

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 21
Forms of marriage, residence, and their logic
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- Title slide
 - "Corpse Bride" starts off with a clear explication of the economic and social/political aspects of marriage in (approximately) Victorian society
- Today's readings are examples of how differently cultures may construct marriage
 - shows how this seemingly fundamental institution is actually variable and arbitrary
 - each system makes sense and works in its cultural context
 - and there is nothing absolute or necessary about any one particular concept of marriage, or unnatural or wrong about others
- Nari or Mosuo "walking marriage", "friend marriage", or *sisi*
 - both male and female children remain in their mother's household for entire lives
 - men leave at night for long-term relationships with women in other households
 - but return in the morning to work for their mother's household
 - no ceremony of marriage, no formalized relationship
 - no social recognition of obligations between kin groups
 - no economic exchange between kin groups
 - women control most property
 - men's obligation is to children in their own household
 - that is, children of their sisters
 - not to the children that they have with lovers/wives in other households
 - from the child's point of the view, the important "father figures" in their lives are their uncles (mother's brothers)
 - these uncles are the ones that have authority over them
 - men may have a friendly relationship with their own children, but it is not obligatory
 - children usually know their biological fathers, but their relationship with them is more casual, flexible, friendly, with little or no discipline from the father
 - more like US children's' typical relationships with their uncle(s)
 - why this marriage and residence arrangement makes sense, according to the Mosuo (emic view)
 - larger families are more practical economic units
 - as opposed to couples constantly splitting off and founding their own small households from scratch
 - more hands among which to divide up the work
 - more people helps in scheduling tasks that must be done around the same time, but in different places
 - as is often the case for farmers who have to plant, irrigate, harvest, move animals, etc. at specific times in specific fields or pastures in order to get good results
 - reduces conflict in the family; all the members are working for the same economic unit, headed by their own mother

- as opposed to trying to arrange cooperation between small family units that all have slightly different self-interests
- since in traditional family units, any relationship by birth with one spouse is a relationship to an in-law of the other, the obligations to cooperate with other families are weaker or even conflicting
- allows couples to be formed based on love or preference, not economic decisions
 - thus they can easily split if they are dissatisfied
 - since there is no formal marriage
 - thus no alliances and obligations between kin groups that would be disrupted by a split
 - results in very little fighting
- prevents contact and problems between mothers and daughters-in-law
 - says a Mosuo, Luo Sang Yi
 - actually, between any parents in children-in-law
 - recall from Radcliffe-Brown that in-law relations are structurally prone to be tense
- Tibetan fraternal polyandry
 - multiple brothers marry one wife
 - considered the optimal form
 - oldest brother is dominant authority
 - children consider all the brothers to be their fathers
 - in some areas, all are "father", modified by "elder" and "younger"
 - in other areas, the oldest brother is called "father" and the rest are "father's brothers"
 - monogamy is also common
 - polygyny OK but rare
 - usually when first wife produces no children
 - divorce is easy: a brother can just leave and set up his own household
 - but all the children stay with the wife's household
 - two etic explanations; Goldstein says both are wrong
 - False hypothesis 1: fraternal polyandry is a response to a shortage of women, caused by female infanticide
 - not so, because female infanticide is not a standard practice
 - not so, because there is no documented gender imbalance
 - False hypothesis 2: fraternal polyandry is necessary to produce enough food
 - not so, says Goldstein, because it is not the poorest who do it, but mostly the landowning middle class
 - if fraternal polyandry were necessary for survival, presumably the poorest people, closest to not surviving, would do it most consistently
 - is this a valid objection?
 - the poorest do not emphasize polyandry because they have no landholdings to keep together
 - they work for others, rather than producing their own food
 - so in fact, the poorest people *who have land holdings* DO tend to practice polyandry
 - so Goldstein's objection here seems to be a mistake

- an etic explanation that could be correct
 - fraternal polyandry reduces population growth
 - by leaving some women unmarried
 - various acceptable, self-sustaining roles for them
 - live at home
 - set up own household
 - work as servants
 - become Buddhist nuns
 - about half of these have kids anyway
 - but still much lower birthrate than married women
 - 0.7 vs. 3.3
 - this population effect is not noticed or mentioned by Tibetans
 - that is, it is not an emic explanation
 - it takes an outsider to make this connection, someone who thinks in terms of birth rates, population growth, and ecology
- emic reasons for fraternal polyandry
 - prevents division of father's land and animals among multiple sons
 - so it ensures a higher standard of living for all the brothers
 - wife likes it because more resources and multiple men are supporting her and her children
 - etic spin
 - this way of keeping the inheritance together has the same benefit as does primogeniture, except that all the brothers get to use the inheritance, not just the first born
 - having multiple couples working the inheritance together would be unstable
 - because wives are oriented towards their own children, and will compete for a better share for them
 - they form "competing sets of heirs"
 - [thought question: why are men less likely to compete for themselves and their children in a polyandrous marriage?]
 - for brothers, fraternal polyandry assures a good standard of living
 - access to more land and animals
 - access to inheritance of clothes, jewelry, saddles, etc.
 - each would not get as much land, housing, or goods if he set off on his own
 - less work pressure, since it is spread over several men
 - especially in the past, when aristocrats would demand almost fulltime labor of one man from each household
 - it is hard for a couple to manage both herding animals in distant pastures and tending crops
 - just not enough people to do things at the same time in different places
 - so tradeoff is between personal freedom and material security
- structural problems with the system
 - leaves some women without marriage partners
 - younger brothers are permanently subordinated to older ones, can cause tension
 - sexual jealousy, especially when brothers vary widely in age

- youngest brother may be prepubescent or immature, uninteresting to wife initially
 - by the time the youngest is mature, his wife may seem too old
- today, fraternal polyandry is declining in popularity
 - no longer needed to meet corvée labor demands
 - disparaged by dominant groups from India, China, Nepal
 - more other alternatives for subsistence today, with tourism and government jobs
 - i.e. less pressure to split up inheritance, since some men can just leave
 - i.e. less reason for a younger brother to give up his personal freedom to older brother, since it is more possible for the younger brother to get by on his own
- several of these explanations typify the "culture as system" approach
 - fraternal polyandry resulted from feudal system of labor rights, and is declining now that that system is gone
 - fraternal polyandry loses prestige when powerful outsiders disparage it
 - fraternal polyandry declines as better transportation and globalization increase alternatives for livelihood
 - All of these explain what seem to be fundamental and personal ideas about marriage, sex, families in terms of larger systems in which they are embedded: historical changes in politics, economics, travel and media technology
- several of these explanations typify the "culture as adaptation" approach
 - fraternal polyandry assures material plenty and security
 - fraternal polyandry keeps landholdings intact
 - fraternal polyandry assures sufficient labor for a diversity of tasks located in distant places, like herding, farming, and trading
 - fraternal polyandry keeps the population from outgrowing its resource base
 - Again, explaining intimate aspects of beliefs about personal life in terms of how they function to solve problems posed by economics and ecology