Strauss (1969: 372) cited Benedict’s kinship terminology shift when asserting that Tibetan (or proto-Tibetan) culture had shifted from a matrilineal to a patrilineal social model, something linked to a much broader debate in which he became embroiled. Perhaps partly devalued by its association with these controversies (and as a consequence also of a more general shift of trends in the discipline of anthropology) the idea of the avunculate in relation to Tibetan culture seemed, after Benedict and Lévi-Strauss, almost immediately to have fallen out of favour.¹⁰ So whilst sporadic and disorganised references to the azhang are not uncommon, no framework is in place for collating and interpreting them; no better

⁹ Bremmer’s analysis is of literary sources from a broad range of Indo-European language-speaking cultures, but the close correspondence between the practices found within them and those which can be observed amongst Tibetans and Tamangs is immediately obvious.

¹⁰ And curiously, seem not to feature in studies about the Tamang.

example of such a set of sprawling observations can be found than that of Stein (1972: 107). The remainder of this study is to some extent an attempt to reintroduce the idea of the avunculate model into the realm of Tibetan studies, and to explore the Tibetan(ised) version of that model.

4. Zhang-Terminology

In discussion about the maternal relatives, the two most regularly occurring terms are *a-zhang* and *zhang-po*: these are, according to the *rGya-bod tshig-mdzod chen-mo* (1993: 2372) synonyms. To these, we should add the term *zhang*, which has featured in studies related to early Tibetan history, such as the articles by Nagano (1998), and Dotson (2004). As well as in the rank of the minister (*zhang-lon*), *zhang* appears occasionally in imperial-era literature as part of a title affixed to personal names, such as Zhang stong-rtsan.¹¹ The rules of abbreviation (used in the formation of compounds words, etc.) have obviously been observed in these examples. *Zhang* must be considered an abbreviation of either *a-zhang* or *zhang-po*; two terms still used universally, which display structural features that typify Tibetan spoken forms.

Regarding the translation of the terms *azhang* and *zhangpo*; whilst it is only possible to make sense of the *azhang*'s importance within a framework that distinguishes between wife-giver and wife-taker groups (with the *azhang* on the side of the wife-givers), neither *azhang*, nor any other *zhang* term, could correctly be said to *mean* 'wife-giver.'¹² As is apparent from some of the examples cited below, there is often a distinction between ceremonial and everyday usages of these terms. Hence *azhang* may be used to describe the maternal relatives collectively during the wedding, but in other everyday situations, it appears, *azhang* (or *zhangpo*) is used *directly* as a designation only for adult males. Stein asserts (1972: 94) that the same *zhang*-term is shared by uncle, maternal grandfather and father-in-law. If reference could be found to his sources, this assertion could be evaluated.¹³ He may well have encountered usages occurring in situations where wife-givers were being distinguished from takers (such as during weddings), and *zhang*-terms were extended to encompass other male kin on the grounds that they belonged to maternal group or party. However, this group gains its name from, and is defined by the uncle,

¹¹ This individual's name appears, for instance, in the document Or 8212.187; accessed through OTDO (Old Tibetan Documents Online).

¹² At the risk of appearing slightly pedantic, I choose here to distinguish between 'means' and 'refers to.'

¹³ At a later date I would like to explore this topic in more detail, with specific reference to historical documents.

and in day-to-day usage, the terms *azhang* and *zhangpo* seem restricted to the maternal uncles. Historical records, stretching back to the earliest period of Tibetan literature, seem to confirm a high degree of consistency in the application of these *zhang*-terms. Particularly worthy of attention here is a section of the 8-9th century bilingual *Bye-brag rtog-byed chen-po* (*Mahāvīyutpatti*: 146-8), where we find the first historical example of a standardised presentation of Tibetan kinship terms. Benedict made no reference to this list, and it has also been strangely overlooked by subsequent generations of scholars. Here *zhang-po* is listed as an equivalent only of the Sanskrit *mātula* (i.e. maternal uncle); distinct terms are listed for other kinship figures and the in-laws. The general picture, built upon historical sources, more recent literature, and my own fieldwork is that according to this Tibetan cultural model, it is not that the adult male represents the *azhang* (i.e. in the sense of this male representing the wife-giving group), so much as that he *embodies* the concept of the *azhang/zhangpo*. There also seems to be a strong association of the *azhang* with youth and vigour; even though the older and infirm may still technically count as *azhang*, it is to the energetic and able-bodied that the image attaches itself more readily. Thus a text describing how weddings are conducted in *Gro-tshang* (Amdo) stipulates that the one selected to serve as the main *azhang* to perform a particular duty should be someone who is; ‘mature, but not old looking.’¹⁴

The Tibetan (*azhang*) and Tamang (*asyang*) terms both denote not just a single individual, but any and all of the maternal uncles. They are ordered according to seniority; it being necessary in certain ceremonial situations to have an identifiable head.¹⁵ Although, as mentioned above, some sources suggest that *azhang* and *zhangpo* are synonymous, one common pattern I have noticed has the term *zhangpo* (or in the Tamangic languages *syiangbo*) restricted to this senior figure. In Tamang regional variations *asyang* is the more stable term, whereas *syiangbo*, although still limited to adult males, displays greater mobility.¹⁶

Rendering *azhang* as ‘maternal uncle’ is slightly misleading on two counts. Firstly, the crucial part that the *azhang* plays in the wedding clearly illustrates that the adult male siblings on the bride’s side are *azhang prior* to the birth of any progeny; i.e. before there are any nephews or nieces to justify his being described as

¹⁴ On page 42 of the *Gro-tshang sa-cha’i bag-ston gyi cho-ga me-tog tshom-bu* it says; *lo mtho yang rgas-nyams med-pa...* This work will henceforth be referred to as GT.

¹⁵ There are a number of situations (one of which is referred to below) where the absence of an *azhang* requires that one be designated.

¹⁶ For more discussion about Tamang distinctions between these terms see Toffin (1986: 32-3).

‘uncle.’ So whilst few would argue that in a traditional setting the production of an offspring (preferably male) is the principal aim of the marriage, the understanding of what it is to function as an *azhang* is to be found in the process of providing a wife itself, rather than in the alliance’s successful outcome. Secondly, whilst representing the *azhang* as an uncle rightly draws attention to the uncle-nephew relationship, it obscures the other key relationship and role he has; namely as the wife’s brother. In the forthcoming discussion about traditional roles, both of these will be considered.

5. The Debate Surrounding the Origin of the Zhang-term.

In Benedict’s explanation of the aforesaid shift in kinship terminology (1942: 317), the word which originally denoted ‘mothers-brother’ (**k’u*) came to mean ‘fathers-brother’; with the term *zhang* then supposedly occupying the vacant position. As outlined above, to account for the shift, both Benedict and Lévi-Strauss came up with rather speculative theories regarding changes in marriage practice. Nagano (1998: 106-7) was surely correct to question whether Benedict or Lévi-Strauss had sufficient evidence to back their respective theories. However, Benedict’s original assertion of the semantic shift is perhaps also due some scrutiny. He was certainly mistaken to argue (*ibid.*: 317) that the pattern – i.e. with *khu* occupying the position of ‘father’s-brother’ – was one peculiar to Tibetan; as already indicated, throughout the Tamangic languages we find terms for maternal and paternal aunts and uncles which closely resemble those of Tibetan (for lists of kinship terms from the ‘Bodish’ group of languages, see Vinding 1979: 208-20). There are also some doubts regarding other Tibeto-Burman languages. For instance, as non-Tibetan languages, the likes of Lepcha, Mon (Tawang), etc. were not (according to Benedict’s theory) subject to the shift. However, the terms for the maternal uncle in these languages still seem closer to ‘*zhang*’ than to ‘*khu*.’ Of course the crucial question here is that of Tibetan interaction with other cultures in the region, and whether similarities (such as in kinship terminology) derive from Tibetan influence, or from a shared, pre-Tibetan linguistic heritage. Benedict’s rather cursory mention (*ibid.*: 317-8 n.15) of the possibility of Tibetan influence suggests that his consideration of these matters when formulating his theory was far from thorough.

For his part, Nagano does not question the shift. In seeking to account for the ‘introduction’ of the *zhang*-term into the purportedly vacant spot, he speculates that it was derived from the system of marriage alliance in which brides from *Zhang-zhung* were adopted by various Tibetan rulers. Putting the question of the semantic

shift aside, there is, in my opinion, a weightier issue, concerning Nagano's assertion about the source of the zhang-term. Whilst one might find Benedict and Lévi-Strauss's explanations unconvincing, their approach is surely correct; when trying to discover reasons for changes in something as fundamental as kinship terminology, the domain they searched within was that of social and cultural trends within the broader population. Nagano, on the other hand, citing extremely flimsy evidence,¹⁷ attempted to reconstruct the evolution of this most basic aspect of social identity for that population in terms of nuptial trends amongst the ruling elite. It perhaps illustrates that one of the main things which will be required if there is ever to be a credible social (and perhaps also a cultural) history of Tibet is a sense of perspective.

Moreover, although surely not Benedict's intention, the scheme underlying the alleged semantic shift has the zhang-term playing second fiddle to the khu-term. This represents an inversion of the true situation regarding the profiles of these two; it seems always to be the akhu who gives way to the azhang. Thus there are regional variations, both in Tibetan and Tamang terminology, where the zhang-terms are occasionally extended to embrace certain males of the paternal line, but no examples, as far as I am aware, where the reverse is the case. Also, as illustrated below, there are ceremonial situations where the lack of a genuine azhang necessitates the creation of a classificatory one; comparable examples involving the akhu have however, not yet surfaced. One stark fact, underscoring the deep cultural significance of the azhang figure, deserves mention here. Although the term for mother (*a-ma*) might perhaps rival the azhang-zhangpo ones for consistency and distribution, when it comes to distinctively Tibetan names, whether viewed from a regional or historical perspective, I would venture to suggest that it is the azhang-zhangpo terms which are the *most commonly occurring* of all Tibetan kinship terms.

6. The Azhang's Traditional Roles

The generally positive cultural image of the azhang does not seem to be derived from some fuzzy notion of a kindly relative, but largely, as already suggested, from very specific social roles with which the figure is associated. The starting-point for

¹⁷ There would seem to be no precedent for cases where royal marriage patterns have exerted an effect upon kinship terminology. Nagano's evidence in support of his claim that the zhang-term might represent such, amounts to little more than the kinship term and the place-name sharing the syllable 'zhang', and three known examples of marriage alliances between the Tibetan and Zhang-zhung ruling families, at least one of which (*Sad-mar-dkar*) is not a case of a Tibetan ruler taking a Zhang-zhung bride, and therefore hardly seems to strengthen his argument.

understanding these roles is definitely the marriage process. In the last thirty years particularly, a good deal of material has appeared; especially Tibetan language works on regional practices, including recitation scripts for weddings – a genre commonly entitled *mo-la* or *mo-lha* – and anthropological studies with details of weddings, etc.¹⁸ These materials serve as a notable counter to the picture of society presented in much Tibetan literature, where biases towards a religious outlook historically led to chronic underreporting of most aspects of the general population's lives, including life-cycle events, and seem almost to suggest that encounters with tantric deities were more everyday occurrences in Tibet than weddings. Tibetan marriage practices have attracted considerable academic attention, particularly because of their diverse forms; as Aziz (1978: 134) remarks, 'Tibet probably exhibits a greater variety of marriage types than any other society.' This focus upon diversity can create the impression that Tibet has had an anything-goes attitude to marriage, and obscure both underlying patterns and certain organising principles to which there seems to have been a constant attempt to refer. The origin of particular practices cannot be dated. However, some of them, whilst appearing to be integral to the local identities and cultures in which they are found, are also seen to be replicated over a vast geographical area, with such a degree of uniformity that a description of them as recurrent, if not standard practices seems warranted, as does the inference that they are of some antiquity. Of these standard patterns, only those specifically related to the *azhang* can be discussed here. Furthermore, only a portion of the wedding-related literature will be cited, but hopefully sufficient to give some idea of the geographical spread involved.

Unless interpreted within the framework of reciprocity – as outlined by Lévi-Strauss (1969: 52-68) – and the process of interactions between wife-giver and wife-taker groups, the high profile of the *azhang* would seem difficult to account for. However, the remainder of this article does not set out to examine the broader scheme of generalised exchange, nor various cross-generational marriage arrangements operating within such a scheme.¹⁹ Instead it seeks primarily to identify the *azhang*'s part *within* such a system. As already indicated, the Tamang social

¹⁸ Having already completed this article I became aware of the Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Tradition and Modernity: Cultural Continuum and Transition among Tibetans in Amdo*, by Wu Qi (Helsinki 2013). Although neither of us had access to the other's work at the time of writing, there are strong resemblances in our respective treatments of the *azhang* topic. The two works will hopefully be seen as complementary to each other.

¹⁹ Discussion of cross-cousin marriage, moieties and so forth are outside the scope of this article.

structure, unlike that of Tibet, is uniformly and strictly clan-based. Traditional kinship characterisations, roles, and practices seem to be at their most concentrated in such clan-based cultures. So whilst neither the Tamang nor their language are classified as Tibetan, whereas the Nyinba people of Nepal are, both groups have a very similar Tibetanised clan-based social model, and consequently, the profile of the Nyinba's *azhang* (see Levine 1988: 57) is remarkably similar to that of the Tamangs. These kinship characterisations, etc. seem to be at their most diluted form in Central Tibet, where clan-based social structures are the stuff of history. That being said, general understanding of the constituency of the wife-giver and wife-taker groups amongst these peoples does not necessarily vary greatly; factors related to social and economic class, as well as geographical location may be considerations in the choice of partners, but essentially each group is defined by consanguinity, and it tends to be immediate (rather than distant) relatives who are the active participants in the processes.

The names denoting the groups are unlikely to make explicit reference to 'wives,' or 'givers' and 'takers'; apart from the inclusion of *azhang*-related vocabulary (discussed in the next section), the terminology which manifests most regularly in the descriptions of these groups is that associated with the concept of the 'household' (Tib: *tshang*, Tam: *dim*). As illustrated by the prominence afforded to the *azhang*, the principle underlying the transfer of the bride/wife from one group to the other is that this transfer makes the takers beholden to the givers. This suggests that these cultures attribute considerable value to the bride; something supported by the fact that although symbolic gift exchanges take place, they seem heavily weighted in favour of the wife-givers.²⁰ Understood in terms of this model, three essential roles of the *azhang* (*asyang*) may be identified:

6.1 The *Azhang* as the Primary Figure of Honour

In both the Tibetan and Tamang marriage processes, representatives of suitors make their petitions – with negotiations conducted principally through the medium of *chang* (beer) offerings²¹ – to the potential bride's parents, and it is principally they

²⁰ Regarding the interpretation of these transfers; the cultural value of the bride certainly does not necessarily translate into high social status. Furthermore, as Gelek and Miao (2002: 85) demonstrate, there are sometimes reciprocal 'payments' between the two groups. It seems questionable whether the language of 'dowry' and 'bridewealth' (at least if these are understood purely in terms of economic transfer) is appropriate in description of these exchanges.

²¹ The Tamang word for beer is *ci*. During the many stages of the wedding negotiation the various offerings of beer are given different names. In a number of these the term *ci* is replaced by *chang*.

who must accept or reject the offers (although in some communities it is actually the approval of the *azhang* – i.e. the potential bride’s brother – which is required). It is generally at the point of acceptance that the *azhang* steps to the fore. Indeed it may be more accurate to say that the *azhang* comes into existence with this wedding agreement, as it is only when one group is defined as the potential provider of the wife that use of the *azhang*-designation seems to begin. The emergence of the *azhang*-identity usually expresses itself in a shift of terminology employed for both the residency and the group from which the wife derives. Hence amongst the Tamangs, although the wife’s natal home may still belong to her parents, it is now referred to as the ‘*asyang*’s home’ (*asyang la dim*). Similar designations, particularly *a-zhang-tshang*, are found in descriptions of weddings in many Tibetan communities (e.g. GT: 23). The main practice is that of patrilocality. With the respective groups of wife-givers and takers now clearly delineated, those chaperoning the bride are invariably described as the *azhang*’s group.²² During the chaperoning, the interlocutor for the wife-givers is the *azhang*. The rather elaborate process described in the GT is a common one, and includes gift-exchanges, games, and verbal sparring. The GT states that the group may select an *azhang* (i.e. a male relation) to serve as their representative through these stages. However, at the wedding ceremony itself it seems that there should be a ‘chief’ *azhang*, towards whom symbolic offerings of *chang*, etc. can be directed; the bride’s parents seem effectively to be sidelined.

It is with the arrival of the bride at the new home during the wedding process that the *azhang* (or *asyang*) seems to become a real focus of attention. Kinship identities and terminology feature prominently in both Tibetan and Tamang weddings. These are expressed in: a.) addresses, b.) seating arrangements, and c.) the order and portions of offerings. Generally, *azhang* is by far the most commonly appearing kinship term in descriptions of the wedding, and the pre-eminence of the *azhang/asyang* is discernible in all three aforementioned areas. Praises for various participants at the wedding (usually referred to as kinship figures, rather than named individuals) are lavish, but the most elaborate (in the form of addresses and

²² In the GT, the wife-giving party is always referred to as *azhang*, or some variation of this, such as (p.22) *a-zhang 'khor dang bcas-pa* (‘the *azhang* and his attendants’). Other texts talk of the *a-zhang tshan* (‘the *azhang*’s party’). In the Tibetan situation, although these groups are defined in terms of the *azhang*, they are certainly not composed exclusively of the bride’s brothers. Terms for the wife-takers seem less standardised; in the GT they are usually just referred to as *gnyen-tshang*; which in this context can be translated as the ‘affine-household.’ More generally, the terms *pha-khu* and *pha a-khu* are often used to describe at least the adult male group amongst the paternal relatives.

recitations) are usually reserved for the azhang. In the GT (p.53), the first toast is offered, by the groom (*mag-pa*) to the azhang. Amongst the numerous complimentary expressions directed towards the azhang in this text we find (p. 17) *a-zhang rin-po-che* ('precious azhang'). In the context of the marriage, the Tamang version of this (*asyang rimborche*) is also commonly heard. Aside from a small number of revered secular institutions to which it is sometimes directed, the term *rin-po-che* is seen as belonging almost solely to the religious domain; to such an extent that its application to a kinship figure might strike some as verging on the sacrilegious.

Pride of place in the seating arrangements is offered to the azhang/asyang. In the Tibetan marriage, kinship groups and other guests are ordered in rows or lines (*gral*), to which a variety of names are assigned. The status of the azhangs as chief guests is demonstrated in their preferential positioning; with them either forming their own row (*zhang-gral*) or occupying the head of the foremost row.²³ The GT describes how, at various stages (e.g. p.29) in the proceedings, with some fanfare and accompanied by recitations, elaborate cushioned seats are constructed for the main azhang.

The custom in Tamang and many Tibetan weddings is to distribute offerings to the wedding guests, which are prescribed in content and amount, to reflect such things as the recipient's kinship status and perceived importance. Enscathed at the head of the line, the azhang/asyang is invariably the first recipient. As the interlocutor for the wife-givers, the chief azhang may, as part of a ritualised exchange (e.g. GT: 33) express his dissatisfaction with the offerings.²⁴ Another perspective on this culture of honouring the azhang (and perhaps also an indication that the dissatisfaction may not always have been entirely feigned) is found in a study from another settlement in Amdo²⁵ (Tshe dpal rdo rje, Rin chen rdo rje, Roche, Stuart 2002: 59), where we hear of *khong*, a term used exclusively for the anger of the azhang. This is probably the only Tibetan example recorded to-date of a term denoting a feeling or emotion restricted to a single kinship figure or group.

The honouring of the asyang is every bit as clear in the Tamang tradition; even after the wedding the husband must visit the natal home at least annually, to make offering to the eldest asyang. The fact that the azhang/asyang serves not only as the

²³ For example the principle azhang in the GT (p.52) is described as seated at the 'head of the right-hand row' (*g.yas-gral gral gyi gral-mgo*).

²⁴ After a brief performance, in which the offerings are gradually increased, he is eventually assuaged.

²⁵ *Brag dmar-nang*, *Mtsho-lho* Prefecture, *Mtsho-sngon* (Qinghai) Province.

voice of the wife-givers, but also the main figure of honour during the wedding would clearly seem to indicate that it is he who takes credit for providing the bride. This effective marginalisation of the bride's parents in favour of her brother is one that seems to have some correspondences with practices in other cultures where avunculate patterns have been observed (see Lévi-Strauss 1969: 305-6).

6.2 The Azhang as the Principal Officiator and Legitimiser

Tibetan and Tamang weddings are not religious affairs, conducted by priests or other religious figures. The closest to someone officiating – although more correctly understood as someone whose chief task is to recite (generally from memory) verses or songs appropriate to the occasion – are the marriage specialists whose attendance at weddings in many regions is essential. Amongst the Eastern Tamang, these specialists are known as *tamba*. Tibetan names show regional variation, although the names *mo-dpon* (i.e. 'the one who recites the *mola*') and *gnyan-chen* are found in many places. This specialist is often someone from the community who shares no kinship ties with either bride or groom. However, the occasional crossing of roles with the azhang indicates some relationship between the two figures. In some parts of *dBus-gtsang* this individual is apparently known as the *zhang-zhang*. In Lhasa, the specialist is known as the *zhang-chen* (Blo bzang 'jam dpal 2002: 7).²⁶ The azhang seems to be the only kinship figure whose name is incorporated into the titles of these specialists. In those regions where specialists are not involved (such as *Grotshang*, as described in the GT), it is actual kinship representatives who perform the recitations. Of these, unsurprisingly, it is the azhang who enjoys the lion's share. During the wedding proceedings, the two groups occasionally seem to represent themselves as oppositions, and during the course of the performance certain actions of one side are seen to be mirrored or reciprocated in those of the other.²⁷ This aspect should however not be exaggerated; there is no figure on the groom's side to rival the azhang, and rather than ritualised expressions of balanced exchange, things are heavily biased in his favour. As the azhang (whether in his true or classified

²⁶ In this description, the representative from the groom's side, who performs the recitations, is known as the *khri-chen*. The *zhang-chen* is his counterpart from the bride's side. In addition to performing recitations he also serves as the chaperon and interlocutor for the bride. The text also says that in the absence of a true azhang, someone can be selected to occupy the role.

²⁷ In the GT (p.49) for example, the azhang's aforementioned initial dissatisfaction shown with the offerings and consequent reluctance to accept the union is mirrored by the initial dissatisfaction with his offerings shown by the females of the potential affines (*ma-sru*), and their reluctance to allow the bride access to the hearth.

form) seems, overall, to be the figure most frequently involved in the wedding recitations, he is present not simply to serve as the passive recipient of tribute for providing the bride; it is the *office* and active participation of the azhang which would seem to be essential to legitimise proceedings.

Perhaps more significant are customs following the wedding. Certain rites of passage, particularly coming-of-age ceremonies, are practiced both by Tamangs and many Tibetan communities, especially in Amdo.²⁸ Amongst the Eastern Tamang, a boy's coming-of-age ceremony is called the *chewa-laba*; I observed these being carried out when boys reached nine years of age. March (1983: 732) refers to those performed by the Western Tamang. The one who officiates at the Tamang ceremony – does the hair-cutting, recitations, and dresses the boy in a new set of clothes – is the asyang. A related ceremony, known as a 'hair-changing ritual' (*skra-ston*), performed for a girl in the Amdo village of *Brag dmar-nang*, is described in the aforementioned study by Tshe dpal rdo rje, *et al.* (2002). The general structure and roles are quite similar to the wedding ceremony. Hence the term azhang is used collectively for the maternal relatives, who select one of the girl's uncles as the primary figure (the *a-zhang zhang-bo*).²⁹ Whilst none of the azhang actually performs the hair-changing, they seem to dominate the ceremony; they are the first invited and most important guests, and the gift of the azhang zhangbo is the most valued (*ibid.*: 33). The study is particularly rich in detail relating to the honour shown to the azhang (zhangbo), demonstrated by the preferential seating arrangements, offerings, and praises, similar to those referred to earlier in the wedding setting.³⁰ Indeed it gives the impression that the ceremony is just as much about showing respect to the azhang as it is about marking a significant change in the life of the young girl.

Within the clan context of the Tamang, the involvement of the asyang in the ceremony is particularly noteworthy. He is, of course, the primary figure amongst the maternal relatives, so any role in legitimisation he might have with regard to his sister's wedding is perfectly understandable; not only are they siblings, but they belong to the same clan, and the wedding ceremony could be expected to

²⁸ As a more general Tibetan phenomenon, such ceremonies are both underreported and under-researched.

²⁹ *'grul-ba*, the term used to designate the paternal relatives (meaning simply 'guest' or even 'traveller') seems to epitomise the deference shown towards the azhang.

³⁰ The text also contains many interesting items of vocabulary, where the zhang-term is attached to various objects; animals, such as the *zhang-rta* ('azhang-horse'), and *zhang-lva* ('azhang-robe').

symbolically acknowledge the release of the bride from the care of her own clan to that of the wife-takers. However, the patrilineality (agnatic kinship) of the culture means that any children she produces are born into the wife-takers clan. The role played by the asyang in the coming-of-age ceremony (and echoed in the Amdo hair-changing ritual) would seem to suggest that it is he who also has the authority to release the offspring into maturity and eventual marriage, despite the fact that he and that offspring do not belong to the same social grouping (clan / wife-giving unit). In the case of the Tamang coming-of-age ceremony, this authority is partly articulated through the medium of new clothing, which he presents and dresses the boy in. Interestingly, in the GT (pp. 39-46), it is the selected azhang who, during the wedding, presents the groom with, and then dresses him in a new set of clothes (*mag-lva*) and a belt (*mag-bcug*). Bremmer's (1976: 69) citing of the Serbian weddings, where the bride's brother presents the first belt seems almost to hint at an international avunculate language. Whatever the case, it is evident that no other individual – be it other kinship figures (including the bride's parents, or in-laws), religious figures, or marriage specialist – appears to be invested with the power to legitimise rites of passage like the azhang.

6.3 The Azhang's Duty of Care

In the previous two roles the primacy of the azhang was expressed within ceremonial contexts, and relied heavily upon symbolic interactions. It is however in a third aspect; his traditional role of caring for and nurturing his sister and her offspring that it is perhaps easiest to understand why the popular image of the azhang/asyang is overwhelmingly a positive one. The unusually close bond between the sister and brother in a number of cultures on the borders of Tibet (both those of ethnically Tibetan groups, as well as those of other Tibeto-Burman language-speaking peoples) is one that is both celebrated in popular culture, and has been remarked upon by ethnographers and anthropologists. Hence of the Tamangs, March (1983: 731) says; 'the most crucial relation a woman must maintain is that with her brother(s)...' There is a sense in which this bond is seen to intensify after her marriage; regular visits and contacts between the two continue, and more than any other maternal relation, it is the brother (asyang) who is at very least seen to put in

regular appearances at the bride's new home, the one she confides in, and perhaps on occasions, *may* be called upon to intervene on her behalf.³¹

The previous section set out the azhang/asyang's ceremonial duties with respect to his sister's offspring. However, relations are not simply of this formal variety. The expectation is certainly that the azhang/asyang will cultivate a close, affectionate relationship with the children. Balikci (2008: 98 n.14) reports that amongst the ethnically Tibetan Lhopo people of Sikkim it is the nieces to whom the azhang has a special duty of care, whereas Levine (1988: 57) says that for the Nyinba it is both nieces and nephews. For the Tamang the pattern is of the predictable form, in which the focus of the asyang's affection is the nephew. The picture which emerges from this is of a common cultural model, according to which the azhang assumes the role of a guardian, both for his sister and her children. This role, and the affectionate bond associated with it characterises, or can be said to epitomise the avunculate pattern. Only in the suggestion that the bond and duty may extend to the azhang's niece(s) do we find evidence of variation from the earlier dictionary definition.³² The example of an imperial-era inscription cited by Stein (1972: 108) also seems to fit with the pattern.³³ In clan-based cultures such as those of the Tamang and Nyinba, where notions of distinct social groups are more robust, this is again striking, in that it involves the asyang/azhang crossing the clan divide; i.e. moving from the domain of the wife-givers to that of the wife-takers.

As far as the sister goes, the practical logic behind the shift in responsibility from the parents to the azhang in this third role would seem to be more obvious. As the bride's peer, he would be expected to survive her parents, and represent a more stable figure in her future. As a younger male, he might also be expected to mount a sturdier defence of her rights in the case of dispute.

It is also worth commenting that in all three of the roles noted for the azhang/asyang, he stands alone; no other kinship figure (e.g. from the paternal side) performs reciprocal duties that correspond to, or truly complement his own.

³¹ I would not want to exaggerate the intervention dimension here; in cases that I witnessed, visits seemed to be observed as a custom, although the shows of affection on such occasions seemed very genuine.

³² Although examples provided by Lévi-Strauss (1969: 305) suggest that this is not an uncommon feature of the avunculate.

³³ The historical context for this will be discussed below.

7. Symbolic Expressions of Primacy and Boundary-crossing

The lavish praises, referred to above, which are heaped upon the azhang during weddings and other occasions regularly spill over into a form of idealisation. Indeed the level of the hyperbole employed means that is difficult at times to determine whether azhang-figures named in some Tibetan and Tamang wedding-related texts represent actual participants, or are archetypal figures; central characters in some perhaps undocumented narrative.³⁴ Another manifestation however, leaves far less room for doubt: the most conspicuous example of icon-isation of the azhang is his literal deification in the figure of the *zhang-lha* ('zhang-deity'). Both Buddhist and Bon traditions have attempted to incorporate the *zhang-lha* into their respective literature (if not their pantheons), especially through its classification either as one of the '*go-ba'i lha* or *lhan-cig skyes-pa'i lha*.³⁵ There is agreement that each grouping consists of five deities, but not necessarily about the identity of their constituents.³⁶ Comparing the various versions, six deities seem to appear most often on the list of the '*go-ba'i lha*; the *pho-lha*, *mo-lha* (or *ma-lha*), *zhang-lha*, *dgra-lha*, *srog-lha* and *yul-lha*. Rendered literally, these are the deities associated with the 'male,' 'female,' 'maternal-uncle,' 'enemy,' 'life-force,' and 'region' or 'local area.' The possibility of glossing these to make them more compatible with religious schemes is somewhat limited by the rather transparent character of their names. It is noted however that many in the Bon tradition advocate the spelling *sgra-lha* (rendered literally as 'sound-deity') in place of *dgra-lha*.³⁷ Pursuing this alternative etymology they come up with a far more pacific understanding of the deity. It cannot however pass without comment that texts by both Buddhist and Bon writers contain exhortations to the deity such as 'supply martial reinforcement and subjugate my enemies!'³⁸

³⁴ Amongst a group of Tamang texts reproduced by Parshu Ram Tamang (2000), entitled *Tamba Kaiten*, are some tamba wedding recitations. I originally understood a figure referred to as *asyang samṭi* to be just such an archetypal character, but have since concluded that more careful consideration of the matter is required.

³⁵ In accordance with the common understanding of their function, the two terms, respectively suggest deities who protect, and are born simultaneous with the individual, although the appropriateness of describing them as 'personal deities' is one that I discuss in a section of my thesis.

³⁶ Perhaps the most frequently cited source for these listings is the *Bstan-srung dam-can rgya-mtsho 'i mtshan-tho* by Klong-rdol bla-ma ngag-dbang blo-bzang (1719-1794). According to this classification (1991: 492) the *zhang-lha* appears in both groups, although the author acknowledges that there are conflicting enumerations.

³⁷ It is generally understood to be the 'enemy' deity in the sense that it is the deity which helps the individual overcome his enemies; i.e. a deity of warrior aspect.

³⁸ *dmag-dpung bkye la dgra-dpung thul*: (2007: 738) folio 3b of *Lha lnga'i gsol-mchod bsod-nams dpal-skyed* of the 5th Dalai Lama (Ngag-dbang blo-bzang rgya-mtsho).

Despite these different interpretations, the identity of the *zhang-lha* seems to be uncontested. The deities are presented as a unitary grouping, but within this grouping, distinct identities and schemes are detectable.³⁹ Although this is not the place to explore these in great detail, some consideration can be given to the logic behind the inclusion of each one. As this group of deities is charged with the task of protecting the individual, the presence of one devoted to his life-force would seem to be self-explanatory, and requires no further comment. The inclusion of the *yul-lha* can be presumed to be an acknowledgement that the welfare of the individual is inextricably linked to his locale. The *pho-lha* can be said to be involved in two distinct schemes; one of these is a scheme with a martial aspect, in which the *pho-lha* is paired with the *dgra-lha*. In the second scheme, the *pho-lha* is linked with the *ma-lha* or *mo-lha* and the *zhang-lha*. Both the general aspect of this scheme and the identities recognised within it are related to the family and kin. Bon and Buddhist texts always attribute certain generic religious aspects to these deities; however, details of their distinctive functions are also provided. Reference to both schemes the *pho-lha* is involved within are made, for instance, in the line; ‘(He) manifests as numerous male relations (of the same descent group) and as fully-armed men.’⁴⁰ Hence the *pho-lha* is associated with the paternal line, and the *mo-lha* with the maternal one. Various other deities and kinship figures connected with those respective lines are subsumed within the two terms, and the *pho-lha* and *mo-lha* are described as protectors of these kinship figures. Occasionally, the *zhang-lha*, along with other deities and kinship figures associated with the maternal line, is subsumed under the umbrella-identity of the *ma-lha*. The appearance of the *zhang-lha* represents another very stark fact that seems hardly yet to have been acknowledged; namely, that despite the apparently irresistible Tibetan cultural urge to deify – resulting in deities associated with all sorts of ‘worldly’ phenomena, such as ‘paths/roads’ (*lam-lha*), ‘the home’ (*khyim-lha*), ‘wealth’ (*nor-lha*), cattle (*phyugs-lha*), and so forth, the *zhang-lha* would appear to represent a unique example; the *only* clear-cut case where a kinship figure (i.e. the *azhang*) is overtly deified.

Each deity is believed to have a ‘seat’ within the body. Karmay (1998: 129), basing his explanation on the *mDzod-phug*, a seminal 11th century text of the Bon

³⁹ No attempt here is made to give a ‘correct’ or ‘definitive’ version of the grouping. Equally, no effort is made to *resolve* apparently conflicting schemes. I am personally inclined to accept such clashes at face value.

⁴⁰ *sprul-pa pha-spin mang-po dang 'khor-gsum btags-pa'i skyes-pa'i cha-byad-can du ston-pa*; p.737 (2007: 737) folio 3a of *Lha lnga'i gsol-mchod bsod-nams dpal-skyed*.

tradition, has the *pho-lha* at the right shoulder, the *ma-lha* at the left shoulder, and the *zhang-lha* at the back of the head.⁴¹ In many versions it is the crown of the head (*spyi-gtsug*) which serves as seat for the *zhang-lha*.⁴² A deification scheme which not only recognises the azhang, but apparently regularly gives him pride of place would seem to be an eloquent testament to the Tibetan version of the avunculate, paralleling, as it does, practices during various rites of passage. Furthermore the triad, formed by male and female deities at the shoulders, with the *zhang-lha* placed above, equidistant between them, strongly suggests some reference to the marriage scheme, which again, paralleling popular customs, has the azhang (*zhang-lha*) enjoyed a privileged position, due to being the one expected to bridge and/or cross the boundaries between the male and female lines within the union.

Materials emanating from Buddhist or Bon sources do provide useful details about the aforesaid deities and schemes; as historical records, they also verify the longevity and continuity of beliefs and practices associated with them. The fact that most references to these deities are found in texts generally classified as Bon or Buddhist demonstrates that they have been integrated into these traditions. But in no way do such references constitute ownership or a prior claim to the deities, let alone indications of their origin. The scanty narratives religious texts supply which seek to account for the presence of the various deities in these schemes are rather unconvincing, and fail to dispel the sense of a degree of randomness of choice.⁴³ Far more credible accounts of these deities may be seen to emerge from popular understandings – often dismissed as ‘folk’ by those who subscribe to the established visions of Tibetan religion – particularly from cultures where traditional clan and kinship-based social systems are still strong. For instance, in regard to the common understanding of the *zhang-lha* amongst the Lhopo of Sikkim, Balikci (2008: 98) says; ‘For the women of the lineage, he is their *shang lha* (*zhang lha*), who follows them as a protective *pho lha* from the house of their *ashang* (a *zhang*–mother’s brother) to the house of their husband.’ According to this, the *zhang-lha* is apparently the male guardian deity (*pho-lha*) of the wife’s descent group. When the bride transfers from the wife-giver to the wife-taker group – symbolised by crossing the threshold of her new home (provided by the husband’s descent group) – the deity

⁴¹ Areas in the head, the shoulders, and the armpits are the three most common locations.

⁴² See also note 51.

⁴³ The Bon tradition has perhaps a very slight advantage here, in that its origin myth (see Karmay 1998: 126-31) provides some sort of narrative framework in which discussion of kinship relations seems more at home.

adopts a new identity; that of the *zhang-lha*. The implication here is that the *zhang-lha*, like the bride, takes up occupancy in the patrilocal residence. There is also the suggestion that he takes on a guardianship role with respect to the bride, paralleling the relationship between the actual asyang and his sister. However, in addition to the actual personage of the asyang, many Tamangs also talk of the *zhang-lha*, and here we come across an unambiguous symbolic representation of the *zhang-lha*'s residence. The hearth is the most important location in the Tamang home (see Tautscher 2007: 41); aside from its functional purposes, it is venerated as the seat of the male clan-deity and the ancestors, and access to it is restricted. As in a number of cultures bordering Tibet, the traditional fire is set upon three hearth-stones. According to one popular account, these stones represent three deities; the *pho-lha*, *dgra-lha*, and the *zhang-lha*. This triad almost echoes the one found amongst the five 'go-ba'i lha, except in this version the *ma-lha* is replaced by the *dgra-lha*.⁴⁴ The most significant aspect of this seems to be that the *zhang-lha* not only crosses the clan-divide, acting as a form of intermediary, but is also invited into and given a permanent, honorary place, amongst the male deities of the wife-takers, the symbolic heart of the social group. The hearthstones might therefore be seen as representing the symbolic pillars of the social structure and marriage system amongst the Tamangs, and one that obviously still has strong resonances in Tibetan culture.

8. Historical Echoes

Although, as remarked earlier, Tibetan literature prior to the modern period was biased against the reporting of what might be termed 'secular' culture (including the type of social practices in which the asyang would be expected to feature), there are still obvious examples which seem to support the idea of the Tibetan avunculate. Perhaps the most pertinent case is that of the *zhang-blon* (or *zhang-lon*); the important rank of minister during the imperial period, mentioned at the beginning of this article. Summing up current understanding of the derivation of the title, Dotson (2004: 75) says; 'the appellative *zan* was lent to an aristocratic clan when one of its ladies gave birth to a Tibetan sovereign (or upon his subsequent accession to the

⁴⁴ Reference to the traditional hearth and three stones representing deities, or the seats of deities is found in the biography of Milarepa by Gtsang-smyon he-ru-ka (*Mi-la-ras-pa'i rnam-mgur*: 1999: 405). There, the *zhang-lha* is replaced by the *yul-lha* (regional deity). The 'intrusion' of the *yul-lha* upon the kinship-based and martial-based schemes compels us to recognise the presence of regional identity upon the cultural landscape. But it also raises the question of whether the shifting identities of deities within these schemes may reflect historical shifts in notions of social identity.

throne).⁷ Hence it is generally agreed that the title was granted on the basis of the recipient's belonged to the clan which provided the bride (and ideally also a son and heir) for the ruling line. Patently, the projection of the zhang-title here into dynastic and administrative structures is built on a system of exchange, centred upon marriage, which seems to have exhibited the following features:

1. There was a division between wife-giver and wife-taker groups.
2. Each group was a corporate, clan-entity (*rus*); the consanguinity of its members expressed through the notion of them sharing the same 'bone' (i.e. *rus*).⁴⁵
3. Givers were entitled to honour by the takers for their providing a wife and (ultimately) an heir.
4. A special status for the wife-givers was afforded on a temporary basis.
5. The honouring was expressed through the medium and figure of the (*a-*) *zhang*.

In Tibetan historical terms, this would seem to represent an isolated example; elsewhere, aside from the conventional patterns based upon patrilineal succession, imperial institutions and specific kinship-figures do not seem to be intertwined in this fashion. Even though separated by many centuries, aside from a significant variation in one respect,⁴⁶ these same features could be said to characterise the avunculate-centred marriage system practiced by the Tamang clans (*rui*). At the very least, it would seem safe to assume that the cultural model the two systems drew from was the same. The centre-periphery model undoubtedly makes sense in helping to understand the diffusion of many aspects of Tibetan culture. As we have also already seen, the temptation for some has been to try to use dynastic history as a prism for understanding broader social evolution. Thus no doubt there are those who would think it logical to explain the similarities between the two systems by asserting that this avunculate model emanated from the dynastic centre, and eventually found its way into periphery societies. However, more probably what this

⁴⁵ The same concept of sharing the bone-substance is evoked in descriptions of the dynastic lineage, although it seems likely that the criteria for membership of the royal corporate group might have been more restrictive than with other groups.

⁴⁶ In regard to the fourth feature, Dotson (*ibid.*: 75) says that the honorary title was retained for four or more generations beyond the birth of the son. In Tamang culture, the arrangement lasts only for the lifetimes of those involved.

case illustrates is that the early Tibetan rulers and state institutions were not simply innovators, but also consumers and modifiers of social structures and traditions.

As an administrative figure, the zhang-blon may not have survived much beyond the imperial system of which he formed an essential component. However, references to him in popular culture, especially in the nuptial sphere were more enduring. These partly fed into the characterisations of some protector deities, such as Zhang-blon rdo-rje legs-pa. The figure of the zhang-blon does not appear to be derived from Buddhist literature emanating from outside Tibet; it would seem that indigenous concepts served as the inspiration for those who choose to represent a protector as a zhang-minister. The zhang-blon figure certainly implies the existence of another force (i.e. a ruler) to whom he answers. Religious texts devoted to Zhang-blon rdo-rje legs-pa definitely represent him as a figure that is emanated (*sprul-ba*) out, to work on behalf of an enlightened being.⁴⁷ Hence the relation between the ruler and his minister, originating in the imperial period, perhaps re-emerges here in a religious guise: in this idealised model the ruler is depicted as the still source of power, and the zhang-blon as the mobile, dynamic figure, responsible for the projection of this power. However, it seems equally likely that in choosing the zhang-blon to personify a figure that performs an active and intercessional role, some reference to the traditional hands-on image of the azhang is made.

Although these interpretations might appear to be conjectural, confirmation not only of the association between the zhang-blon protector and the actual azhang, but also suggestion that in popular culture, the link between the various figures bearing the zhang-name was never lost can be seen in the rare example of a historical text dealing with wedding ceremonies. In a work attributed to the eminent Buddhist writer Karma chags-med (1613-1678),⁴⁸ all four figures – namely, the historical rank of minister, the Buddhist protector, the *zhang-lha*, and the azhang – might be said to be symbolically ‘reunited’ (if not consciously conflated), in the section where it says: ‘The *bzhang-lha* derives from the mother’s relations (i.e. affines). He arrives in the form of a *zhang-blon bra-ma*.’⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See for example the *Zhang-blon gyi 'phrin-bcol* (1998: 863) by Shar-gdong blo-bzang bshad-sgrub rgya-mtsho.

⁴⁸ Folio 2b in the *Bag-ma lha-'dogs dang ming-sring dpal-dgos*. I am indebted to Berthe Jansen, who provided a copy of this text.

⁴⁹ *bzhang-lha gnyin-po ma las byam / zhang-blon bra-ma'i tshul du byon*. The text contains numerous orthographical inconsistencies, involving both outright errors and non-standard spellings. The obscure term *bra-ma*, which is attached to a number of the deities mentioned in the relevant section, remains unidentified.

In the early chapters of Gtsang-smyon he-ru-ka's biography of Milarepa, the traditional role of the azhang seems to be vividly portrayed. Putting aside the question of whether the good uncle / bad uncle performance (between the azhang and akhu) exhibited during the recounting of the inheritance dispute has any relation to popular characterisations discussed at the beginning of this article, the author certainly feels no need to provide motives (or in any other way justify) the great lengths that the azhang goes to in order to assist Milarepa and his mother (presumably because the audience would be so familiar with the roles). In working on their behalf, we hear how the azhang (or zhang-po) serves as champion for the two, as well as their intermediary, witness, confidant, and eventually their temporary saviour (from destitution). The literal role of *defending* their rights is also described, as we hear (p.26) that: '...because the akhu had many sons the azhang was unable to take him on (i.e. fight him).'⁵⁰

Notwithstanding the aforementioned shortcomings of historical Tibetan literature vis-à-vis the documenting of Tibetan socio-cultural history, I have no doubt that literary sources could yield a great deal more in support of my thesis regarding the azhang's profile and traditional roles. Equally, I suspect that a considerable amount of information could be gleaned from as yet undocumented details of kinship terminology, local customs, sayings, etc. The lively interactions that are often sparked by introducing the topic of the azhang into the conversation with Tibetans leave me with the impression that there is a certain appreciation of him as a figure of considerable cultural significance.⁵¹ This has however, not yet translated into academic writings on the subject.

9. Conclusion

Observations of popular kinship characterisations in Tibetan communities may have sown the seeds for this article, but it was contact with Tamang culture, in which clan

⁵⁰ *a-zhang gis ni a-khu la bu mang-po yod-pas rgol ma-nus.*

⁵¹ After my presentation at the Kobe conference a number of Tibetans approached me, with relevant information. I cite here one example, in the form of a proverb from Amdo. This was supplied by Tri Yungdrung, and I am indebted to him both for bringing it to my attention, and providing cogent explanation of it. The proverb is; *zhang-lha klad-pa'i gtsug*, which can be translated as; 'The *zhang-lha* is (at) the crown of one's head'. This refers back to the idea that the *zhang-lha* occupies the most prestigious place. Tri Yungdrung was at pains to point out the direct link here between the *zhang-lha* and the azhang, asserting that the real point of the proverb was to communicate the high esteem in which the azhang is held; accordingly, he proposed an etymological link between the term *lha* (deity) in the proverb, and the honorific-affix *lags*.

and kinship-based structures and notions of identity find a fuller expression, which helped solidify these observations, and led me to the conclusion that the azhang occupied a unique position. Whilst it does not seem possible to account for the significance and positive image of the azhang outside of a seemingly ancient system of marriage exchange, this article has steered clear of the type of broader speculation about marriage patterns in early Tibetan society which scholars have previously engaged in. The focus, instead, has been upon the azhang's place within the marriage system. His cultural significance has been explained in terms of the avunculate pattern, a concept which, in Tibetological circles, seems never to have been seriously embraced or explored. Key traditional roles performed by the azhang within the marriage system, in which the wife-givers are honoured by the wife-takers, have here been identified.

I have argued that in this cultural model, in its more precise sense, the azhang term is reserved specifically for the brother(s) of the bride (or someone selected to take his/their place), and that the marriage agreement signals the point that the azhang steps to the fore (something generally accompanied by the commensurate shrinking into the background of the parents), to become the primary identity/figure who the wife-takers interact with, and the one who takes credit for providing the bride. In addition to the azhang's serving as a figure of veneration, two apparently traditional and widespread roles that he has had with respect to his sister and her offspring have also been identified here – namely, exercising guardianship over them, and acting as the principal authority legitimising certain rites of passage. All three roles demonstrate what seems to have been the unique function of this kinship figure in crossing the divide between the wife-giver and taker social groups, presumably thereby facilitating smooth relations between them.

This topic is one which has continued social relevance, but is also crucial to understanding aspects of early Tibetan culture. Studying the innovations of empire and state are obviously important in attempts to understand the development of early Tibetan society. However, innovation presupposes pre-existing tradition, which, in a pre-state setting, means the traditions of 'ordinary' people (i.e. not the ruling classes). Perhaps a 'kinship not kingship!' sloganeering campaign is not necessary, but I would certainly hope for a greater willingness to conceive of early Tibetan society outside the realm of dynastic history. Equally, when seeking to explain the evolution of Tibetan culture, we have surely moved beyond the stage of believing that what lies outside the realm of the court and politics must belong to the realm of

religion, and that all such material can be divvied up between Buddhism and Bon. The topic of this article belongs to none of the aforesaid domains, but that in no way diminishes its importance with regard to explaining the origins of Tibetan culture and identity. If it does not fit neatly into the pre-existing categories, then this surely just exposes the inadequacy of those categories.

Finally, despite his being underrepresented in mainstream literature and historical accounts of Tibet, the prevalence of his name, his deification, and his apparent indispensability to various life-cycle events all suggest that the azhang represents the most durable and iconic of Tibetan kinship figures. His status seems to derive in a large part from his having acted as the linchpin of a social structure and marriage system with apparently ancient origins, which on the borders of Tibet at least may still survive. All of these would seem to be good reasons for further academic interest in the azhang.

Bibliography

[TIBETAN LANGUAGE WORKS]

Blo-bzang 'jam-dpal (compiler)

2002 *dBus-gtsang khul gyi bag-ston goms-srol*. Lhasa: Bod-ljongs mi-dmangs dpe-skrun-khang.

Karma chags-med

(?) *Lha-'dogs dang ming-sring dpal-dgos dang lha-'phes*. Dharamsala: Handwritten copy; Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Klong-rdol bla-ma ngag-dbang blo-bzang

1991 *Bstan-srung dam-can rgya-mtsho'i mtshan-tho, Klong-rdol bla-ma ngag-dbang blo-bzang-gi gsung-'bum* (Volume 2), *Gangs-can rig-mdzod* (21). Lhasa: Bod-ljongs bod-yig dpe-rnying dpe-skrung-khang.

Ngag-dbang blo-bzang rgya-mtsho (5th Dalai Lama)

2007 *Lha lnga'i gsol-mchod bsod-nams dpal-skyed; Thams-cad mkhyen-pa lnga-pa chen-po'i gsung-'bum* (volume *da*), Dharamsala: 733-42.

Rus-pa'i rgyan-can (Gtsang-smyon he-ru-ka)

1999 *Rnal-'byor gyi dbang-phyug mi-la-ras-pa'i rnam-mgur*. Xining: mTsho-sngon mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang.

Shar-gdong blo-bzang bshad-sgrub rgya-mtsho

1998 *Rje shar-gdong blo-bzang bshad-sgrub rgya-mtsho'i gsung-'bum* (vol.2). Xining: Mtsho-sngon mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang.

(Sngon-byon rgya-bod lo-paṅ mkhas-pa)

2000 *Bye-brag rtogs-byed chen-po*. Dharamsala: Bod-gzhung shes-rig dpar-khang.

So-sprang thar rgya-mtsho (compiler)

1994 *Gro-tshang sa-cha'i bag-ston gyi cho-ga me-tog tshom-bu*. Xining: Mtsho-sngon mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang.

Zhang yisun (chief editor)

1993 *Rgya-bod tshig-mdzod chen-mo*. Beijing: Mi-rigs dpe-sprun-khang.

[TAMANG-NEPALI LANGUAGE WORK]

Tamang, Parshu Ram

2000 *Tamba Kaiten (A Recitation of the Tamang Tamba of Nepal)*. Kathmandu: Durga Bahadur Tamang Smriti Pratishṭhan.

[WESTERN LANGUAGE WORKS]

Aziz, Barbara Nimri

1978 *Tibetan Frontier Families: Reflections of Three Generations from D'ing-ri*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press.

Balikci, Anna

2008 *Lamas, Shamans, and Ancestors: village religion in Sikkim*. Leiden: Brill.

Benedict, Paul

1942 Tibetan and Chinese Kinship Terms. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol.6, No.3-4 (Feb.): 313-37.

Bremmer, J.

1976 Avunculate and Fosterage. *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 4.1: 65-78.

Campbell, Ben

1998 The Heavy Loads of Tamang Identity. In D. Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, & J. Whelpton, eds., *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers: 205-35.

Dotson, Brandon

2004 A Note on *Ḍaṅ*: Maternal Relatives Of The Tibetan Royal Line And Marriage Into The Royal Family. *Journal Asiatique* 292.1-2: 75-99.

- Gelek, Lobsang and Miao, Hai
 2002 Marital Payments: The Case of Tibetan Nomads. *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology*; Volume 34, No.4 (summer): 84-95.
- Karmay, Samten G.
 1998 *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude
 1969 *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Levine, Nancy
 1988 *The Dynamics of Polyandry*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- March, Kathryn S.
 1983 Weaving, Writing and Gender. *Man* 18, No.4 (Dec.): 729-44.
- Nagano, Sadako
 1994 A Note On the Tibetan Kinship Terms khu and zhang. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, 17 , no. 2: 103-15.
- Stein, Rolf A.
 1972 *Tibetan Civilization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Tautscher, Gabriele
 2007 *Himalayan Mountain Cults: Sailung Kalingchok Gosainkund; Territorial Rituals and Tamang Histories*. Kathmandu: Vajra Publications.
- Toffin, Gérard
 1986 Unités de parenté, système d'alliance et de prestations chez les Tamang de l'Ouest (Népal) *Anthropos* 81: 21-45.
- Tshe dpal rdo rje, with Rin chen rdo rje, G Roche, and CK Stuart
 2009 A Tibetan Girl's Hair Changing Ritual. *Asian Highlands Perspectives*. Volume 5. Xining: Plateau Publications.
- Turin, Mark
 2001 Call Me Uncle: An Outsider's Experience of Nepali Kinship. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* Vol. 28, No. 2: 277-83.
- Vinding, Michael
 1979 A Preliminary Report on Kinship Terminologies of the Bodish Section of Sino-Tibetan Speaking Peoples. *Kailash* VIII (3-4): 191-225.

[online sources]

Hentschel, Elke

2012 All men become brothers: The use of kinship terms for non-related persons as a sign of respect or disrespect. *Linguistik online* 51, 1/2012 (PDF version: 29/42): http://www.linguistik-online.de/51_12/hentschel.pdf

OTDO (Old Tibetan Documents Online): <http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/>

Oxford Dictionary Online: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>