

THE THARU HOUSE: OPPOSITIONS AND HIERARCHY

A central aspect of Dumont's ideas concerning hierarchy is their emphasis on a holistic approach. To avoid 'atomisation', and so as not to decompose the original relations of elements, Dumont (1980:222) urges us to reassemble the contexts or oppositions we encounter by relating them back to the whole of which they are parts. In this way we will be able to see more clearly the dominant principle or principles which are at work. Barnes has suggested¹ that the existence of the hierarchical opposition in which one part stands for the whole at a superior level is an empirical question, and one which it is necessary to study and verify in each particular field. This paper is a preliminary attempt to apply Dumont's notion of the hierarchical opposition to a body of ethnographic material. I shall argue that in this case we are able to point towards something like the hierarchical opposition wherein one part stands for the whole.

Beginning with the Tharu house and then moving outwards to touch on their cosmology we shall meet various oppositions, but in the main the discussion will concern the opposition between

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¹ R.H.Barnes, 'Hierarchy without Caste?', paper presented at Conference on 'Contexts and Levels', March 1983.

north and south.² In fact, however, this opposition is an asymmetric one, and I shall accordingly concentrate on the north. This may seem to give us a somewhat one-sided view of the Tharu scheme, but nevertheless I think that this is the correct line of approach.

The literature on the Tharu as a whole is limited. One subgroup, the Dangaura Tharu, with whom this paper is concerned, have been described by several ethnographers, to whom I owe much. Especially useful have been the reports of Rajaure³ (1978, 1981a, 1981b, 1982), while Macdonald (1969:71) has earlier noted the north-south orientation of Dangaura Tharu houses and villages. This fact was later used as comparative data in an article on Thulung classification by Allen (1972:87), and this article, together with one by Sagant on the Limbu house (1973), have stimulated me to look into the subject of the Tharu house and to explore further the significance of its north-south orientation. The detailed description of the Tharu house by Milliet-Mondon (1981) does not examine the questions I am concerned with here. Of the literature outside the specifically Nepalese context, the collection of essays in *Right and Left* (Needham 1973), and particularly Cunningham's contribution on the Atoni house, have directed me towards the present analysis.

The Tharu are a tribal people who inhabit the Terai districts along the border between Nepal and India. Geographically the Terai forms the boundary between the vast North Indian plain and the foothills of the Himalayas. It is very flat, but inside the outer foothills there are some long and broad valleys which comprise the Inner Terai, and which though slightly cooler share many of the characteristics of the Terai proper. Although the land is fertile, in the past the heavy forestation and the prevalence of malaria has tended to keep the people of the surrounding plains and hills out of the Terai. Recently deforestation and the eradication of malaria have brought considerable change.

Altogether people called Tharu number some 500,000. They are broadly divided into several named groups which are distinguished by the territory they occupy, by differences in certain cultural features, and by language. They speak a number of largely mutually unintelligible languages, which are structurally related

² It must be made clear that the terms north, south, east, west are translations of the Tharu words for the cardinal points, *uttar*, *dakkin*, *purub*, *pachiun*, which derive from the Sanskrit, *uttara*, *dakṣiṇa*, etc. In this context therefore the cardinal points do not present the problems to analysis encountered elsewhere, as for instance in Barnes 1974:78-88.

³ I also wish to thank Drone Rajaure for his advice and help in the initial stages of fieldwork.

to, and to a great extent based on the surrounding north Indian languages, including Nepali. The Dangaura Tharu form one of the largest groups and speak a distinctive language. They take their name from the long Dang valley of the Inner Terai of western Nepal. The term Tharu here, therefore, refers only to the Dangaura group.

The Tharu live in fairly compact nucleated settlements. The village is an important unit, being the focus for much activity and having a bounded and defined territory. Villages are situated a couple of miles apart on average, and range in size from around 150 to 600 inhabitants. The Tharu differ from the surrounding peoples in many respects, three of which are particularly notable. First, their villages exhibit a high degree of communal organization, which centres on the village headman. Secondly, they live in large joint-family households, some of which can contain up to 80 or 90 people. The third difference is the unique style and appearance of the traditional house itself.

Apart from the village and the household, the most important unit in the structure of Tharu society is the clan. The society is divided into an indefinite number of exogamous patrilineal clans. The clan has no overall corporate identity. Its primary function is to provide the negative rules bearing on marriage.

The Tharu are sedentary agriculturalists, cultivating rice, maize, and wheat as staple crops, and some mustard and linseed which are sold into India so as to buy salt, cloth and other essential commodities.

The house (*ghar*) is the fundamental social, economic and ritual unit of Tharu society. This is reflected in the manner in which the house is ordered directly by certain principles, which do not relate to the village, and only in certain specific contexts to other houses in the village. The house constitutes a kind of template or blueprint for ordering and relating certain ideas and social positions. Genealogies, in so far as they are reckoned at all beyond the household, are spoken of in terms of the house. The most closely related local households of a clan are termed *ghar phutlak*, which means 'of the broken house', that is they came from the same original house when it divided. Genealogical links are often reckoned in terms of houses, in that the pattern of house-splitting over time and therefore the links between houses can be remembered, while the individuals involved are soon forgotten. In addition the word *konti*, which is the word for one of the rooms in a house occupied by a man and his wife and children, can also be used to refer to a lineage (Rajaure 1981b: 24). Thus the language of social structure derives from the house.

The composition of a joint household consists of a man and his married sons, but often there is more than one man in the senior generation, and so two or more groups of sons in the junior level. The norm of jointness is highly valued in Tharu ideology, particularly that between a father and his sons. When a house divides it will most commonly do so after the death of the men of the senior generation, the link between the remaining brothers being weaker than that between father and sons. Never-

theless we do find instances of brothers remaining together.

Within the household a crucial aspect of the relations between father and sons and between brothers is ranking according to generation and relative age. The seniority of the father is fundamental, and this carries over to relations between brothers, an elder brother being senior to a younger brother, who should obey and respect his senior. This ranking of seniors over juniors is clearly expressed in the rules of food pollution. A younger is able to eat food remaining on an elder brother's plate, but not the other way round. The seniority of elder brothers is also expressed in customary forms of greeting. The term used for someone older is *barā* which also means 'larger' or 'greater', while correspondingly *choṭi* means 'younger' and also 'smaller' or 'lesser'. Of several brothers the eldest, who will become the household head, is called *barkā* while the youngest is *choṭkā*.

In considering the orientation and layout of the house, the first point to note is that all Tharu houses, as already mentioned, are oriented along a north-south axis. In fact it may be more accurate to say that they are oriented to the north.⁴ Most commonly villages are made up of houses built in two lines also running north-south, on either side of a central village lane.⁵ The internal layout of the house does not vary except in the sizes and number of rooms. The location of the kitchen and the deity room does not vary, so in addition to the north-south axis we find a constant distribution of features on the east and west of the house.

From north to south the house is divided into three sections (as shown in Figure 1). The southernmost area, the *ghāri*, is reserved for cattle and sheep at night. The next section, the *bahari*, is a semi-public area. The northern section called *bhitar* contains the *konti*, that is the sleeping rooms, the kitchen, and the deity room (*deurār*). The terms *bahari* and *bhitar* are derived from words which have the more general meanings of 'outside' and 'inside' respectively. This is understandable since in a physical sense the *bhitar* section is the furthest inside the house, in that to reach it one has to pass through the *bahari* first. The *bahari* thus forms a kind of barrier separating the inner part of the house from the outside (Milliet-

⁴ The houses are not oriented to true north, but are roughly at right angles to the mountains, which lie west by northwest and east by southeast. The houses are therefore oriented to the mountains, but for the Tharu this also means the north.

⁵ Most villages consist of two lines of houses, but a few consist of three or four. It seems that when a new village is built, as occurs in the far western Terai districts to which the Tharu have been migrating, first one line of houses is built and then a second line is built to the east of the first. Obviously local topography affects the location and layout of villages to some extent.

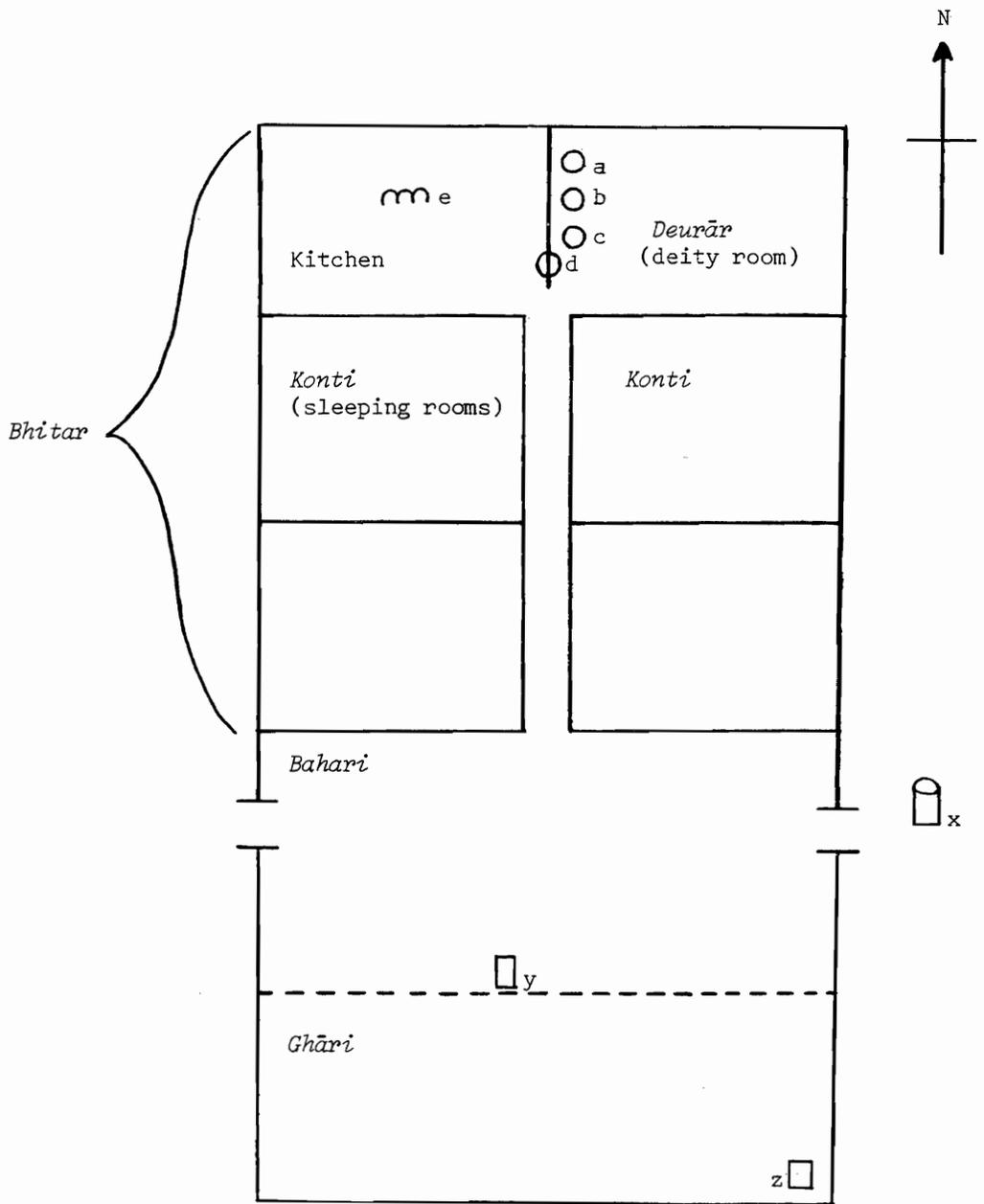


Figure 1. The Tharu House

a,b,c - 'Main' deities; d - House post (*mannik khamba* or *dulāhā khūtā*); e - Hearth; x,y,z - Other deities

Mordon 1981:24). The *bhitār* is entered via a doorway, situated in the middle of the northern wall of the *bahārī*, which gives onto the central corridor. The two northernmost rooms, the kitchen and the deity room, are the 'innermost' rooms of the house, and are thus in the part of the house which is the most private and separate from the outside world.

The main household deities are located in the northeastern room, along the central partition separating this room from the kitchen. These deities face east. There are also deities located in the centre of the fence separating the *ghārī* from the *bahārī*, in the southeastern corner of the house, and in the eastern courtyard (see Figure 1). These last three deities are not always all present, but when they are their location is always the same. They are all connected with cattle or sheep, and are not permanently sacred and protected by restrictions as the inner deities are. The inner deities are hedged around by rules restricting access to them and sometimes the deity room may be closed to outsiders. They are the most important deities, and it is in the deity room that most household rituals are performed. They are crucial in two further respects. First, these deities identify the clan affiliation of the household, each clan having its own deity or unique configuration of deities; and secondly, the presence of these deities identifies a house as such. Without them, the building is not a proper house at all for the Tharu. Such buildings exist, but always as part of a joint household. In fact, houses lacking deities are equated with *goṭh*, which are temporary structures built for cattle in the village or for grazing near the jungle. When a household divides, one of the first tasks of the new household heads is to make and install new sets of deities for themselves, each being made in the name of the new household head.

We have then for the house an orientation along a north-south axis, with distribution of kitchen to the west and deity room to the east. This layout does not vary.⁶ Therefore, in terms of its internal space the house is not oriented to other features such as rivers, the village lane, or other houses.

When a new house is built it is erected in a few days on a level piece of ground, which forms the floor. Wooden posts are raised in lines, with a central line of posts called *dhur*,

⁶ There are four clans whose houses are built in reverse order to all others. The *bhitār* lies to the south and the *ghārī* to the north. It is only the north-south order which is reversed, since the deity room remains on the east side of the house and the kitchen on the west side. The name of these clans is *ulthāwā*, meaning 'opposite' or 'reversed', which reflects this feature of their houses. There is no evidence, however, that this reversal reflects a hierarchical inferiority for these four clans.

and two or occasionally three or four lines of shorter posts in descending height on either side. These posts support a large sloping thatched roof which reaches down over the low outer walls, themselves made of wattle and daub. The inner rooms are divided up by partitions consisting of large grain storage containers joined together by thin walls.⁷ The only part of house-construction which is marked by ritual is the fixing in place of the northernmost post that falls inside the area of the house. This post is called the *mannik khambā* or *ḍulāhā khūtā*, meaning 'the post of Man' in the generic sense, or the 'bridegroom post'.⁸ It is the first of the central line of posts to be erected, and both its setting-up and the foundation ritual are carried out near the start of construction. This ritual is quite short and simple, and is performed by the head of the new household with some assistance from his wife. The north, therefore, is stressed, marking the start of the process of construction, and singling out the northernmost of the central posts as distinct. This is also, at least in one appellation, a male post. In certain ritual contexts this post is treated as a deity and is assimilated to the other household deities.

The main feature of the sleeping pattern is that the household head sleeps either in the deity room itself, or just next to it, in the room directly to the south, on the same side of the house. According to some informants the full traditional sleeping pattern for the other married men follows in order of seniority down the east side of the house, and then begins again at the north on the west side, descending through that side. I never met a house where this pattern was rigidly adhered to, and the only constant feature is the location of the household head in the deity room or the room just to its south.⁹

When the household splits, the brothers may each build their own houses, or divide up the original building. In the former case, the eldest brother remains in the original building and keeps the deities, and the new households have to make and install their own deities as one of their first tasks. On the other hand, when the house is divided walls are built east to west across it, splitting it into equal sections, each of which is made into a smaller-scale replica of a proper house, with *bhitar*, *bahari* and so on. The eldest brother keeps the northernmost part of the deities, and usually these do not move. Again,

⁷ For details of the dimensions of these storage containers, and of other parts of the house see Milliet-Mondon 1981.

⁸ I also heard this post referred to as *jethā* or *barkā khambā*, which means the 'eldest post'.

⁹ The household head's location in this part of the house was once or twice referred to as the *sīr* or 'head' of the house. The term *sīr* was also frequently used to describe the northernmost of the shrines in the deity room.

the other brothers have to make new sets of deities.¹⁰

To sum up so far, there are four main points. First, the house is divided into an inner area and an outer area, the former being to the north, and the more private. Secondly, brothers are ranked on the basis of age order. This ranking is manifested or worked out in spatial terms in the house, with the eldest brother or household head being associated with the north, and the junior brothers situated to his south. Thirdly, the northern post in the house is ritually marked, and represents a starting point or beginning in relation to which the rest is built. This part of the house is fixed and not usually moved. Fourthly, the north is also the location of the main deities, whose room is the most sacred area. These deities are the main focus for ritual, and they protect and support the household. Their very presence defines a house as such. There are two further points. First, among the deities in the deity room is a centrally placed group which includes the principal characters in the Tharu myth of the creation of the world. Secondly, the spirits of the dead ancestors are ritually seated or given a place in the deity room alongside the other deities. So this is the location not only of the living head of the household, but also of his ancestors.

In an obvious sense the household head supersedes the other members. As master he has certain responsibilities, but equally he has privileges; if sufficient labour is available he need not do some of the heavier agricultural work, and he acts as host for entertaining guests. He represents the household in the outside world, and is also the main ritual officiant from within the house. More than anyone else he stands for the household as a whole, as is suggested by his name, *ghardhurryā*, or 'house-post'. As already noted the central line of high posts supporting the ridge of the house are called *dhur*. Like the house-posts he is the pivotal support of the household, and just as the house is oriented in relation to the north, so the other men of the house are ordered in relation to him.

There is a similar pattern in the context of the village. The village headman (*mahaton*) has various functions, including officiating in rituals at the shrine of the village deities. This shrine consists of several carved wooden boards and pegs, one of which is called *murāhā mahaton*, which means 'headman peg'.

¹⁰ There was one particularly striking example of the right of the household head to the north part of the house and the deities. A household had decided to split and for various reasons it was decided not to divide up the original house with internal walls. Instead, the house was cut in half and the northern half dismantled and carried to a new site, where it was used for building a new house for the original household head, who also took the deities.

This peg is changed whenever the headman changes, and in some villages is the northernmost part of the shrine.¹¹

There are then, a series of ideas and entities which are clustered around the northern end of the house, or which are ordered in relation to the north. Oppositions we have met are senior:junior, inside:outside and north:south, and we have also touched on east:west.

It is true that I have traced only one element, the north. These oppositions are asymmetric - senior:junior inherently so of course. One element is usually superior, and among the configurations of oppositions that between north and south seems to emerge as dominant. It may be that we can see what it is about the north that lends it superiority more easily than we can for other positive elements, and there is no space here to go into the inferior elements of these oppositions. Let us continue to trace this orientation to the north, and explore its dominant role in articulating other oppositions. After all, we must ask why it is that certain deities, the ancestors, and the senior in rank order are all linked with the north.¹²

Let us recall that the ranges of the Mahabharat mountains rise steeply to the north of the Tharu areas, while to the south lies the vast plain. For the Tharu the north means the mountains and is obviously also 'up'. In a general way in the village this is reflected in the terms *tikra* and *tara*. When one walks northwards in the village and its surrounding fields this is described as going *tikrawar* or 'upwards', and conversely to move south is to go *tarawar*, 'downwards'.¹³

¹¹ I was told in my base village that this peg was made from the same tree that was used to make the northern house-post of the headman's house.

¹² Space does not allow discussion of the fact that the kitchen, with its close association with women, is also located in the north of the house. This would have to be included in any fuller analysis.

¹³ The terms *tikrawar* and *tarawar* respectively mean 'upwards' and 'downwards'. Within the village they were used to describe movement northwards or southwards, even where at first sight there was no obvious slope to the land involved. This is understandable when we bear in mind that the whole valley floor slopes from north to south, and that the village land as a whole does so, though the gradient is slight. On a wider scale the association of north with upwards and south with downwards holds good because the mountains lie to the north and the plain to the south. Where, however, local topography conflicts with this general pattern the terms can be used in their literal meaning, so that when going up the low hills which lie to the south of the valley one moves *tikrawar* or 'upwards', even though one is at the same time actually going southwards.

Certain deities and the ancestors dwell in the house, but they can also be in other places, especially *harikabilās*. The ancestors in particular are in *harikabilās* since usually they do not have their own shrines in the deity room. They come once a year during the *dasyā* festival, when they are fed with a fine feast carefully laid out for them in the deity room. The deities seem to be more evenly distributed between this world and its houses, and *harikabilās*, and this is because they have fixed *thān* or places where they are fed on a regular basis. Notions concerning *harikabilās* are vague. It is a nice place, sometimes described (through the image of a flower garden) as bright, beautiful, light, and sweet-scented. More significantly it is situated somewhere to the north and up in the mountains. Obviously this is a version of Mount Kailās in the Himalayas, important for Hindus and Buddhists alike as the abode of the gods.¹⁴

The relationship between men and deities is complex. The deities belong to the *sat jug*, the 'age of *sat*', which in the Hindu context corresponds to the *satya* or *kr̥ta yuga*. This was an age of power and purity, when the world was created and the deities lived in the world. Men now live in the *kal jug* (in the Hindu scheme the *kali yuga*), which is the present imperfect age in which the deities have retreated from the world, though they still sustain and protect men. From certain points of view the most important deity is *guru bābā* who created the world and who now presides in *harikabilās*. He came first in the order of things. It is not surprising then, that *guru bābā*, represented by a small leather figure of human shape, hangs separately above all the other deities arranged on the small platforms on the floor of the deity room.¹⁵

The deities, then, dwell at least in part in *harikabilās*, to the north up in the mountains. They came first with the creation of the world, and are the source of support and protection for men today. The ancestors of men are also assimilated to these deities. Men interact with ancestors and deities through their shrines or *thān*, which appropriately lie in the north of the house.

This orientation to the north is, therefore, far reaching. The north:south opposition always seems to be asymmetrical, and through several different situations we have gained an idea of

¹⁴ Two educated Tharu informants explicitly identified *harikabilās* with Mount Kailās. It is interesting to note that *dhāmīs* of Bar-khang village in north west Nepal address a deity called *kabilas*, 'le maitre du kailash' (Bancaud and Macdonald 1982: notices 59-62).

¹⁵ Literally *guru bābā* means 'teacher-father'. I hope to discuss the hierarchy of the deities and their inter-relations elsewhere.

what the north stands for. It is at once various things, but in cosmological terms it is the direction of *harikabilās*, the abode of deities who created the world, who came first, and who are powerful and superior to men. This pattern is also significant within the house. The north is the location of the household deities, including as already mentioned the main deities of the creation myth. It is the point which marks the core of the house, the point which is fixed, and in relation to which the house extends southwards. It is also the location of the household head, who is at once master of the establishment and the ritual officiant from within the house.

It is not so easy to discuss the south as a pole. Points to the south are appropriate for juniors, for inferiors, and for things of the outside - but this is only so in relation to the north. Perhaps this is a situation similar to that which Dumont has described as the kind of hierarchy wherein the superior pole is coterminous with the whole, and the inferior pole is determined solely in relation to the former (1980:225). In contrast to this type, Dumont refers to the articulate type of hierarchy, where we see reversal and chiasmus clearly manifested, such as that between priest and king or purity and power. In the former type this chiasmus may be obscured, or manifest only at the empirical level. The Tharu scheme is close to this former type, but does not coincide with it entirely.

There are, in fact, certain situations which are marked by reversal. In most ritual contexts the right is superior to the left, and regarding the hands this is true in a general way.¹⁶ In the majority of rituals the right is the place of the senior priest. The officiants face west towards the deities, who face east, and in these situations the right and north coincide. Some situations are marked by reversal so that left becomes dominant. There are also other kinds of reversal, with rituals for household members - normally performed inside the house - being performed outside. In two such contexts it is arguable that there is an assimilation or reconciliation of these reversals by the north, in particular in relation to the deities and ancestors.

First, death itself is marked by numerous reversals. The body is laid out north-south in the *bahari*, the opposite of its usual sleeping position in the *bhitar* section. The corpse is stripped completely naked, wrapped in a shroud, and buried in a grave oriented north-south, with the head to the north.¹⁷

¹⁶ The right:left opposition does not seem important in relation to the house, but this would have to be discussed in the context of rituals.

¹⁷ Burial is the commonest form of disposal, but sometimes the body is cremated.

Throughout the associated rituals the left hand is used, and so on. Eventually, in the course of subsequent purification rituals, the new ancestor is led back into the house and is seated along with the other ancestors and deities in the deity room. In a sense the initial reversals have now been superseded through the deity room in the north of the house. Perhaps we have crossed levels in the process.

Secondly, a similar form of assimilation appears in relation to women. A woman enters her husband's house on marriage, but her full incorporation is a long-term process. For the first year, and at frequent intervals thereafter, she spends time in her natal home on a series of visits. Even after she has had her first children the woman will continue to visit her natal home, though as she gets older her visits will become increasingly rare. For the Tharu, the deities of the woman's natal household, of her mother's brother's household, and of her mother's mother's brother's household in some sense continue to follow and affect her. This is the explanation for a ritual which is performed twice every year in the marital house for the woman's fertility and well-being and for that of her children. Since this ritual concerns the deities of clans different from her husband's, it has to be performed outside the house. More than this, part of the essential ritual equipment is kept hanging in the southwestern corner of the house, either inside or outside. The ritual is actually carried out on the ground, outside the house and near its southern end. This is in direct contrast to other household rituals, which take place inside the house, usually in the northeastern room.¹⁸ Women marrying into the house come from different clans and are still affected by the deities of those clans, so they are to an extent separated from the husband's household and clan deities. If, however, we again follow the

¹⁸ This ritual for women, called *rath lausarnā*, is performed outside the house, and at what we may call the 'back' of the house. This is the side which adjoins the fields. The 'front' side of the house, with its large open courtyard, faces towards the village lane. This means that for houses on the west side of the village this ritual is performed to the west of the house, and for those in the eastern line of houses it takes place to the east of the house. The relation of the house to the village lane, therefore, although making no difference to its internal layout and orientation, seems to affect the spatial location of rituals performed outside the house. We might then have to include in any fuller discussion a further opposition between 'back' and 'front' sides of the house. This is also suggested by the fact that when a corpse is carried out of the house, for those houses to the west of the central lane it leaves by the western doorway, while in those to the east it leaves by the eastern doorway. In both cases, then, it leaves by the 'back' door, on the side facing away from the village lane.

sequence of this relationship between a woman and her marital household, we see a kind of progressive incorporation. At death the woman, like any other ancestor, is seated with the other ancestors in the northern deity room. She is finally brought in and finds her place inside and in the north, in a position befitting her final transition to an absolutely senior status.

We have seen two situations which are set apart and marked by reversals, but which in turn are transcended by an overriding organising principle. These contexts are being ordered for us in relation to this principle, and so we can speak of '...different levels hierarchised together with the corresponding elements' (Dumont 1980:225). Within the oppositions encountered, I cannot assign to the elements values which are intrinsic and invariant in all contexts. Nevertheless one can say more about the positively valued elements and in particular the north. North and south are only definable in relation to the whole, and like right and left in relation to the body, they do not have the same relation to this whole. At one level they are opposed, but at a higher level north transcends south. They are, then, hierarchically opposed, and north is more important in relation to the whole (Dumont 1979:810). I cannot say if at the highest level north will always be dominant, since there are further situations and elements to consider. North is associated with seniority, male, inside, ancestors, the deities, and *harikabilās*. Among further aspects to be considered are purity and fertility. By distinguishing hierarchical levels however, I have begun to draw 'the main lines of organization of the ideological whole...' (ibid:813). Perhaps the number of value-ideas clustered around the north may suggest that we are in the 'zone' where 'the fundamental idea, the mother of all others... is hiding' (ibid.: 814).

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