

THE WOMEN OF TEBAS
FEMININE PERSPECTIVES IN GURUNG CULTURE

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A Description of Tebas Village

Walking thirty miles up from Pokhara, one reaches Tebas. It is a cluster of houses clinging high on a mountainside. Looking out from Tebas, one sees the pattern of terraced fields running down to the river. The gorge is steep. Sometimes there is only the sharp drop of the land, and a chasm with water rushing below. A road of hard slate steps twists up the mountain. On either side and above the village there are woods. As one goes higher, these thicken and darken to become a rain forest that spreads over the top of the mountain on which Tebas rests.

Across the gorge is a mirror-like image. Chimroe, another village, lies at this same height as Tebas on a similar mountain. There are more terraces and trees, another winding road down from the village. The sun rises behind Tebas and sets behind Chimroe.

Living in Tebas one lives with the elements. When the winter days are short and cold, and the earth dry and fallow, work is light. A few winter crops, wheat and barley, are cared for. Wood is laid-up for the summer months when work is heavier. Baskets are made; cloth is woven. Family, animals, and house are maintained.

Winter is the dry season. The landscape is brown, yellow, and pale green. The river is small and can be forded in many places. People work in their courtyards and absorb

the heat of the sun. Firewood is too precious to be burnt for warmth. If the cold is very bitter, older people will go to bed to stay warm. When the sun is out, the weather is mild. Tebas is sheltered from the cold winds that blow off the snowy Himalayas.

In the winter in Tebas one notices the shapes of the stones, the terraces, the mountain slopes. The land is bare, the sky expansive. The wet season brings dramatic change. Around April thunderstorms come down from the north. These are followed, in several weeks, by the heavy monsoon rains from the south. The days lengthen and a time of intense agricultural work ensues. Working in the fields one can see a great wall of water coming up the gorge as the rainstorm approaches. The rain is warm and falls heavily. Terraces fill with water. There is a mountainside on shimmering pools into which rice can be transplanted. The land is fecund, smelling of damp earth and rich foliage. The river is swollen. The sky is filled with billowing clouds. As the water abates and the land dries the rice ripens. Around September it turns golden and is cut.

In the summer, the village is nearly empty. First corn, then millet, then rice must be planted. These crops, especially the rice, demand a great deal of labor and must be planted quickly while the weather is right. After the crops are harvested, the village again becomes the focus of activity.

The village consists of about 80 houses. It is the home of around 500 people. Sixty houses, those of the Gurung, are clustered close together. Half a mile north of these are the smaller houses of the untouchable castes: Kamis (metal workers), Damais (tailors), and Sarkis (leather workers).

The people in the village are generally divided into two categories: the Gurung and the untouchables. The Gurung have Oriental features. Although most of the population is fluent in Nepali, they prefer to speak Gurung, their mother language, which is of Tibeto-Burmese origin. Once primarily a pastoral, herding group, they have become more dependent on farming as the growing population has caused the forest to diminish. Money and goods become available as young men also go into

British and Indian Gurkha regiments as mercenary soldiers.

Skilled craftsmen: metal workers, stone masons, carpenters, come mainly from the untouchable castes. Untouchables also hire out as laborers during the planting season and do sharecropping on the land of the Gurung who are away in the army. They are indispensable to the Gurung farmers, most of whom have a reciprocal relationship with one or more untouchables. In this relationship the Gurung can rely on the untouchable to make a special effort to be available to work for him, do a good job, and the untouchable can rely on the Gurung as a source of work, of old clothes, and of a loan or small gift of food when times get hard.

The untouchables are racially distinct. They have dark complexions and Aryan features. Untouchables are considered both by themselves and by the Gurungs to be impure. If they touch a dish, foodstuff, or the body of a Gurung, that too is rendered impure and must be sprinkled with consecrated water in order to restore it to its former state. Food would be discarded. Thus, the term untouchable.

For all the village, there is a sense of identity with the land and the people. Whether untouchable or Gurung, they are "our own village people." Within the area surrounding the village there is a sense of protection, both from strangers and spirits. The presence of a number of people increases the safety of the village. In the youth of this generation of parents, headless spirits with lamps on their shoulders would dance in the courtyards of houses, terrifying the inhabitants. Now they do not come. "Because there are more people there is not such need for fear."

Stronger than the bond of common space is that of the group, the identity as part of a people called Gurung. Common language, customs, rituals reinforce that. There is a very strong ethic of sharing. One should not eat alone. Even a very small bit of special food, fruit or sugar-cane will be broken up so that many people can have a taste. I knew a two year old who would occasionally refuse to eat unless two or three friends came over to her house and ate with her. If a mother has an abundance of breast milk she will give it to the

small children and babies of her friends. Wealth is also shared, though in small token gifts, outside the family. The parents of a soldier will be given large sums of money and gold when he returns on leave; his brothers, sisters, and some cousins might receive clothing and watches; friends and more distant relatives would be given a pack of expensive cigarettes or candies. Work is also shared. Groups of friends work together in the fields, planting for each of their families in turn. The distinctions between the property and tasks of the individual and those of the group are not emphasized.

Status within the Gurung community is dependent on wealth, intelligence and abilities, and the purity of one's lineage. Those whose families have met the criteria for high status for many generations, and who are able to maintain or increase this, have the strongest positions in the village. The epitome of this is the *jimwal makiya*, or head man, around whose house political and ritual activity centers. He is rich, intelligent, and charismatic. His wealth gives him the outward signs of a powerful man--a fine house, good clothing, and servants. His intelligence enables him to make competent decisions concerning land disputes, use of forest resources, and other communal matters. His personal magnetism enables him to command the loyalty of the villagers. Thus, the head man of Tebas wields in full the traditional power of his office.

A woman's status is dependent on that of her husband or father, so the pursuit of prestige is largely an occupation of men. The rewards of a prestigious man are many. He is consulted on matters concerning the village as a whole: projects, disputes, etc. He is likely to be incorporated into the formal political structure. Prestige also lifts a man above petty gossip. He is not subject to reproach unless the matter is a major one. Prestige is a quality explicitly defined, and a man's status is not diminished by mere opinion. A man of position and his family are treated with deference and great hospitality outside the village.

This much sought-after and carefully guarded prestige brings obligation with it. The generous hospitality received when traveling must be returned in kind to important visitors who expect to stay at a prestigious house, usually that of the

head man. To build one's own status and maintain that of the family, a boy or girl must treat their friends to food and drink during outings or ritual occasions. Poor people and wandering beggars go to the most prestigious houses, and it is a loss, both of status and religious merit, to turn them away empty handed. To maintain status rituals, especially the expensive funeral rite, must be performed lavishly, with many priests and abundant food and drink for the guests. At Kalorat, during the Dasain festival, the head man's family must serve food and drink to villagers who sit all night in his courtyard, singing and dancing to ensure prosperity and their leader's long life. The responsibilities of those with status help distribute the wealth they have accumulated and provide some balance of power.

The responsibility of a high status family extends from the material into the moral domain. A person who violates the code of behavior in the village "throws his prestige away." He also damages that of his relatives, of anyone he is closely associated with. An older child who disobeys his father in public will slightly diminish that man's status and authority. Building and maintaining prestige is important, even for those with very little. Practically, socially, and emotionally prestige is valuable. Prestige determines one's place within the community, and probably, to a large extent, self-image. The need to keep up one's prestige requires adherence to the group's ethical standards and is the greatest enforcer of morality.

In childhood and as a young adult it is a person's family that determines his status. Throughout life family remains the most important factor affecting prestige. The family bond is strong and far-reaching, seldom mentioned but all pervasive. People are called and referred to by kingship terms. It also plays a large part in identity: in youth one is known as Mukta Bahadur's second daughter; as one grows older she will be known as Lalit Man's mother. The same follows for a man. First he is known as his father's son, then as his child's father.

The family lives in a rectangular house consisting of storeroom upstairs and living space downstairs. There is usually a small room at each end of the house where grass and wood are kept. The living space is one room with a pole in the

middle. On one side of this is the hearth, altar, and pantry. On the other side of the pole is an open space in front of double doors. A woman and her husband, their children, daughter-in-law and a small grandchild or two will live here. The son, his wife and baby (children sleep with a parent) will sleep in one of the small rooms. As the son's family grows he will build a house of his own adjacent to that of his parents. After marriage a man's primary responsibility shifts from his parents to his wife and child, though the parents will always be looked after.

Parents are paid great respect in the Gurung community. They provide the necessities of life, and people speak of being grateful for the care that enabled them to grow up. The parents' approval of the child is all-important. If it is intact the opinions of others are meaningless. It is said, "If a mother or father says bad things the child should cry, but other people's talk is nothing." A family lives and work closely, so keeping peace there is important. Expression of anger is disapproved of by Gurung; loss of dignity diminishes prestige. An angry attitude is particularly harmful to the group one lives most closely with: "You should make your heart light and calm with your family, not get angry." Children do disobey, but not overtly, and not in matters of importance. The parent will usually know about but seldom react to this. When the roles of loving attentive parent and respectful obedient child are adhered to, dignity is maintained and the family is peaceful.

The Gurung system as a whole can be seen as a mechanism to preserve balance and reduce conflict: the reciprocity with the untouchables; the complementary roles of man and woman, parent and child, the interconnection of power and obligation in prestige. The ordering of the Gurung community is toward harmony, "that things should be good."

Feminine Perspectives on Community and Religion

Women in Tebas have a thorough understanding of the intricacies of their community. The women are familiar with the institutions of the village, including those in which they

cannot participate. There is no political or ritual activity whose details are forbidden to be known by the opposite sex. The domains of men and women touch, though in many ways they are separate. This section will examine feminine views of their own world--attitudes towards family, neighbours, and outsiders, the family. We will also look at female opinion of the realm of religion.

The Gurung woman contributes to her community mainly through her family. The family is of paramount importance. Women in Tebas attribute their feelings for people to relationship rather than personality. Ama would say, "I love Kanchi because she is my daughter." Affection is expressed little by word or gesture, much by caretaking and fulfillment of familial obligation. Though Saili, Kanchi's sister, never made friendly overtures to me, Ama said, "Saili really loves you. She always asks if she should call you for tea or bring you more wood." These tasks were Saili's responsibility through her fictive kin tie as my younger sister. That she was eager to carry them out demonstrated affection. Direct expression of affection seldom occurs in Tebas, except toward babies.

As with approval, disapproval is not often openly expressed. Maintaining harmony between people and a calm demeanor is highly valued. If a child is playing in a dangerous area, he will usually be moved, not admonished. Any forbidden object will be taken away and put out of reach, but the child is not likely to be scolded. When behaving badly he will initially be told in a friendly manner something like, "There's no use pleading to go and get candy. If we walk to the shop now a dead man will leap out at us and go Arrh!" If a child persists in harassing his mother, she may lose her temper and slap him. A worse punishment is shutting a child in the dark with the command, "Die!" Some other member of the household will immediately fetch the child and comfort him. Children are most visibly affected by the last punishment. Older children, reaching adolescence, are seldom punished. By then they have learned what behavior is acceptable. They are too old to harass their mothers for special treats or attention.

Older children are punished for violating group norms. The punishment is quite direct--verbal or physical or both.

Saili was scolded and hit by her mother for spending five rupees in one day and refusing to say where.

There was no reason for her to have spent that much, even during the *pai*. Maila has to treat other young men and girls to build up his prestige, but Saili is far from the age where she has to do that. When she is fifteen or sixteen if she spends twenty, twenty-five rupees in one day, treating people and building up her prestige, that's OK. I'll have to give her that money then. But the only reason to spend five in one day now is bad habits.

It is important for Ama to protect Saili's "habits." It is necessary that Saili be known as a young girl of good character so that she will secure a prestigious husband, and so that the reputation of the family will be maintained. Watching over the development of the children's characters is largely the task of the Gurung Mother.

As well as guarding the habits of the children, the Gurung woman protects the purity of the house. Ama explained the points which she saw as important to maintain. Untouchables could not come into the house or touch utensils used to carry water or prepare food. If an untouchable touched a Gurung or other pure caste the person who had been polluted had to have holy water sprinkled on him in order to restore his purity. This is also the procedure for restoring purity after a person has come in contact with birth or death. Water becomes a purifying agent after gold or a flower from the household altar has been dipped in it.

It is important to the Gurung that roles be kept intact. For this it is necessary that some separation be maintained: touchable from untouchable, the living--members of the social world, from birth and death--the unsocialized and unknown. When things that should be separate come in contact, pollution results and purity must be restored.

There are certain taboos within the household as well as outside of it. Elder brothers cannot touch or sit on the same mat with younger brothers' wives. They both would need to be sprinkled with holy water in order for their purity to be restored. The other household taboo has to do with *jhuto*. If any utensil has been eaten out of, the vessel and its contents

are rendered *jhuto*, impure. Washing the vessel restores its purity, but nothing can be done to redeem the food. Within the family *jhuto* food will be eaten by members of lower status. It is acceptable for them. A woman will eat her husband's unfinished food, a child his parent's or older sibling's food. As a child gets older he may refuse *jhuto* food or dishes, but a woman will always accept her husband's *jhuto*. This is her duty. Among the Gurung *jhuto* food will also be shared between friends of the same caste. Unless given by a friend or a family member of higher status, *jhuto* is considered disgusting. One village woman recounted with horror a story about a tourist man she had seen eating his wife's leftover food. "It was awful," she said. "I wanted to vomit."

Gurung women protect the taboos both in and out of the home. They teach their children what is proper and enforce the correct behavior. The women of Tebas live in an ordered world. Rules of behavior are explicit. One should act according to what is appropriate given his place in the group. Within the Gurung community, this is determined by one's age, status, and kinship ties. When it becomes convenient because of close association or affection to integrate an outsider into the Gurung community, one becomes *meetini* or *meet*, ritual sister or brother, to the outsider. Though the relationship is initiated by two individuals, both of their families will consider themselves related and call each other by kinship terms. This custom serves to establish intergroup bonds with neighboring castes like the *Thakali*. It creates a place for non-Gurungs within the order of the community. One's *meet*, like one's spouse, will usually come from a family of similar financial status and prestige.

Though fictive kin ties, like *meet*, are usually initiated by individuals, marriages are not. A boy's mother is usually the architect of the new relationship. Her son will contribute to the decision, but it is likely that his parents will present him with his choice of four or five eligible young women. The criteria for choosing a potential bride are very clear. Wealth and prestige are important considerations, but what is most important is that the family is one with whom your family has traditionally exchanged brides. A cross-cousin marriage would

insure this, since it is either the family that your mother came from or your father's sister was given to. According to Ama, "It is not good to give to someone new."

A traditional cross-cousin marriage protects the purity of the lineage and enhances the prestige of both families. The bride should be pretty, industrious and of good character. If she has wealth of her own or is particularly intelligent this will increase her status as long as she stays within the parameters of her role. A woman who defies the social norms diminishes her own prestige and that of the family. A marriage outside the boundaries of the group also lessens a family's status. Ama explained that,

Any Gurung with a mother of different caste would probably have to marry into a family of lower status, financially or otherwise. It would be difficult for him to follow the normal procedure of marrying someone of the same status as his father.

She went on to talk about status and the position of her family:

We used to be one of the richest families around, one of the few that had money. People would come and borrow from us. Now we have many children and are not so wealthy, but we are still among the most prestigious people. Oh, lesser people have become officers (in Gurkha regiments) and wealthier than we are. They like to pretend to be high and put us down, but they can't touch us. We have our prestige. (Because you and *jimal* both come from pure families?) Yes. (How does prestige help you?) It is protection. No one can abuse us. They can say what

they like, but regardless of that we are who we are. We are high and no one's opinion can change that.

Jimal's position as head man of the village greatly enhances the family's prestige. He is also a district administrator. His power is sanctioned both by tradition and by the modern political system. Gurung women tend to see the national government as important but not very relevant to their lives. The king is respected though he is quite a distant figure. To them Nepal is Kathmandu. Tebas is their country, governed by local people. Although the men are more sophisticated and discuss both national and international politics, the women of Tebas do not view themselves in so large a context. Anything beyond the ridges of Tebas is "another country."

To Gurung women, the gods control the destiny of the people. There are three major deities with altars around the village-Khul, god of the ancestors; Bhoome, god of prosperity; and Chandi, the village goddess. Various holy beings of Buddhism and Hinduism are also worshipped. The village deities are said to be most important and most powerful. Although they recognize differences in the religious systems of Buddhism and Hinduism, the Gurung consider the Gods that are worshipped to be the same deities called by different names. Thus, Amitabha is Brahma; Padmasambhava is Shiva; the Maitreya Buddha is Vishnu. The people of Tebas do not think of any one religion as being exclusively correct. They include a variety of religious practices in the ritual cycle. After a birth both a lama, a Buddhist priest, and a Hindu brahmin will be summoned. The lama performs the purification rite and the brahmin casts the child's horoscope. If the baby falls ill, a shaman is likely to be called to exorcise evil spirits. Each type of priest is thought to excel at a particular function.

For Gurung women, religion is a great source of comfort in a precarious world. It is distressing to them that some of their sophisticated children who have been educated or lived abroad cease to believe. One woman said of her son, "He doesn't say much against the religion because he knows how I feel, but he may not do any rituals when I die. They look at the god and they say, 'That's not a god; that's a rock'."

There are spirits as well as gods around Tebas. Most are malignant; some are friendly. More feared than the spirits are the witches. They have the power to cause sickness, madness and death. Ama explained about witches:

Witches have wisdom in their stomachs and are able to make people sick if they see them. They look just like other people. If you're big and your *daman* is strong they can do nothing, but if you're a baby or an old woman they can make you sick. Are there witches in America?

I don't know. I don't know much about those things. They look just like people but are they people?

They look just like us. They are people like us, but they have a *mantra*. They can make people sick. They play with witch fire at night. We don't see them, but people know and tell us. There are lots around here.

According to the women of Tebas, witchcraft is the most common cause of sickness and death. Women frequently exchange stories about witching incidents. Nani, Bouju, and some friends spent one evening talking about witches around the fire. Bouju told about the recent death of a young woman in a neighboring village:

In Rimo, the schoolmaster, his sister-in-law, and father-in-law were sleeping in the house. A ritual had just been done and there was meat hanging from the rack above the fire. From above the rack a big cat, with long teeth pointing up and down, jumped down. It bared its fangs and breathed fire at the master, who threw things at it. Then it ran across the room and fought with the sister-in-law, ate her, and she fell out of bed dead, (He bit her?) Nothing was on her body. He ate the inside of her. (Drank her blood?) Yes. Maybe. Then it was gone. (It ran out the door?) The doors and windows were closed, but it was gone. A soldier had just brought her a lot of nice cloth. She wouldn't give any to the witch so she killed her. (Why do they do that to people?) We don't know. (Is there a witch god?) That's what they say. They go up to wash their hair at midnight on Sunday. Young men have seen them.

When Bouju finished, her friend spoke:

You know the chief shaman of Khor died. He was eaten by a witch. He did a ritual, ate the offerings, and had dinner. Then he got sick. He couldn't speak for two days and he died. The witch ate him. Later she sat and stroked his body. It was the woman who lives above his house by the water tap, the one with two small goiters. Don't tell anyone I told you.

The people of Tebas do not consider themselves helpless in the face of the witches. There are techniques through which a witch can be exposed. Bouju explained:

A lama or shaman can make the witch possessing a person speak by putting a rice cooking pot in the fire until it glows, then putting it on the person's cheeks. (Doesn't it hurt the person?) No, it only hurts the witch. When they're made to speak the priest makes them say how many sons and daughters they have, what their names are, if their husband is alive. Then we know who they are. Some are made to speak right away and with some it's really hard. I heard one speak inside a sick person once and I was so scared I couldn't talk.

There are less drastic methods of curing bewitchment. A shaman may have his own *mantras* to break the witch's spell. A lama can make offerings to satisfy a witch's hunger. Though witches are feared and disliked, threat or

anger is seldom expressed to them personally. It is said to be dangerous to cross a witch. They are treated politely and avoided. There are no witchhunts in Tebas. Like disease, bad weather, ruined crops, witches are considered to be an unfortunate but inevitable part of life.

Women can acquire supernatural powers by becoming witches or nuns. Men can also become witches, but in Tebas most witches are women and all priests are men. Women, because of their impurity, rank quite low in the Buddhist hierarchy and are thought to have relatively little power or authority. It is possible that the same impurity that makes a woman a weak priestess renders her a powerful witch. It is a great departure from the normal order of the Gurung world for a woman to manipulate the supernatural. It is logical that mixing female impurity with the pure and properly masculine spiritual world would erode the order of things as they should be and result in the fruits of witch-craft--madness, sickness and death.

The feats of priests, like those of witches, are a frequent topic of conversation among Gurung women. There are four classes of priests used by the Gurungs. Hindu brahmins are called to the village for divination or rituals designed to bring good luck and prosperity to a household. *Dammis*, untouchable shamans, are most often called for the exorcism of evil spirits and witches. They are thought to have a powerful connection with the local Gods. *Jakeris*, Gurung shamans, come from outside the village to perform ceremonies. No Gurung shamans reside in Tebas. The priests traditionally used by the Tebas Gurung are the lamas. Gurung boys train from childhood in order to become lamas. They usually study with their own fathers, then spend two to five months in a Tibetan or Thakali monastery to the north. The Thakali, like the Tibetans, are a more literate group of lamas. Gurung lamas, though they read and write the Tibetan script, do not understand the language. Their religion is much influenced by the pre-Buddhist tradition. The Thakali lamas consider Gurung Buddhism unorthodox.

In the winter Thakali lamas travel down from the north to escape the intense cold. They perform ceremonies in the houses of their kinsmen and in Gurung villages. Though they

admire the training and accomplishments of the Thakali lamas, Gurung women consider them to be improper. Phupul, Jimwal's sister, explained:

"The wandering lamas aren't so good. We say *namaste* (a greeting) to them and not much else. They aren't good. They like to talk a lot to young women, and they don't marry. They come to read and we don't look at them or say much to them."

Gurung lamas, on the other hand, are householders. They marry and serve the people of the villages in which they live. Chij lama, who works in Tebas, is the eleventh generation in the line of lamas to have served Chimroe and Tebas. He is married, has children, raises crops. The Thakali lama who comes to Tebas pointedly remarked that it is not right for Buddhist priests to drink, eat meat, marry, or plow the land. The women of Tebas, however, refer to the Thakali lama as one who "thinks he is big" and they appreciate Chij, their kinsman, as a good man and a good priest.

When praising the lamas, Gurung women describe their powers in curing and in dealing with death. It is the Tibetan and Thakali lamas who are renowned for these feats. Phupul is an old and very religious woman. She told some stories to illustrate the power of high lamas:

There was a Tibetan lama staying in Khor, who after dying sat cross-legged for seven days. When he fell over they cremated him. He was a very high lama.

Another lama cured Pani after she had been sick for seven years. When it came time for him to die, he knew. He put butter on his stomach and told people "When it melts I will die." He sat for five or six days, then it melted and he died.

These were both Thakali lamas. She went on to talk about another Thakali lama:

"Yegay is a high lama. He was higher before he got married, but he is still a high lama. He slept with a nun and she got pregnant, so they were married. His status went down after that."

Phupul admits that most Thakali lamas are respectable:

"All Thakali lamas aren't the same. Some have good hearts and some don't. We are all different and so are they. Gurung lamas are all different, too."

Ama does not distrust Thakali lamas like Phupul does. Her *meetini*, ritual sister, is a Thakali and has a nephew who is a high ranking Thakali lama. Ama told me about high lamas:

A *koshyo* lama comes back to this world three years after his death. He can recognize his own books and things. If he marries he becomes like us, though; and doesn't know whether he'll come back or not. He can still practice and perform ceremonies, but he doesn't know about his next life. The others know they'll come back after three years as lamas.

Nuns don't know whether they'll come back or not. They can read with lamas, but they can't do a death ceremony by themselves. They stay alone a lot, read the sacred books, and meditate. They don't get married.

If a nun is lucky, she will be reborn as a lama, a male, and have a chance to escape the vagaries of birth and death by becoming a *koshyo*. In a female body, one cannot be certain of subsequent births. She can only hope that if she lives well she will be reborn a man.

Gurung women speak well of Thakali nuns, but they themselves do not customarily give up the ordinary feminine roles of daughter, wife, mother, for a secluded religious life. Widows and spinsters often devote a large part of their time to religious practices, but they are not trained to read the sacred books or assist at ceremonies. Their practice usually consists of attending ceremonies, inviting lamas to perform rituals in their homes, and praying. Around the village these women are treated with respect. Devotion to religion is admired by both men and women.

It is expected that both men and women will follow their religious pursuits within the framework of ordinary village life. Unlike the Thakali, who withdraw from the activities of farm and family life to devote themselves to religion, Gurung are expected to integrate religion into everyday life. Religious withdrawal is mistrusted by the women of Tebas. Most admired are the lamas who are also husbands, fathers, and farmers. It is more appropriate for a devout young woman to fast for the well being of her husband, than to renounce the world for a religious life.

One way to look at the Gurung woman's inclusion of religion in ordinary life is as a lack of compartmentalization of experience. Religion is part of community life; one should participate in both. This holistic view can also be seen in the incorporation of varied religious traditions in the ritual cycle. Just as the Gurung woman does not see religion as exclusive of family or community life, she does not see belief in one religious system as inimical to belief in another. She will call a shaman, or a lama, or a brahmin at the appropriate time. Though the detail of the ritual may be different, what is worshipped is the same. It is important that the gods be honored in whatever ways can be found to please them. The well-being of the family and community, the state in which "all things are good," depends on the blessings of the gods. In a rugged environment where life is fragile all aspects of the supernatural are appealed to for sustenance and security.

The Life Cycle

The life of a Gurung woman can be compared to that of a tree. The tender plant grows into a sturdy sapling and blossoms. Then it bears fruit, becomes barren, and dies. The life cycle of the Gurung woman is similarly delineated. She passes from being a *butzi*, baby to *keti*, girl to *tarooni*, adolescent. She becomes a mother, *ama*, then an old woman or *buri*. Corresponding terms for a man are *butza*, *keta*, *tita*, *apa* and *bura*. Gurung men and women are not called by name but by kinship term. Even if there is no kin tie between two people, they are likely to have a classificatory relationship. Thus when two women meet and find they are of the same clan, they will call each other "sister" though they are not actually related. The use of kinship terminology extends into the third person. A woman will be referred to as "Kaji Man's first daughter" as a child, "Het Bahadur's wife" after she marries, and Raj Kumar's mother" after she has borne a child. The same pattern holds true for a man. One can see that these terms define certain stages of life. In this section we will explore the journey of the Gurung woman through the various stages of her life.

A Gurung baby is like a delicate shoot growing out of hard earth. The environment is harsh. Many infants and young children die in Tebas. Babies are coddled and fussed over. When the mother becomes bored with caring for her baby or is called away by other work, there is a legion of people to take over. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, young siblings and cousins are all eager to hold and care for the child. Little girls of the village may carry the child away to play with her and leave her at a neighbor's house. She will be watched and cuddled, and later returned home. Though not often displayed to other persons, affection is lavished on babies.

If a child survives babyhood, she is like a young tree that has taken root and is likely to grow to maturity. Children who live to age four or five usually go on to reach adulthood. About this time in a child's life sexual distinctions become apparent. Girls are not made so much of as boys. They are still given special tasty food, but are seldom dressed up or asked to show off. Now age-mate groups begin to form. Five or six little girls become companions to each other. They sing and dance, imitate their mothers' work, and play games together. They sometimes play with the little boys, but the groups are distinct.

Though adults are always near a group of children, little Gurung boys and girls do not spend much of their day with their parents. Most of their time is spent with their friends. Until adolescence they sleep with their parents or older siblings. After that boys often sleep alone, girls with a younger child. Near the age of eleven or twelve, the carefree childhood draws to a close and children begin to work. It is an easy transition since the child has been playing at these tasks since babyhood. Children work with their families or with the age-mates that they played with for so long.

By the time a child begins to work, she will be expected to follow the social rules of the community. She will not contradict or disobey her parents publicly; she will show respect for elders; she will become shy around members of the opposite sex. As a child enters adolescence, he or she becomes responsible for protecting the reputation of the family.

Unlike many other cultures, the Gurung do not perform an elaborate initiation rite at puberty. A boy's transition into adolescence goes unmarked by ceremony. His maleness has been established by his first hair-cutting, which usually takes place at age three. When a girl reaches puberty, her mother presents her with a *lungi*, a long skirt, to replace the short dresses she has worn as a child. The girl can now wear the *lungi*, but she might occasionally prefer to wear her short dress and that, too, is acceptable.

It is at adolescence that a young girl blossoms. This is considered to be the prime of her sexual attractiveness. With adolescence comes a period of flirtation between girls and boys. The same girls that have played together since babyhood participate as a group in this. Liasons are between groups of girls and boys from different villages. Although a girl is likely to have a special *tita* within a group of boys, public connection is between groups, not individuals. The girls and boys meet in each other's villages for *rodi-ghar*--evenings of eating, drinking, and singing to each other. They go to cut wood together and meet in the nearby bazaar. They exchange small gifts of combs, hats, and ribbons. The gift giving is strictly from group to group. Within the village, too, the young people flirt and tease each other. The girls and boys of Tebas form work groups in the planting season. They practice singing together and make up the *thetar* show of singing and dancing that is performed at death ceremonies.

Young men participate in these activities into their late twenties, even after they are married. For a young married woman, singing in public is forbidden. She may come to watch and listen at *thetar* or *rodi ghar*, but she is not allowed to participate. A girl's freedom is much curtailed by marriage. She must work harder. She is no longer a part of the group of *taroonis* that she has been with since early childhood. It is best to marry out of one's own village, so that contact between the two families will remain special and ceremonious, and meetings will be accompanied by ritual gifts and generous hospitality. Girls usually greet their marriages with tears and protestations. "People cry at weddings. They all cry because the girl has to leave her home."

Marriages are arranged when a man's parents decide he is ready to marry. They will choose four or five suitable girls and ask him which he prefers. He is unlikely to know any of them personally, but may have seen or heard of them. He may have a choice of his own that he will suggest. When a girl is decided upon, the parents of the boy will go to her parents and propose the marriage, pointing out the advantages of the match and offering to give the bride so much gold. If the girl's parents agree an astrologer is consulted to set the date.

The girls is never consulted or even told about the arrangements. When the day for the marriage arrives the groom and a party of men from his village come to the girl's house. They tell her that she must come with them. She weeps and refuses, but her parents order her to go. She is carried away on a man's back, and the marriage ceremony is performed at the groom's house, amid feasting and animal sacrifice. The bride will stay three days, then be returned home. She will visit her husband's home periodically, for longer and longer visits, until she finally stays. She will continue to make occasional visits to her natal home. The marriage is usually not consummated until several months after the wedding, when some relationship exists between the bride and groom.

Most young women regard the traditional marriage process with fear and distaste. Kamala, a girl about seventeen years old, told me her feelings about marriage:

Our marriage custom isn't good. We have to go without being asked, whether we like it or not, without even knowing. Sometimes a girl will be working and men will grab her and carry her away, or she'll be asleep and they'll say "Get up." "Why?" "To get married." If she hates him and doesn't want to go, and cries and cries, she still has to go. Sometimes she'll run away from that house and go off with another man, but he'll have to pay a fine to the first one, of 500 or 1000 rupees (12 rupees = one US dollar).

Nowadays girls will run away with men they like. People say bad things about them and their parents get furious. (Can they come back to their natal house?) Maybe not at first, but after a while. After they have children, the parents forget about it. (Your cousin did that, didn't she?) Yes. She ran off with a soldier to Hong Kong. They ran straight out of the country. She hasn't come

back yet. (Where her parents angry?) Yes, they cried a lot. Maybe they wanted to give her to someone else. They didn't like that son-in-law.

It was *Tihar* (a festive holiday) and men were in the house playing cards late at night. She had her clothes all ready, and after milking the buffalo she said she didn't feel very well and lay down. A lot of people were in the house. Her mother and father went to sleep. The soldier was waiting outside. She snuck out and they ran off. Her brother went to Pokhara to look for them but they were gone. (He never asked for her?) No, they just ran off. I think it's not so bad now. They talk to his family. (Were they angry at that household?) No. They said their own daughter had wronged them; those people didn't do anything bad.

I want to run off with someone I like. I don't want to be given to anyone. (Will your mother be angry?) She'll be furious.

A year after this conversation, Kamala's marriage was arranged with the son of a well-to-do family in Rimo. Her aversion to arranged marriage was partly due to the unhappy marriage of her sister Indra Kumari. She explained the painful situation:

I was married when I was 19. I had never seen him before, nor had my mother. His parents are good to me and he is good to me, but he is twelve years older than I am and I don't like him. His house is in Daragoun (a full day's walk away). I don't like living in another country. I didn't want to go there. After the marriage I ran away but didn't know the road, so I got lost. I stayed in someone's house and cried all night. I had to sleep with him, though, and now I have his son. What to do? I stay at home even though his parents send for me. He is away in the army. My mother and my aunt tell me I should go, that it's not proper not to live in that home. I don't want to go, so I stay at my family's house.

Some young people escape traditional marriages. Elopement is one method. If there is not a big difference in status between the boy and girl, the family won't interfere. If the bride is of higher status than the groom, however, the family will send a member to intercept the couple and bring the girl home before the ceremony takes place. Often the elopement will succeed and eventually both families accept the match. Another avenue open for a boy and girl who want a "love marriage" is to persuade their parents to arrange that marriage. If the boy and girl can be classified as cross-cousins and their

families are of similar wealth and prestige, the parents are not likely to stand in their way.

One such marriage in Tebas was that of Jimwal's nephew. He had met a girl while visiting in Khor and had fallen in love with her. He was in the British army Gurkha regiment, so was away much of the time, but they had corresponded and visited when he was on leave. After six years they were married. By this time, the young man had served two tours of duty in the army--three year periods with two month leaves in between--and on the third term he was allowed to bring his wife to Hong Kong with him. By waiting for the marriage until she could accompany him, she was spared a long period as a daughter-in-law in a strange village. Even if her new husband is away, a bride is expected to come live with and work for his family.

Many young women in Tebas are married to soldiers. Parvati's husband is a soldier in the British army, as was her father. She told me the story of her youth and marriage:

My husband came to my house to ask for me with *Jetaju* (husband's elder brother) three years before we married. *Jetaju* was in Malay at the same time as my father was there. He used to give me candy often. I called him *Mama* (mother's brother), because in the army bases it's custom to call the women *chama* (mother's sister) and the men *mama*. So *Jetaju* told his younger brother he should marry me when he got back here. I was eleven then. They came to our house. I said, "The *Mama* who used to give me candy in Malay is here!" They sent me off to school and talked with my parents, grandparents and aunt. I was given to them, though we didn't marry until three years later. (How much older than you is he?) Four years.

About a week later my little sister told me they had asked for me and I had been given to them. I cried and cried. I didn't understand what marriage meant and thought maybe I was to be a servant in their house. I wondered why they had asked for me and why my parents had given me away. My mother, aunt, sister-in-law, and my father told me I mustn't cry, that every woman who is born has to marry and leave her home. They said that Sister-in-law had had to; Mother had to and I was born, and see that Auntie doesn't get to live here at her childhood house. After they told me not to cry, I didn't in front of them, but I was still upset.

When it came time for the marriage Auntie consulted a brahmin and he said the wedding shouldn't be done at

the groom's house like it is traditionally--with musicians playing and a feast for the village. He said it should take place elsewhere, so we went to Kathmandu. My Auntie and all my friends, my *tarooni* group, went to Talaket and my baby's father and *Jetaju* met us there. My friends and I were all crying. Two of my friends and Auntie went with me to Kathmandu, four of us. I was married at Swayambhu temple there.

Parvati now lives with her father-in-law and children in Tebas. Her husband is now on his second tour of duty in Hong Kong. The next time he goes she and her two baby daughters will accompany him. She speaks about the trip with pleasure, looking forward to the freedom from agricultural work and the luxury of living in an apartment with a stove and running water. She said she has missed the comfort of the army base since she lived there as a child. Parvati plans to move to the town of Pokhara when her husband is discharged from the army. Though wealthy, prestigious and well-liked, Parvati is not satisfied with life in the village.

Saraswati, a neighbor of Parvati's, also misses the easy life she led abroad. Her husband is a soldier in India and she lived with him there for awhile. She lived in the town, unlike the wives of British soldiers in Hong Kong who stay in army apartment buildings with other Nepali women. The situation was both painful and rewarding for her.

I have lived away from my village, like you. I went with my husband to India and when I was first there I was very sad. For the first year I cried all the time and missed my home. After awhile, though, I made friends, learned the language, and was much happier.

When I was in India, water came into the house. There was a stove. I didn't have to work hard. My skin was smooth, though it darkened in the sun. The water didn't suit me so I got sick. I was in the hospital for a year and all my hair fell out.

It's not good here--no roads or planes. You have to walk everywhere. There is no bazaar to look at, no cinema to go to. Life is hard here.

In spite of the hardness of her life, Saraswati intends to stay in Tebas.

Bouju, Jimwal's daughter-in-law could have gone to India with her husband but chose not to. Her brother is a lama, and

she comes from a traditional household. She is an exemplary daughter-in-law--hard working, obedient, and uncomplaining. She is quite religious, fasting each full moon and performing the household rituals. Bouju lives in keeping with the traditions. She does not crave the ease and excitement of modern life. She has never even been to the small bazaar near the village. When I asked her if she wanted to go, she replied, "Who do I know there?"

Bouju is living out the role played by her mother and grandmother. Atiya, the wife of Jimwal's older brother, told how it was when she came to her husband's household:

This Grandfather Subidar (Jimwal's father) was very rich. He had coin money, not paper, and that was a time when not many people had money. He lent it out to other people here. They would come and ask for it.

He had four sons and two died. This son (her husband) would have been Jimwal if he had been a hot smartie like his younger brother. But he is stupid and couldn't do it so it went to his brother.

Grandfather Subidar and my father, who was a Major Subidar, were in the same platoon and were great friends. Grandfather Subidar asked for me, and my father gave me since they were good friends. My father had a stack of money and I came to a house with a stack of money. (I suppose there was a lot of land then, too.) There were loads of fields for us and there are loads of fields now. There used to be people at this house called *Kamari* who washed the dishes and everything but the government said we couldn't keep them anymore. Then everything you bought was really cheap, but now it's expensive.

The old man never said a word to me about work. It was, "If you want to work, do; if you don't want to work, don't." I lived with them like their own daughter. It was very good.

After marriage, when a woman becomes part of a new family, the next step in her life cycle is having children. The tree has grown strong and blossomed, and the time for it to bear fruit has come. Marriage affirms a boy's manhood. It is an important transition for a girl, but she is not considered to have truly reached womanhood until she bears a child. Then she will be acknowledged as a valuable member of the community. She will have fulfilled her proper role.

Though they are important milestones, pregnancy and childbearing are seen as frightening and dangerous by Gurung women. In spite of the pain and fear, a woman would rather have children than not. Children are prized in Tebas, and a childless woman is considered incomplete. A sterile woman is referred to with the derisive term *taray*.

Parvati was married when she was fifteen. She was twenty-one when I lived in Tebas and had two daughters, one six months and one two years old. She told of her feelings and experiences about childbearing:

Pregnancy is very weakening. You have to wear two shawls on your head. If the slightest wind hits you, you get a terrible headache. You should wear very warm clothes. Also, when you are pregnant if anyone asks you for anything you have to give it, and everything has to be given with an open hand. The way you do this is the way the baby will come. There are lots of things to observe.

Giving birth is very painful. Everyone cries a lot. Usually a woman is present, whoever you call. Men are embarrassed to be there, except maybe the father. Some husbands clean up the blood, wash the clothes, do the whole thing without anyone else. Others don't even come in the house. They only come to their wives at night, to sleep with them.

With my oldest girl I felt the pain at about 3:00 p.m., called my uncle's mother, and my daughter was born at 5:00. My sisters were here the night the youngest came. I got up to urinate and when I came inside my stomach started hurting. It kept hurting and I called the same uncle's wife. A couple of hours later the youngest was born.

Pregnancy is very scary. You know it will hurt and also if the placenta doesn't come out the woman will die, or if the baby doesn't come you both will die. I'm terrified of birth. I've carried two babies, both fearfully.

After the baby is born the blood and placenta are cleaned up and thrown away. This mustn't be discarded near land that has been plowed, and no furrows must be crossed on the way to discard it. A woman's neighbors or relations will see that this is taken care of. Anyone who touches the mother, baby, blood or placenta will need to undergo ritual purification because such contact results in pollution. This usually involves a bath or a sprinkling with holy water.

Birth pollution lasts for nine days. Then the mother and baby get out of bed and bathe. The mother will rest and eat rice with chicken curry for twenty days. Her sisters-in-law are required to give her chickens and her natal household might provide a goat if they can afford it.

The rearing of children is shared by the family and the community, though the parents have most of the responsibility of a child. Discipline for a young child is lax. The wants and whims of a boy, especially, are accommodated as far as possible.

Children are well cared for and in return they are expected to care for their parents as they grow older. When a woman's son marries, she gains a great deal of freedom since her daughter-in-law will do much of the household work. The young couple will live with the parents until their own family starts to grow.

When a woman grows old and her children all have their own households, she has less authority. Once her daughters-in-law have their own houses and families she has little power over them. Her children are still bound to care for her, though, and she commands much respect. She is like an old tree surrounded by the strong saplings that have grown up from her seeds.

After an old woman dies many people come to the death ceremony to honor her. All the people that a woman has commanded or cared for--her children and their spouses, members of her natal family, her husband--gather to send her off well. Her spirit will find its way to the land of the ancestors where it will be received by the community of Gurung dead. After this will begin another birth, another cycle of life in another form.