

THARU MATS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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In a footnote in one of his earlier publications Andrew Duff-Cooper summed up some of the main ideas that guided him in his work:

The phrase 'holistic account' means little more, in my view, than that, as Hocart...advises, as an ethnographer one should take nothing for granted in recording as faithfully and in as much detail as one can what the people with whom one lives do and what they say (and write) about what they do. In doing this I, at least, was guided by the view that every social fact no matter how impressive or how seemingly trivial was potentially interesting and significant in the attempt to come to some understanding of the form of life of the people with whom I lived on Lombok. (Duff-Cooper 1984: 43)

I am grateful to the SSRC (now ESRC), the British Academy and the Life Sciences Faculty Research Committee of Oxford Brookes University for financial support for fieldwork in 1979-81, 1985-86 and 1993 respectively. I would also like to thank Jilly Dempsey who first made me think about mats and Dron Rajaure for his comments on a draft of this essay. An earlier version was given in the seminar series 'Anthropological Approaches to Non-Western Art' held at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Oxford, in 1985. It is to be regretted that to date very little research has been done among the various Tharu communities in the Nepalese Terai. Fuller accounts of the Dang Tharu can be found in McDonough 1984, in Krauskopff 1989, and in several works by Rajaure (e.g. 1978, 1981). So far as I know there are no examples of Tharu mats in museums nor are there any published photographs of them. Should any reader be interested, however, I have several slides showing these mats being made.

There is a lot packed into these two sentences, but certainly one of the key notions for Andrew was 'form of life'. Throughout his work Andrew sought to trace linkages between diverse aspects of the life of the Balinese on Lombok, aspects that were shown to be related and ordered by fundamental structuring principles in Balinese collective thought. In a parallel but less thoroughgoing manner I seek in this essay to show how mats, and what people do with them, reflect or embody wider aspects of the social structure of the Dang Tharu caste group of Nepal, particularly with regard to the respective positions of men and women in Tharu communities.

Quite rightly, Andrew advocated that the ethnographer must record carefully what people do and what they say about what they do. To an extent I have tried to do this, but the analysis here goes further than the explicit statements about mats that I recorded in the field. In particular, the correspondences I draw between the structure of mats and gender divisions go beyond anything that the Tharu themselves said to me. This is not surprising, since the Tharu I know do not have much to say about mats in a general, synthesizing way. They do not spend much time reflecting on an aspect of everyday life that is instead taken for granted. Nevertheless, I have discussed the gist of this analysis with several Tharu men and women whose reaction tended to be quizzical amusement combined with comments to the effect that they themselves had not thought of relating together the various facts about mats in the way attempted here. The implication for me, however, is a familiar though important one, namely that 'social facts', on which Andrew placed so much emphasis, do not simply speak for themselves. To make sense of them the ethnographer has to arrange them into some sort of pattern.

Mats (*gondri*) conform to two standard traditional designs: the *petār gondri* made by women and the *dhacyā gondri* made by men. There is no room for variation or for individual expression. Some people produce a few mats for sale locally, usually to households of other castes, but mat production is not a significant economic activity, nor is it seen by the Tharu or other castes as a key defining feature of Tharu communities. Both men's mats and women's mats are required in a few specific contexts, as I shall explain below, but mats are also essential pieces of household equipment used in a wide variety of everyday mundane situations. The manufacture of mats is linked to the gender division in Tharu life, so I shall begin with a summary outline of the social structure focusing on the different structural positions of men and women. To highlight certain contrasts between the two types I shall then describe the design and production of mats. In the third section I explore the principal uses of mats, and in the conclusion I relate the design and use of mats to the wider social structure.

Structural Positions of Men and Women

At the most inclusive level the Tharu of Dang form a largely endogamous group, which like other such groups in Nepal is referred to as a *jāt*. As a *jāt* the Tharu have their place in the local hierarchy of castes, but like many other groups in Nepal they possess a number of cultural features that distinguish them from Hindu castes in the region.¹ Internally the Tharu are divided into an indefinite number of patrilineal exogamous groups (*gotyār*). The *gotyār* is not a corporate group: it does not hold land or ritual sites in common, nor is it integrated by an overall lineage structure. Each *gotyār* is identified and distinguished by its deities. In theory each *gotyār* has a unique combination of these represented in every household of the *gotyār*. The Tharu have no substantive idiom for expressing kinship, for instance in terms of shared blood or bone as is common among other groups in the region. The agnatic kinship of shared *gotyār* membership is ultimately anchored in and conceived of in terms of a common relationship to shared deities. This has been aptly described by Krauskopff (1989) as *filiation spirituelle*. The relations between a household and its deities are of crucial importance, and it is the men and the hereditarily linked household priest who between them maintain relations with the deities through the performance of household rituals. The women of the household have virtually no role in these rituals.

The operative unit of the *gotyār* is the household, which is often joint, consisting typically of a man, his wife and their married sons. Within the household there is a hierarchy structured by seniority according to generation and age, with the position of household head (*ghardhurryā*) held by the father and then by his eldest son. The household head is responsible for representing the household in such external contexts as village meetings, for performing many of the household rituals, for apportioning daily tasks among household members, and for controlling cash.

Marriage is governed principally by the negative rule of *gotyār* exogamy; it is not structured by any ideology of transgenerational alliance. A woman leaves the house on marriage and enters that of her husband. At first, a married woman comes under the authority of her parents-in-law, but later her position in the household will depend on her husband's place in the age order. Thus a woman who marries an eldest son will become *ghardhurnyā* and exercise control over domestic matters including the day-to-day use of food stores and the distribution of household tasks among the other wives.

A woman's *gotyār* affiliation is ambiguous and transitional. She does not properly belong to her natal *gotyār* since she is destined to leave it on marriage. This is reflected in her exclusion from certain household rituals, particularly those

1. The Tharu of Dang are only one of several Tharu groups that inhabit districts throughout the southern Terai region of Nepal, and which collectively number some 750,000 people. When I write of the Tharu here I am referring only to the Dang Tharu.

concerning death. After marriage a woman begins a process of assimilation into her husband's household and *gotyār*. This matter is complicated and to do it justice requires fuller discussion than is possible here. Certainly the marriage ceremony itself marks an important stage in this transition, as does the birth and later the marriage of her first son, but there is a sense in which a woman's incorporation only becomes fully complete after her death, when as an ancestor she is ritually seated along with the other ancestors in the deity-room of her marital household.

This brief account of Tharu social structure is incomplete, but allows us to point to fundamental differences in the structural positions of men and women. Men have a permanent and unchanging *gotyār* identity whereas women move from one group to another. Similarly, men remain in the household, while women move from house to house. In general, therefore, we can view Tharu society as composed of groups organized around men who occupy positions which in a structural sense are fixed, whereas women move between these groups and in a manner which is essentially unstructured, other than by the fundamental negative rule of *gotyār* exogamy. A woman's structural position within her marital household is dependent on that of her husband.

Naming, Manufacture and Design

Both types of Tharu mat are made from the same kind of pliable reed-like plant (*gwān*), which is grown and prepared by the Tharu themselves. The women dry the reeds and trim them to the required length. Generally speaking, women work singly when making *petār* mats. These may be made at any time of year, but most often women work on them in otherwise slack periods, especially during the hottest time of the year in April and May. Occasionally, a mat may be begun by one woman but then finished at a later time by a different woman of the household. The maker begins at one corner and plaits the reeds together so that the resulting structure is a criss-cross pattern with the reeds lying diagonally to the rectangular border. The mat has no orientating features: it has no top or bottom sides and no head end. In most cases these mats are not coloured, though occasionally single strands of reeds dyed red, green or purple may be woven in.

There was no clear view or consensus on the meaning of the name *petār* among the men and women with whom I discussed it. However, some of the local etymologies are interesting since they point to an association between this type of mat and women, belts (only worn by women), the stomach and birth. One man's suggestion was that the name derives from *pyet*, meaning stomach. And, indeed, women use this type of mat when giving birth, after which the midwife throws away the umbilical cord with the blood-stained *petār* mat. The term *pyet* is used to refer in a general way to the area of the stomach and abdomen and so, the

argument goes, since this mat is used for the birth, the blood and the umbilical cord, all of which have come from the *pyet*, the mat is called *petār*. Other suggestions were that the name is related to the words *peti*, meaning belt, and *petār*, meaning a horse's saddle-belt. The associations here are unclear since *petār* mats are not used as belts or waist bands, but Dron Rajaure, a Nepalese colleague who has studied and written on the Dang Tharu, has suggested to me that the link is in the fact that in the recent past women's belts consisted of narrow strips of cloth made from jute-like thread woven in the same kind of diagonal weave used in making *petār* mats. I do not know what the linguistic merits of such folk etymologies may be, and they were also no doubt prompted by my own line of questioning, but they serve to underline a view of this type of mat as essentially associated with women and, as part of this, with birth, an exclusively female event.

Dhacyā mats can be made by one man working alone, but much more commonly they are made by groups of men working together. They are made in the large, hall area of the house in the evenings, and sometimes friends and neighbours may gather to help the men of the house with the work. Unlike women's mats, which can be made at any time of year, men's mats are always made in the weeks leading up to the major *Dasyā* (Dasain) festival in September/October. The *dhacyā* mat has a more elaborate design than the *petār* mat. First, a warp of several strands of grass rope is stretched out on pegs set into the ground. Across these ropes a weft of reeds is threaded and set in place by a wooden bar lying across the warp. The resulting weave is thus rectangular. The *dhacyā* mat is most often made without any extra colouring, having only the natural colour of the reeds themselves. Occasionally, however, red, green or purple reeds are woven in to form a simple design of single strands of colour alternating with the natural reeds, or forming a chequered pattern with blocks of colour. Mats incorporating coloured designs are considered finer work than ordinary mats.

The finished mat is orientated in two ways: there is a head (*sir*) end, which is where the construction of the mat begins, and a tail (*puchi*) end where it finishes, and there is a top side marked by a double line of beading along both the long edges, and a bottom side marked by a single line of beading. It is considered inauspicious or unlucky (*alacchin*) to sit on a mat with its bottom side up, or to sleep on a mat with one's head at the 'tail' end.²

The orientating features of the *dhacyā* mat are encountered in other contexts in which the 'head' is opposed to the 'tail' as senior to junior. The north end of the house is sometimes referred to as the 'head'. This is where the kitchen and deity room are located and where the household head as most senior member

2. Similar ideas about the correct placing of mats have been reported in these pages for the Rai of east Nepal: 'it is *kholo* [ill-omened, unlucky, taboo] to spread a *gundri* (rectangular mat made of rice straw) so that the part made first (the head end, recognisable by the shorter loops of the warps as they circle back to re-enter the weft) lies downhill' (Allen 1972: 86). The head end of the Tharu mat is identified in the same way.

sleeps, usually in the deity-room. Similarly, in certain possession rituals (*gurai*) that require two officiants, the senior priest who invokes the deities sits in the 'head' position, while the junior officiant who acts as the medium, sits in the 'tail' position, always to the left of the senior priest. The contrast between the double and single line of beading is less clearly identified, but in rituals and in the transfer of certain prestations, offerings or gifts should be made in pairs (*jor*). Thus in the bridegroom's marriage procession a small string of fish is carried, with the fish arranged in pairs: this is simply called *sagun* or 'auspicious'. Although I cannot demonstrate it here, it seems that for the Tharu a whole or a complete unit should in many contexts consist of two elements forming a pair.

Uses

The uses of the two types of mat present a number of important contrasts. While both types of mats are used in everyday mundane or informal contexts for sitting or sleeping on, in general the *petār* mat is preferred. It is smoother, more pliable, more comfortable, more versatile (in that it comes in a greater range of sizes), and it is probably more durable. The *dhacyā* mat, however, is required for a range of more formal contexts. It is preferable, though not essential, to offer important guests a *dhacyā* mat for sitting on when they arrive, and for when they are later given beer and food. In many household rituals, particularly those that require the household priest, such a mat is provided for the officiant. In funeral ceremonies any mat may be used, but if a *dhacyā* mat is used for carrying the corpse it must be inverted. A new *dhacyā* mat is required in the *Dasyā* festival for the preparation of certain foods and for the ritual feeding of the ancestors. Special foods are laid out on the floor of the deity-room and a new mat is spread out for the ancestors. Finally, the *dhacyā* mat forms an essential part of the prestations transferred from the bridegroom's household to his wife's natal household and to certain other affinally related households. The only special use of the *petār* mat is, as noted above, for birth.

Two particular uses of the *dhacyā* mat explain why it is made in the period leading up to the *Dasyā* festival. First, a new mat is required for the ancestors, and second, it is in the period after *Dasyā* that this type of mat has to be given as a prestation. After marriage, which usually takes place in February/March, a series of prestations, including such objects as a bed, a stool and a rain shield are given at various times over the following months to the wife's natal household. In the first year after marriage the post-*Dasyā* prestation consists of a cock, a pot of rice liquor and a *dhacyā* mat. In subsequent years, all the other prestations are gradually discontinued, but the post-*Dasyā* gifts are continued indefinitely, though in the reduced form of only a mat and a pot of liquor. It is also customary for a man to give a *dhacyā* mat when he participates in the festivities surrounding a

marriage or a first hair-cutting ceremony in his wife's natal household and in certain other households to which he is related through his wife. As prestations, then, *dhacyā* mats, along with certain other items, pass in the opposite direction, so to speak, to women.

Conclusion

The *gotyār* and the household, the fundamental Tharu social units other than the village, are organized around men. In a structural sense men have a permanent and unchanging identity whereas women do not; women move from their natal household on marriage, when they begin a gradual process of assimilation into their husband's household. In a parallel fashion, men make *dhacyā* mats, with their definite structure and series of orientations, in groups; women make their *petār* mats, which lack any orientating features, on their own. Linguistically these mats are not gendered, but they clearly are gendered in their manufacture and uses, which associate them with strongly gendered social contexts. Men's mats are used in certain rituals, as prestations, and as seating for important guests, all social situations controlled by men. Women's mats are used for a whole range of everyday household needs, and during birth, both areas of social life centred on women.

When we consider as a whole all these social facts concerning mats, which for much of the time could be taken as among the 'seemingly trivial' aspects of Tharu social life, it appears that, in their manner of manufacture and in their various uses, mats embody key aspects of the structural positions of men and women and underline the gendered quality of some of the social domains in which men and women play leading roles. In their manufacture and uses, mats embody aspects of the structural positions and gender roles of their makers, but when we consider the movement or lack of movement of mats, for instance the role of *dhacyā* mats in prestations, in relation to the respective structural positions of men and women, then the mats reflect a sort of inversion or reversal of the structural characteristics of their respective makers. Men do not move but the mats they make do, and their mats move in the opposite direction to women; whereas women move but their *petār* mats do not move in any ordered fashion at all.³

3. There are parallels here with weaving among the Tamang, another Nepalese ethnic group. In a discussion of Tamang writing and weaving in relation to gender, March has commented: 'women's weaving is uniquely associated with the flux and irregularities of marital exchange; men's writing with the fixity and preordination of localised clan identities' (1983: 729).

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