Barter, exchange and value

An anthropological approach

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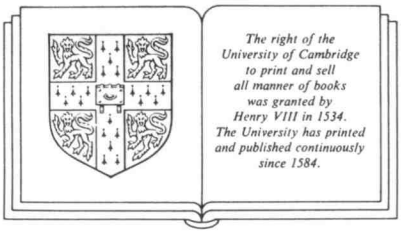

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5 Fair dealing, just rewards: the ethics of barter in North-East Nepal

Caroline Humphrey

This paper discusses some implications of barter for morality and ethnicity. In the Arun Valley of North-East Nepal barter is not a haphazard expedient, but is the major type of economic transaction both between and within ethnic groups. This paper shows what kind of social relations are created by barter when it is a constant feature of the regional economy. In barter, unlike many gift-exchange systems, people transact different items (they acquire what they have not got and vice versa) and thus barter tends to link micro-economies which, at least in this respect, are dissimilar from one another. Towards the end of the paper it is suggested that the shifting ethnic identities for which highland Nepal is so well known can be seen as consequent on the dependencies and enmities created by barter. Here, the more marked ethnic distinctions need not imply hostility. People define themselves as different from those with whom they exchange products in long-term relations, but they are also dependent on, and need to maintain trust with such groups. On the other hand, they are in frequently hostile competition with the groups which have a similar economic niche and economic values to themselves. To demonstrate these points the paper will focus on the Lhomi, a group of farmers and traders, in their situation in the vertical Himalayan economy.

In relating such a system to morality, one could make the point that ethics in any culture must extend *even* to what has been seen in Western tradition as typically amoral, i.e. barter, simply because it is a regular part of social life; or, that any deal once accomplished is 'fair', since the two parties have accepted it. But this paper makes the stronger point that it is because barter is essentially a voluntary, ungoverned agreement between individuals, a choice to agree, in a situation which has variable consequences for both parties, that it becomes a crucial arena for ethical action. In societies which live mainly by barter it can be seen, both systematically and from the point of view of the actors, as having, even engendering, a morality[1] of its own.

Barter in non-market economies is not the mutual handing-over of objects of externally defined equal value. In true barter systems (those with

no numeraire, monetary or otherwise) there is no criterion by which a general value may be established. Objects always have different statuses in the micro-systems of each of the transactors, but in a barter economy there is no mechanism to measure individual bargains whereby they can be compared with one another, either across the range of goods or through time (see Introduction and Strathern, this volume). Therefore in barter the two sides must *agree*, and agree each time anew, that their transaction is fair. It is because barter in farming economies tends to be repetitive and to operate with known partners (Humphrey, 1985), because a transaction may really advantage or disadvantage people, and because of the absence of any sanctions outside the fact of the agreement, that we can speak of morality in this context. The moral obligation, in the case of the Lhomi, is to create or preserve a mutual sense of 'fairness' and trust, in which each side takes responsibility as recipient both for his/her satisfaction and that of the other.

Something like this may apply in barter systems in general, but in the Buddhist cultures of North-East Nepal it rests on a particular social organisation built of nested, yet discrete and 'closed' units: the adult person, household, village, clan, and ethnic group (von Furer-Haimendorf, 1965 and 1975). The household is the most important of these transacting units, since it is the major locus of property rights (Ortner, 1978) and barter almost never takes place between its members. In general we can see groups at each level from the household and above as nested 'moral' as well as economic communities. The individual acts both for himself or herself and a representative of any or all of these communities. Any given transaction can be seen by particular transactors as simultaneously self-oriented *and* fair, precisely because their interests, as members of different communities, are dissimilar.

In this paper the term 'barter' will be used in an inclusive sense following the practice of the people concerned. They do not separate the direct swapping of goods from delayed exchange (the return is made after some time), nor from the transfer of goods against labour or services, repaid simultaneously or later. The element of delay, made inevitable by the timing of harvests in the vertical economy, requires trust (Anderlini and Sabourian, this volume). This means that 'barter' includes what Sahlins (1972) calls 'primitive trade', i.e. where exchange rates are subordinated to the social relations between the actors.

The direct involvement in barter of one's work or its products engages any individual in his or her identity as a specific person. Both this, and the frequent need to involve trust, raise the ethical stakes, as it were. We might also say that barter involves ethics in a general and systemic sense, because the exchange of unlike objects and services in a historically established

pattern creates the identities of communities, and engenders regional dependencies between them (as well as those between households). These have the character of organic solidarity, that is reciprocal dependence, which engenders regard for the other as a necessity for long-term preservation of a given economic specialisation. This reciprocal dependence, which Gregory (1982) claims is characteristic of 'the gift' as opposed to 'the commodity', I would see as equally present, in a different form, in barter.

As Parry (1986) has pointed out, there are important differences in the ideology of 'the gift' between its classic tribal home (Melanesia, Polynesia) and the regions of Asia dominated by world religions. In India the gift (*dana*) does not constrain a return, but is rather a religious transfer without return, embodying the sins of the donor, a surrogate for sacrifice. The gift is separated from other transactions of the complex economy precisely by its religious connotations. The Lhomi have a tribal society, but they are also Buddhists, i.e. adherents of a religion which pervasively ethicises actions. I suggest that there it is not just goods in the form of gifts which embody the moral person (1986: 460), as in urban India, but the entire range of tribal products involved in barter as well as presentations. Furthermore, religious ideology does not stop short at a conceptualisation of 'the gift', but encompasses all transactions. As Parry rightly points out it is only in the Christian, not the Asian, world that the theory of pure utility has developed, making the things of this world antithetical to the person's true self (1986: 468). In the tribal world of North-East Nepal, essentially without markets or complex urban economic organisations, and also without the Melanesian-type institution of 'the gift', all transactions, including barter, cannot but involve the person, and hence intentions and obligations, subject to religious values.

In the Buddhist worldview, I suggest, an analogy can be made between the ethics of barter and aspects of the local understanding of the doctrine of *karma*. Fürer-Haimendorf (1984), Ortner (1978) and others have noted the dominance of this idea in the Tibetan-type societies of North-East Nepal.

> The entire moral system is dominated by the belief in merit and sin ... Every individual has a kind of spiritual account and every act of virtue adds, every sinful act diminishes, this valuable store. The addition and subtraction of merit are more or less mechanical. Throughout a person's life appropriate points result from good or bad deeds. After death the balance of good or bad marks influence the fate of men and women, expressed in good or undesired reincarnations. (Schrader, 1988: 237–8)

Morality in Buddhist culture gives far greater priority to the perfection of the self, as opposed to disinterested action in favour of the other, than in

most Western traditions. Yet few things are more 'moral' in the sense of spiritual benefit to the self than compassion for the other. In other words the obligation in Buddhist culture is to have regard for the other, which in the end is reducible to preserving the capacity of the other to act in the way appropriate for that other (for example, a hare must be allowed to act as a hare should). Fulfilling this obligation, which is nevertheless a matter of choice, is of inevitable religious advantage to the self. The moral obligation here is not so much a matter of charity, so emphasised in Christianity, as of justice.

This is different from the fundamentally altruistic character of morality as it is popularly understood in the modern West. But, as Williams points out discussing Plato and Aristotle, egoistic considerations need not contradict ethics. The Grecian tradition, for example, rejects the idea of justice as founded purely on external convention, something one would not want to follow if one did not have to. So ethics can be based, as in Buddhism, on an idea of internally generated spiritual self-improvement. This has an important implication. It cannot be presumed that there is some universal self, some set of individual satisfactions which is well-defined before ethical considerations appear. 'Their [Plato's and Aristotle's] aim is not, given an account of the self and its satisfactions, to show how the ethical self luckily fits them. It is to give an account of the self into which that life fits.' (Williams, 1985: 32)

What is suggested here is not of course that the prevailing socio-economic conditions explain the morality of *karma*, which is a much wider phenomenon, but that barter exchange does engender its own obligations, and that these can readily be understood by people in terms of *karma*. Thus the task of this paper is not only to describe the ethics of barter, but also to explain the Lhomi 'self into which that life fits'. It is important to note at the outset a point I shall return to at the end, that the self appears not just as a single 'individual', but also as the representative of social groups, and that *karma* can apply to communities as well as to individuals.

Barter in society

First of all, what is the social context in which barter exists in North-East Nepal? As Strathern (1986) following Collier and Rosaldo has pointed out, it is useful to distinguish societies with brideservice from those with bridewealth and/or dowry – that is, to distinguish those systems where obligations are fulfilled in labour, while goods, hardly subject to a concept of property, stand only for themselves, from those where goods not only are owned, but also substitutable for people. The societies I shall be discussing are clearly of the latter type. The presence of clan exogamy, brideprice, and 'women's goods' (principally jewellery) are the conditions for marriage as

a transfer of women between groups. Barter in this kind of society involves the transaction of 'characteristic goods', the products of specific labour processes and environments, identified with their community of origin, in much the same way that a bride is identified with her clan or village.

The analogy between barter and marriage can be taken further. Marriage in this region is not really an 'exchange' in the sense that brideprice is considered equal in value to the bride. The brideprice, as in most Tibetan societies, is a fixed sum in money, often a relatively trivial amount.[2] It is an obligation, the payment of the right kind of thing in the right amount to the bride's side, just as she is in effect a payment to the groom's side. Barter has this character of *mutual payment*, as opposed to *equal exchange*, too. One hands over what one is obliged to hand over in the specific relationship with a partner. Where barter and marriage have been thought by anthropologists to differ, lies in the fact of the unequalness of the transaction in marriage and its long-term and systemic consequences (for example alliance), as Levi-Strauss and Sahlins have pointed out, whereas in barter the transfer is agreed to be one of balance – quits, in effect. But this distinction, though it may hold at an abstract level (see Introduction) does not apply to the societies of North-East Nepal: here, on the one hand, barter has long-term 'organic' results, and on the other, marriages are often short-term and considered as finite relations between households.

The Lhomi in this respect are similar to the Sherpas as described by Ortner (1978). She argues that the 'private-property-owning family household' is the significant unit of exchange, that both individuals and households tend toward social closure and resistance to exchange, and that there is a dominant exchange strategy, *yangdzi*, which both reflects and reproduces these tendencies. *Yangdzi* entails softening up the hardness of others to gain their cooperation and it is also a finite contract.

> *Yangdzi* operates at the level of individuals, overcoming their presumed closure to one's appeals for goods or assistance, and it also operates at the level of families: the marriage process may be described as a sort of giant extended *yangdzi*... And just as *yangdzi* leaves individuals independent after the fulfilment of the contract, so it does with families, where once the new couple has finally been established, there are no residual bonds between their respective groups. (1978: 160–1)

My argument is that the finite contractual mode in both marriage and barter in fact masks underlying, deep-moving, relations between groups created by such contracts.

What makes barter among the Lhomi more complex than simple mutual payment is the fact that the barter of objects for use is not differentiated by the people from the acquisition of goods designated for further transactions. I shall follow the Lhomi in grouping all of these under one term, 'barter', using the sub-category 'trade' to mean a series of transactions for

profit. Goods can be switched from consumption to trade, or vice versa. This has two implications: firstly that 'trade' is not divided off as some morally distinct sphere separate from the household economy. In inter-ethnic barter many, if not all, things which are traded are still linked by cultural classifications with their original producers or owners. Even several transactions do not completely destroy the link with the original producers, which remains as a shadow of the idea that goods 'stand for people'.

Secondly, barter as a system is open-ended, and therefore cannot be analysed simply as a relation between two transactions. There are conceivably others in most kinds of deal. What I acquire from you is not just useful for me, but can nearly always be viewed in regard to its potential for someone else as well. This, if acted upon, necessarily requires a transformation of value, in that no goods have an absolutely equivalent place in the systems of consumption of different households, let alone those of 'ethnic groups'. Even potatoes or salt, for example, have different places in the diets of Lhomis and their neighbours to the south, the Gurungs. Goods have acknowledged paths, their origins and their destinations, and the communities which form the stopping-points along the way constitute a web of dependencies. The 'rates' at which goods are transacted do absolutely reflect supply and demand, but the point is that these two categories are culturally determined in very particular ways. 'Supply' and 'demand' thereby lose the capacity to act as abstract concepts for a general analysis.

I shall suggest that barter, which incorporates barter in money (rupees) so that the homogenising valuation role of money is denied (see Humphrey, 1985), is an essential and long-term strategy in transforming the 'meaning' of objects as they pass from one culture to another. Because money itself is bartered, i.e. it has different and inconsistent values as transacted against labour, grains, etc. in one village from another, it cannot act as an external measure for all prices as in a market economy. If the Muria (see Introduction) can maintain 'their' cultural values in the flow of many centuries of Indian cash trading, the Lhomi have done the same by the expedient of refusing to admit money as the index of value. We are dealing here not with the transformation of objects as they pass between *economic systems* (as in the case of Scottish lambs auctioned to EC buyers, see Introduction), but with a movement of goods between differentiated cultures within one barter system. Objects are alienated, but they remain recognisable, 'characteristic' of the economic–cultural type in which they originated, i.e. the tribal 'ethnic group' which produced them. This is the case not only because of differences of environment in the vertical regional economy, but also because of deliberately maintained cultural speciali-

sations. This establishes different values for particular goods as they move from culture to culture (Appadurai, 1986, Introduction). The use of money as an index and the introduction of markets would transform such a system, creating uniform values where none exist in the process of production.

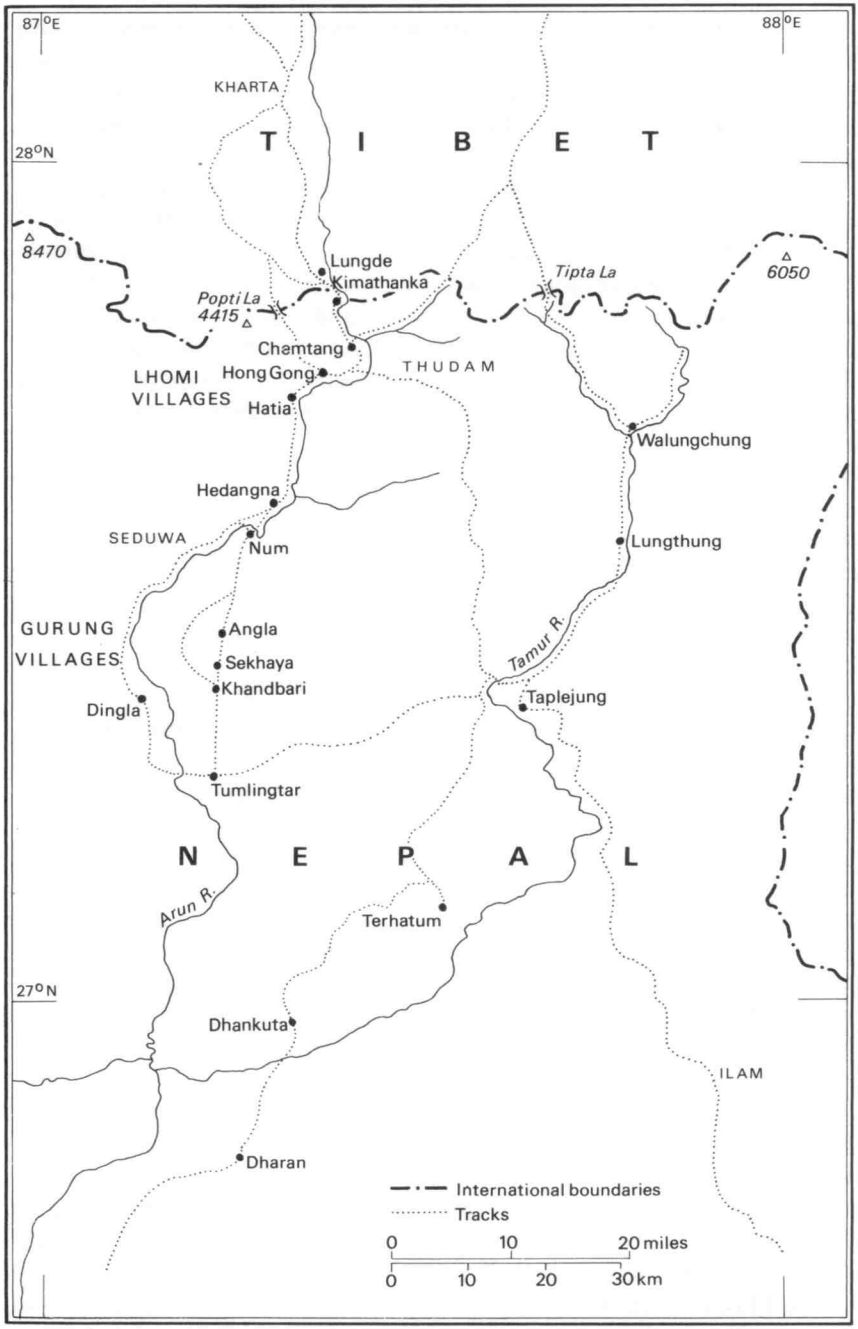
In an earlier paper (Humphrey, 1985) I suggested that it is the present-day weakness of integrative structures among the Lhomi, either 'vertical' (for example taxes via local chiefs to the state) or 'horizontal' (for example large-scale and long-distance trading organisations), which allow them to deny the index-of-value function of money and give preference to barter. This would suggest, *contra* Hart (1987), that in this region at least, over-arching political structures are not necessary for barter to function amicably. Hart's argument appears to rest on the old presupposition of the hostile nature of barter relations. In North-East Nepal, where self-interest and morality are not in conflict, barter itself is not perceived as antagonistic, rather the reverse. It is precisely the links created by barter which establish friendly relations and which cross ethnic and political boundaries, as we shall see from a discussion of the strategic position the Lhomi find themselves in.

Lhomi barter in the regional political economy

The Lhomi (Nep. Kar Bhote) are a small group of farmer-traders who live in some fourteen villages on the craggy slopes of the Arun Valley just south of the border with Tibet. They speak a dialect of Tibetan, are Buddhists, and basically share the *rong* (deep valley) variant of Tibetan culture. However, as far as memory goes back, they have not been included in the Tibetan state, but loosely attached to the Himalayan polities which took it in turns to claim control of the region, the Gorkha kingdom, Walong-chung, Sikkim, and now the kingdom of Nepal. One political advantage to the Lhomi of maintaining an essentially non-monetised economy lay in the possibility this gave them of de-linking themselves from monetary taxation, of being 'unable to pay'. It did not free them from dues paid in kind, but put them at a remove from direct monetary domination.

Trade systems in this region run north–south, down the valleys which link Tibet with the plains. To the north of the Lhomi in the Arun valley, on the very border, are Chiawa farmer-livestock herders. Their neighbours to the south are a series of farming tribes, Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, and Gurungs, which occupy ecological niches at lower altitudes. Yet further south are settlements of Hindu farmers, Bahuns (Brahmins) and Chetris.

The Lhomi correlate this complex ethnic situation with three ways of gaining a living: there are the high-altitude nomadic pastoralists of Tibet



Map of North-East Nepal.

'*ḍog-pa*'[3] (*brog pa*), the semi-settled herder-farmers of the border '*sa-ma ḍog*' (*sa ma brog*), and the village-based farmers '*shing sa-wa*' (*zhing sa pa*), the category which includes both themselves and all the other tribal groups living below them. The products of these three ways of life are different, and exchange between them is expected and integral to the economy. They are like three pools, each with a different eco-system. Since the southern tribes also occupy slightly different niches, they too can be seen as distinct pools within the category of the '*shing saw-wa*' farmers.

ḍog-pa	*sama ḍog*	*shing sa-wa*
Tibetans	Chiawa	Lhomi
	Makalu 'Sherpa'	
		Rai
		Tamang
		Gurung
		Limbu
		+
		Bahun
		Chetri

Within these categories, if we take the Lhomi point of view, there is today a particular pattern of barter dictated by their strategic–ecological position. The important communities for them are: the Tibetan *ḍog-pa* nomads, the Lhomi *shing sa-wa* themselves, and the Gurung farmers of the southern hills. The *ḍog-pas* produce meat, dried fats, butter, woollen goods and yak hair products which are essential to the Lhomi way of life. They also acquire from inside Tibet salt, and various medicinal and religious goods which can be traded by the Lhomi southwards. The Lhomi add to these numerous small items for trade, which they either produce themselves, such as garlic, pig's bristles and potatoes, or gather in the forests, herbs, poisons and antidotes, wax, musk, hartshorn, bear's bile, etc. These are taken south, together with the Tibetan goods, to trade with the Gurungs and other peoples. These lowland farmers produce rice, maize and millet which are essential to the Tibetan diet, and are taken north by the Lhomi to complete the circle.[4] Very little trade takes place between the various Lhomi villages, and still less between them and the various Bhote neighbours with similar economies to the Lhomi. It is complementary economies which trade.

The weak link in the present circuit is the Lhomi to Gurung trade, since from the 1960s the southern hills were flooded with Indian salt which almost eliminated demand among Gurungs for Tibetan salt. Lhomi supplies of herbs, pig's bristles or Chinese gym-shoes cannot make up for what was once a dependency. They were, however, able to bind the Gurung farmers to them by another tie. The Gurungs arrived in this area of Eastern

Nepal as *raikar* farmers, that is, without hereditary communal rights (*kipat*) to land.[5] They needed access to pasture for their flocks of sheep, since the production of woollen goods for trade was one of their most important economic activities. The Lhomi headmen, who did have *kipat* rights to land, seized the opportunity to sell rights of use of their pastures to the Gurungs. These pastures are located in the high mountains to the north and west of Lhomi villages. The result is a complex relationship, whereby Gurung shepherds, attached to farming households in the south, trek up and through the Lhomi villages several times a year. They put their sheep on Lhomi fields for fertiliser, and take Lhomi flocks along with their own, and in return the Lhomi provide food, shelter, storage facilities, and labour to help with herding and shearing. Many Gurungs have secondary wives, whom they send up to live in Lhomi villages half-way to the pastures. In winter Lhomis flock down south to escape the cold and to work in Gurung farms for payments in rice and other grains, hides, and sometimes even cattle, all being items which can be profitably bartered later with the Tibetans. The pastures and support for the shepherds who use them are absolutely necessary for the Gurungs, nearly all of whom keep sheep. It is lucky for the Lhomi that the issue of the legality of *kipat* in relation to usufructuary rights has never been decided, despite Gurung representations to the government. This gives the Lhomi some edge in a relation which otherwise would tend to favour the Gurungs, and it is the background to the many trade friendships between people of the two groups.

Lhomi trade has also been able to withstand, more or less, the other major change to affect the situation, the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. It seems clear from my informants that when the Chinese invaded they also took a sizeable chunk of good summer pasture at Lungde, moving the border south, so that the Tibetan *dog pas* who used to live in the same political realm as the Lhomis are now cut off by a major guarded frontier. The Chiawa *sama dog*s are now on the southern side of the border, at Kimathanka, and find themselves in conflict with the Lhomis over control of the trade down the Arun valley. The construction of a good trail up to Kimathanka to service the Nepali border troops stationed there has enhanced the position of the Chiawas. Being on the spot, they are known personally to the Chinese border guards, who allow them to trade in Tibet and take their yaks to summer pasture there. Other communities from Nepal wanting to trade or use the pastures are forced to pay fees in butter and accept high Chinese official exchange ratios which do not correspond to the rates offered by ordinary Tibetans on the black market. All of this has made the Chiawas a very rich community indeed, and has limited the possibility for a *sama dog* way of life in the Lhomi region.[6] The Lhomis'

only recourse is to bypass the Chiawas by maintaining their primary trading links with the Tibetan community at Khada, accessible by a different and more difficult route over the Popti La pass.

Ideas of trade, profit and debt

Transactions between the groups in the Lhomi circuit are seen in terms of what we might call 'balanced recompense'. Barter in the sense of giving one thing and getting another is called '*jeba*' (*brje ba*), while '*jebo*' (*brje bo*), means to compensate, or make up to the other. Barter as a total transaction between two people is '*jelen*' '*len*' (*lan*), meaning 'mutual reply', 'return', or 'retaliation'. The idea of reciprocity is to be expected for barter, but more surprising is its compatibility with the concepts of both trade and debt.

The term '*tsong*' (*tshong*) is the most generally used, and encompasses all of the above and trade outside the village. It simply means a transaction carried out for one's own benefit. Profit can derive from one transaction, which both sides consider fair, each giving away something he wants less for something desired more. It can also derive from trading, i.e. from two (or more) barter exchanges, the first in one place and the second in another, each of them fair in its context. The profit results from the differences in values in the two pools. No distinction is made between the products which are simply bartered on one's own territory and those which are traded on. Potatoes, for example, are at the consumption end of the spectrum, but people do also trade them, i.e. they will barter other products to obtain potatoes in the village, add these to what they have produced themselves, and take the lot down south to trade for grain and make a profit. Or, as in the following diagram, trader B barters his onions for wool in his home village 1 at a rate which is considered fair on both sides, and then travels down to village 2, where he trades the wool against grain. The profit lies in the fact that the amount of grain he receives is worth more in village 1 than the onions first paid out, i.e. x is worth more to the trader than y, despite the travelling time involved.

Location 1	**Location 2**
A trades with B	B trades with C
B receives z amount of wool	B pays z amount of wool
pays y amount of onion	receives x amount of grain

Debt is known as '*bulon*' (*bu lon*), this being exactly debt as we know it, used both for the situation created by delayed barter and for formal loans with interest charged at set rates for the time elapsed before repayment. In practice, however, debts do not have the social connotations of inequality

we might expect. Many loans are given to kin or close associates in the village,[7] and Lhomis say that virtually everyone takes them at some time during the year. They are not given out to make a profit. There are no money-lenders in Lhomi villages. What happens is that a person requiring funds discovers that someone has some spare cash or grain, or any tradable item in fact, and begs it as a loan. The giver is reluctant because he or she knows that loans are used mainly for trade and the principal may never be returned, let alone the interest. Giving out a loan means that the creditor will himself probably have to take out a loan in order to do the business he had been planning. On the other hand it is socially difficult to refuse a loan. In these circumstances, the pressure put on the borrower is a moral one in my experience: when a loan is taken a lamp is lit, a ritual scarf offered to the creditor, a vow is made by the borrower, and the lender makes some resigned and magnanimous statement to the effect, 'Pay me back if you can.'

Trade and barter in practice

Here I use the term 'barter' for a single transaction, and 'trade' for a series of linked barter deals. Let us look at trade to the north first. This is carried out with Tibetans not at entrepôts or markets, but individually, frequently with lifetime exchange partners who are known as '*dog-po*' (*grogs po*), 'friend'. The 'friends' formerly used to arrive in Lhomi villages with loads on yaks or carrier-sheep, and were received with enormous welcome and civility, with ritual scarves, bowings, speeches, *chang*, and gifts. Such large transports from Tibet now (1979–80) being forbidden, most trade is done by Lhomis who go into Tibet on foot, in *ad hoc* groups of two to three, carrying their goods themselves. It is rare to take porters, and the companions share their profits equally. They stay in caves or in the open on the way, and with their Tibetan friends when they reach their destination. Transactions are subject to changes in rates depending on the local situation. Any kind of item for which there is a demand can be bartered. Even though people sometimes said 'Food should not be exchanged for goods', in practice, in the early 1980s, this was far from true. I could see no evidence of 'spheres of exchange'. From the Tibetan side come wool, butter, cheese, dried meat, yak tails, roast barley flour, livestock, salt, woven aprons, jackets, rugs, sacks, religious objects, antique carpets, musical instruments, musk, hartshorn, herbs, tea, Chinese boots, caps, jackets, and gym-shoes, bowls and knives, vacuum flasks, matches, even a so-called phoenix egg, and so on. These are traded freely with rice, maize, millet, and other grains, chillies, amber, silver coins, hides, watches, tobacco, sugar, biscuits, vegetable dyes, torches, batteries, cotton cloth, bangles, etc. from the south of Nepal. The poverty of the Tibetan

communes in the early 1980s put the Lhomis in an advantageous position. 'If you take grains to Khada', they used to say, 'you can ask for *anything* in return.'

Where the barter trade takes place is important. The person arriving to trade is a visitor, the person *in situ* the host, known as the 'owner' (*bdag po*). In return for the protection and hospitality offered by the host, the visitor is supposed to make the greater concession in bargaining, which in effect means, after due negotiation, accepting the going rate in that place. The situation is reversed when the host goes to trade on the visitor's territory.[8]

Accepting the going rate also means using the weights and measures of the locality. The Tibetans use different ones from the Lhomi, and the Lhomi different ones from the people further south. Now the expression 'weights and measures' may convey the wrong impression. It is true that people do talk in terms of rates for barter. People will say: 'This year in our village two *kathi*s (a round wooden pot) of maize exchange for three of potato seed, but last year it was three *kathi*s of maize for two of potato seed, and yes, we give four *doko*s (baskets) of manure for one *kathi* of salt', and so on for many, many different items. The whole thing is quite extraordinarily complicated. What they do not bother to say is that all these *kathi*s and *doko*s are home-made, and that my *doko* may be really much bigger than yours. It is as though the stated rates are just a way of being able to think, 'Well, what we had was a fair deal.' They standardise transactions only in an approximate way. For many goods, of different qualities, like woven aprons, which are exchanged against grain, there are no stated rates. Everything depends on whether you want a warm apron or a beautiful one, or how much you want one at all. The word 'bargaining' also may convey a mistaken impression of Middle Eastern haggling which is a sort of standardised game of wits. Here negotiation is hardly a confrontation at all, but rather a polite petitioning from the visitor.[9] All this means is that for us, as anthropologists, to talk in terms of 'exchange ratios' misses the point. What people are doing is substituting one good for another according to what is, in the last resort, the host's village view of what is fair.

In fact set barter trade rates, where they exist, are not really so much addressed to the incoming traders as they are to other co-villagers. Richer houses with plentiful stocks to dispose of would benefit by bartering at lower rates. I did not think to enquire on this myself while in the field, but Baumgartner's material on the Sherpas shows clearly that the rationale of barter rates, which are collectively established at the beginning of the season, is village solidarity expressed as a means whereby poorer people are not disadvantaged (Baumgartner, 1980: 135). The obligation not to

vary widely from the rates is a duty to one's co-villagers, and the benefitting of one's barter opposite may be expressed by little tokens around this.

When people calculate the 'value' of what they are giving up in relation to what they are receiving, this is in relation not to an abstract 'price', but to their own possibilities, both at home and in further transactions in the personalised trade circuit they have created. Such circuits are highly individual. The possibility of trading at all depends on there being sufficient workers in the household to take care of the farm during trade journeys.

Let us look at this question in relation to trade in the south. This is numerically the main direction of trade, since nearly all families can go there during the slack winter months, whereas only the households with many working members can afford to send someone north to Tibet during the summer. Poorer people have to make do with the south. They usually do not have Tibetan goods to trade, but have to rely on what they have produced or gathered locally, and these form 'packages' of great variety. For example, one man from Chemtang took south home-made incense, ropes, *kurki* (a medicinal herb) and bamboo baskets, while another took spices, garlic, wax for seals, and poisons. Some people rely on one large item such as an ox, bought in the south with a loan, to be laboriously urged over the mountains and sold for a profit at home. Such circuits create their own 'prices'. Thus, for example, if someone acquired in the village some Tibetan yak-hair sacks and took them on his circuit, he might have a good idea what he could ask for them from his friend A in Angla, but this would not be identical with what a co-villager might get for them from his friend B in Sekhaya.

Even in the south, where there is more of a market economy, money does not affect this situation much. Not only is it difficult even for lowland villagers to get to market (hours of laborious walking), but the demand for money among their Lhomi partners is very variable. A certain minimum of money is necessary for everyone in order to buy kerosene, iron, and edible oil at the bazaar.[10] Poor Lhomis sell trivial items for money, such as eggs, beer, or homemade artefacts on the fringes of the weekly market in Khandbari, at the annual fair (*mela*) on the Barun River held in honour of a local deity, or door-to-door in the lowland villages. Quite rich Lhomis will take road-mending contracts for money, and it is common to take occasional work as porters for cash. But many people, especially the poor, virtually avoid the money economy – and yet even they will suddenly need money for a marriage or sacrifice – and then do anything they can to get it.[11]

Larger, more valuable items are never brought south without a known destination, a friend strategically situated. The great majority of trade in the south is done with ritual friends called reciprocally *mit* (pl. *miteri*, f.

mitini) in Nepali. A *mit* must help not only the partner, but also his or her entire pool of relatives, must observe ritual avoidance of the wife or husband, and undertake funerary rites when the *mit* dies. This is a serious, life-time commitment to a relationship with someone of the same sex, similar to that with the Tibetan *dog po* friends, but perhaps more ambiguous because of differences in culture. But in both cases mutual trust is the essence of the relationship, since the reciprocation of barter is often delayed and may be intermeshed with other kinds of help.

As far as I could understand, the poorer Lhomi families who go down south in winter to do odd jobs on Gurung farms do not work for their *miteri*. The labouring relationship, the exchange of work for goods, is an unequal one, inappropriate to ritual friends. Nevertheless the tie is a social one, and far from alienated. It is mediated by long-standing links between Lhomi and Gurung villages. These incorporate not only the use by Gurungs of specific Lhomi communally owned pastures, but also religious links, whereby lamas from Lhomi *gompas* (temples) regularly travel down to the appropriate Gurung village for healing, astrology and the averting of hailstorms. These lamas spend several months of every year in the Gurung village at times when weather-controlling abilities are required. They are highly respected and paid in grains, which they also barter when they go north again. The Lhomis who come down for winter work do not always go to the same Gurung family every year, though they do go to 'known people'. But then, in the linked villages, everyone knows everyone else.

The Lhomis quite deliberately make themselves strange and 'other' to the Gurungs during these trips. They live under trees, in caves or barns and take pains to dress badly and appear poverty stricken. With their long tangled hair and wild demeanour they are even somewhat frightening. But the Gurungs treat them well. The expression used is that the Lhomis have 'come on a visit'. Of the garlic and potatoes they commonly bring with them to barter the Gurungs say: 'If we feel pity we give two *patti*s of millet or maize for one *mana* of garlic, otherwise only one *patti*.' In other words, even in the comparatively depersonalised relations of winter labouring, where people are related more as members of villages than as friends, there is a strong element of individual 'moral' action.

Schrader, describing trade in the Walungchung valley which is adjacent to the Arun to the east, uses the expression 'a moral economy of trade' (c.f. Scott, 1976 'the moral economy of the peasant') to explain exchange relations with the Tibetans (1988: 283–4). In his view, this moral economy does not extend to trade with the culturally more dissimilar people of the south.[12] But according to my material from the Arun Valley the extension is bilateral, and from the theoretical point of view this has to be so, as long

as the mode of exchange continues to be based on repeated acts of barter along known paths of goods.

Let us now turn to barter between households inside the Lhomi village. It is clear that economic power does play some role here, in that one side may be less likely to want to make a deal than the other and therefore can dictate the terms. As one poor man said to me, 'I need oxen every year for ploughing. If they demand [a deal] in work I must go for that, if they demand in grains, then I must pay 32 *kathi*s of maize or millet. They don't want my potatoes.' This being said, even rich people do not usually overstep village rates. These can be upheld as moral obligations because the most scarce item in the Lhomi economy is labour, not land or livestock. Almost every household needs the help of others at some point in the year. Only a tiny number of families do not have land and live by labouring for others. Yet all households, the rich especially, need extra labour at some point, for harvest, building houses, wedding preparations, terracing, and irrigation. We can see from this the enormous significance of labour exchange (*nga-lak*). A day's work is an item which can be acquired normally only for another day's work.[13] The fact that any adult's labour day has equal value establishes a 'natural' equivalence between the parties to barter.

It is an important fact about this society is that this equality applies to women as well as men. A day of female labour is equivalent to that of a man and there is a relative absence of a sexual division of labour.[14] Most women take part in barter on their own account, though when there is a need to travel they usually send a son to do the trip.[15] Thus, although there may be status differences and economic inequalities between the parties to barter, all adults are enabled to be contractual subjects and thereby moral agents in barter.

To summarise: both to the north (Tibet) and the south (the lower hills villages) the Lhomi trade mainly with ritual friends. This is especially true of more valuable items and delayed barter. What is required here is trust, which is what the ritual friendships provide. The exchange of labour for goods during winter in the low hills villages does not take place with ritual partners, but is nevertheless likely to be repeated with the same village, and therefore both sides have an interest in maintaining their reputations, the Lhomi for neediness, and the Gurungs for generosity. Inside the Lhomi home village there is small-scale barter with neighbours and any strangers who come up for local produce, such as potato-seed. Here, village exchange rates are set for given time periods to attempt to ensure that barter is 'fair' in that situation. Finally, Lhomis barter or sell things for cash at fairs and markets, and sporadically hawk goods around houses in the lowlands. The buyers need not be known at all. The 'fairness' of such transactions

depends entirely on each side actually seeing what is offered. With such a wide range of relationships there can be no external social criterion defining what is 'moral' action. But there is, I suggest, a subjective one, based on the actors' mutual assessment of the place of their goods in one another's economic situation. This cannot be equated simply with their agreement to transact, since, as we shall see, people do sometimes cheat and mislead one another.

Cheating

What would be *not* fair in this system? In particular, how does fairness co-exist with self-interest? This question arises in connection with both immediate barter and relations involving debt (delayed barter and internal loans). There are ideas of greater and lesser iniquity in barter. Nancy Levine provided me with some information on this from North-West Nepal which seems similar to the Lhomi practice. Not very serious and relatively common is cheating in immediate barter by supplying products which look, at first sight, all right, but which turn out to be intentionally adulterated, for example grain mixed with the dregs from making beer. In this case, the person might expect to find trading partners doing something comparable, such as providing salt of poor quality or mixed with stones. Such a person would find himself or herself engaged in an escalating battle of deceptive practices, one which produces no greater sanction than grumbling and negative gossip. Such a reputation for lack of fairness would be enough to damage the trade possibilities of most people, but if a trader were able to invest ill-gotten gains in items much needed by neighbours, these people would find themselves taking a risk in trading with him or her again – while making efforts to protect themselves against cheating. The possibility of getting away with it is, in the end, limited by the fact of mutual dependency between neighbours brought about by the scarcity of labour.

Cheating is not identified with exchange rates charged *per se*, because these are tied absolutely to social relationships. People would quote to me escalating rates for a given item with known, distant, and outside people, it being taken for granted that these were 'fair' in the circumstances. A much wider latitude is possible with people who are complete strangers. A Rai assistant of mine was all agog to do a deal involving musk, a highly valuable item. He borrowed money right and left, and went up to the border with China, where he obtained two balls of musk for 2,000 Rs from a Chiawa pastoralist at Kimathanka whom he did not know at all. He gloated that he would be able to sell them in Kathmandu for 5,000 Rs. But when we got back to town he found to his dismay (and all of us who had

lent him money) that the going rate was far less than he had paid for them. 'What cheats those Chiawas are!' was my reaction. 'No', my Rai friend replied, 'I accepted.' He maintained, perhaps to save face, that the distant yak-herders could not have known about changes in prices in Kathmandu. The point is that the Chiawas would have expected the Rai, who worked in Kathmandu, to have found out about the prices, to have known what he was doing. In other words, blame is not attached if each side acts in accordance with a reasonable estimation of the economic possibilities of the other.

Far more serious is failing to repay a debt or a delayed barter agreement. The person cheated has no recourse but to hound the malefactor, and may literally sit on his doorstep until he pays up.[16] This is another reason why delayed barter is only practicable on a regular basis with known people. In general terms its theoretical importance is that it establishes the need for trust-maintaining ties, such as the ritual friendships in highland Nepal (see Anderlini and Sabourian, this volume).

The immoral behaviour of traders appears in folk sayings as a serious sin with religious consequences in the afterlife, likened to the sin of killing. Of course people may pay no attention to such precepts, but they do serve as talking points for apportioning blame. It is in using power to take extortionate interest that the misdoing is often identified. In Lhomi villages, although small amounts of common produce circulate beyond barter in sporadic gifts this is demeaning to a regular recipient, and it is more common for poor people to take grain as a loan (*bulon*) at hard times in the year and pay it back after harvest at the common rates plus interest. It is therefore significant that rates of interest and a surcharge to the debtor (*tekki*, Nep.) are fixed. Overcharging would incur serious moral disapproval and I did not hear of any cases during my visit.

The ambiguities of dubious transactions are greater when they take place within long-term relationships. Many years ago a Tibetan refugee, Myagmar, arrived with some yaks. These he sold for a large sum of money to a distant Lhomi relative, Tsering, who, it was rumoured, had exploited Myagmar's total ignorance of the situation and had not paid him enough. That was thought not fair. But on the other hand Myagmar was thought to be rather a fool. The money somehow melted away, he was often seen cross-eyed with drink, and he stayed on as a rather incompetent tailor and singer of Tibetan songs for the nostalgic delight of the Lhomi. He lived with Tsering's brother. 'See how I care for the poor', this man used to say virtuously. Neighbours nevertheless blamed the Tsering family, really along the lines that they had destroyed Myagmar's capacity for operation as an equal person. Barter should reproduce *reciprocal*, not one-sided, dependence. Later Tsering, making great play of his generosity, gave

Myagmar a loan, of coral stones which he could exchange, to enable him to go to Kathmandu to find work.

At the same time the morality of barter enjoins a certain flexibility in relation to the perceived wealth of the counterpart. It is good to 'take pity', but bad to appear to be well-off. Needless to say, if both sides do this, both benefit. Everyone in a Lhomi village lives in the same kind of house, wears the same clothes, and locks up their storage sheds to conceal what is within. There is relatively little display of wealth,[17] unlike the Western Gurungs with their large houses and rows of shining brass pots, and the difference may lie in the fact that these Gurungs are not primarily a trading people. Lhomi represent themselves as simply as possible: me, and you.

The points which incur blame (deception, the exploitation of ignorance of local prices, manipulation of transactions by obtaining much needed goods) co-exist with 'normal' self-interested behaviour (differential rates for unknown people, the disguising of one's wealth) but they indicate that the latter has its limits. I argue that this expected, but limited, self-interest is in fact what is seen as 'fair', and that it involves awareness and intention, an estimation of the possibilities open to the other which is founded on knowledge of the world outside. This expected, limited, self-interest in the long run also serves to reproduce ties of mutuality. How does this work?

Mutuality, competition and ethnicity

The common humanity of the partners to barter is refracted by sharply distinct ethnic representations which occur in almost all of the highland valleys of Nepal. Why should such elaborate distinctions be reproduced in such restricted space? It is suggested here that the operation of barter creates 'stages' in the transit of goods where profit can be taken; or, to put this another way, that a 'community' may define its edges where it can obtain differential rates for important flows of goods. This may have originated with environmental distinctions in the vertical economy, but it has been elaborated by purely cultural boundaries. Marked differences in style and cultural consumption separate the groups in organic solidarity. These ethnic frontiers differ analytically from those much less clear-cut boundaries between culturally *similar* groups which are in competition for the same niche in trade.

In the Arun Valley food is the focus for most obvious 'ethnic' differences,[18] which are correlated with distinct economies, marriage patterns, styles of clothing, houses, ornaments, and of course language. Most manufactured things must be transformed to be acceptable: tailors sew Indian cotton into Lhomi patterns, smiths turn scrap-iron into Lhomi pots and knives, jewellers weld rings onto rupees and melt down silver to

make characteristic necklaces and other decorations. It simply never happens that a Lhomi woman wears a Gurung blouse, or a Rai farmer builds his house in the Lhomi style. A Gurung woven rug (*radi*) is as alien in a Lhomi house as a zebra-skin would be in an English sitting-room – in fact more so, as Lhomis have no fashion for the exotic. Even those items which appear to be 'the same' as they pass from community to community, for example, potatoes, are not, if only for the reason that potatoes have a quite different role in the Lhomi diet, where they are a staple, from the Rai or Gurung, where they are a side-dish.

This means that there is a double transformation of value as items A and B are transferred between different ethnic groups X and Y. There is nothing to measure an abstract, non-personal value for A or B, since for group X either A or B is more desired at a particular time, while for group Y the reverse is true, otherwise the barter would not take place. The implication also is that it is impossible for someone in this region to act as a *neutral* individual; the person cannot but be defined as, and act as, a member of a group.

The visual signs of belonging to a particular community symbolise what are seen as essential differences between kinds of people. '*Rik*' (*rigs*) is the word Lhomis use to mean breed, species, culture, or spiritual descent. It was the translation used for the Nepali, and generally north Indian, term *jati* (caste or tribe). In one Lhomi view there are at least six kinds of '*rik*' in their vicinity: Lhomi, Nawa (inhabitants of villages immediately to the north of the Lhomi and including the Chiawa), Sherpa, Po-pa (Tibetan), Gorkha (Nepalese), and Kham-pa (incomers from Kham in the north-east of Tibet). Sometimes they would distinguish among the Gorkhas, the '*riks*' of the Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Gurungs, etc.

Now in origin these are not such very clear categories. The Nawas, according to Furer-Haimendorf are a clan of the Sherpas (1964: 19) as are the Chiawas, and the Lhomis certainly include amongst themselves clans of people who are by descent Rais, Sherpas, Limbus and Khampas. But the point is that the people of the Limbu clans inside Lhomi villages make themselves look just like other Lhomis, and not a bit like Limbus. As Fürer-Haimendorf (1971) and Levine (1987) have shown, transformations of ethnicity in northern Nepal can be very rapid, and are represented publicly by the changes in economic strategies, food, clothing, etc. mentioned above. In the northern Arun the status of the Nawas, for example, who are in the process of transforming themselves into people like the Lhomi, is unclear.

Nor are the groups on the Nepal side of the border actually very distinct from the ecological–economic point of view. It is true that each group tends to live at an altitude typical for itself, that Rais specialise in rearing

pigs, Gurungs in keeping sheep, and Lhomis in forest produce. But they are all farmers whose basic subsistence rests on a wide range of crops and vegetables, maize, millet, rice, buckwheat, lentils, potatoes, barley, soya beans, etc. It is the patterns of consumption and hence 'demand' in the barter trade which vary. In the Lhomi case ecological differences inside their lands are as great as those outside it. In sunny, low-lying nooks there are banana groves, orchids, and monkeys swinging from the trees; in the highest villages people keep yaks. The clear distinctions between the peoples of the Arun Valley are cultural–economic, not ecological–economic.

Ethnic groups are seen by the Hinduised Nepalis in a hierarchical way and the idea easily slips into that of 'caste', but for the Lhomi the important idea is that of difference, not hierarchy. Anthropologists of the Himalayas have tried to represent this in various ways: as concentric circles (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1964), or as a 'four-fold classification' on the lines of a division of labour in a polity (Allen, 1978). In the case of the Lhomi there is certainly no idea of a clear hierarchy.[19] They claim to despise the actually much richer Chiawas and call them 'dirty', while in fact eagerly seeking, though rarely obtaining, their daughters in marriage. For Lhomi only the Tibetans of central Tibet are respected for their great religious institutions, and in the locality it is only the former hereditary chiefs (*gobas*) and Buddhist lamas who stand above other people. This does not prevent either of these categories being seen as equal in other circumstances, notably that of trade.[20]

This egalitarianism should be seen against the background of historical competition for domination of the Himalayan trade routes.[21] As Lhomis often pointed out to me, it is trade, not farming, which makes you rich. The kingdoms south of the mountains (Gorkha, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh, Cooch Behar, etc.) were all established in strategic relations to routes into Tibet and flourished quite largely on the basis of trade (Rhodes, 1980: 264). But much of the border is inaccessible to large-scale traffic, and here the people actually on the frontier and prepared to struggle up the passes have the first whack at the trade. The Lhomi are in this situation, blocked only by the Chiawas at Kimathanka, and their strategic advantage depends on them keeping the lower groups out, sometimes by literally obstructing the trail.[22] This explains not only Chiawa hostility to them, but also Lhomi dislike of later incomers, such as the Nawas, who settled on Lhomi lands as *raikar* farmers some generations ago and are still not fully accepted. Tibetan refugees are not welcome in Lhomi villages, although some maintain a foothold there. I heard even a lama being bawled out for seducing a local girl: 'You dirty *Nawa* dog! Why do you want to leave your bastard here?' village women shouted at the tops of their voices.

The Lhomi have a great reputation for poisoning unwelcome visitors. I do not know if this actually happens, but there were certainly two or three kinds of poison available, made from aconites and datura, and my Rai and Tamang companions insisted on acquiring antidotes before they ventured into Lhomi territory. Lhomis themselves ascribe use of the poisons to the Seduwa Sherpas, who live to the south-west, and are rivals for control of the trail to the town of Khandbari.[23] The similar Khumbo group 'don't talk too good about the Lhomi and call them insulting names behind their backs' (Schickelgruber, personal communication).

So what is very noticeable is that the overt cultural differences between trading *partner* groups (Tibetan nomads, Lhomis, and Gurungs) are far more marked than those between trading *competitors* (Lhomis, Chiawas, Nawas, Khumbo and Seduwa Sherpas). If relations between barter partners, people not like yourself, are friendly, those between potential competitors for trade, people like yourself, are hostile.

The very same pattern, the matrix of friendly/hostile relations works also in the depths of the community, but compressed in the micro-world, so that here groups are frequently both friend and enemy to one another. 'Communities' such as the Lhomi are separated into villages, each of which has a slightly different ecological–economic situation and character. Lhomis are also divided into exogamous clans.[24] Clan members are dispersed in several villages. When you look at them these clans are both heterogeneous and have claims of various cross-cutting kinds. Some arrived earlier, some more recently; some have rights to communal land, others do not; some are original inhabitants, others come from far away; some have 'better mouth' (status) than others. Clan members tend to live together in named sub-sections of villages separated by streams. They have their own deities. Crucially, they have different access to resources, both inside the village, and, because of their various links and partnerships, with the external world. Relations between them can be both friendly and acrimonious. Usually the pretext for quarrels are matrimonial, husband and wife, of course, belonging to different clans. Slanging matches resound in the echoing valleys, knifings are common, and what the Lhomi describe as clan 'wars' are intrinsic to everyone's historical mythology.

Differentiation and sharing

Barter, trade and loans occur within the village as well as outside, so the idea of 'mutual recompense' with someone who is different from you is used to cross internal boundaries too. What is interesting is that this has not led to economic differentiation inside the Lhomi community. Sahlins has pointed out that trade of household surpluses in South-East Asian hinterland societies often leads to an internal ban on sharing rice, to

absence of levelling mechanisms, to fragmentation of households, and a high level of self-interest and differentiation, as each family accumulates its produce in order to buy valuables from the cultural centres (1972, 223–5). This pattern has not occurred in the Upper Arun valley. The difference can be attributed to the absence here, because of the difficulty of the trails, of large-scale high-value trade, and to the fact that the Lhomi do not uphold the accumulatory values of metropolitan hierarchical society, whether of central Nepal, Tibet, or India. Their frame of reference is their own society, within which it is at least as honourable to share as to accumulate.

This can be seen in relation to debt. Repayments are often not made in the same item borrowed, but in whatever the borrower has managed to produce or in labour reckoned in days. So the term *nga-lak* is used both for labour repayments of debts and for reciprocal labour at busy times of year. *Nga-lak* is not considered demeaning, but is rather the general form of adjusting labour to the tasks and produce present.[25] Now although creditor households do use grain repayments after harvest as a supply for advantageous external trade, what we do not find is a regular systematisation of this, resulting in internal hierarchy, as was present in Ladakh (Grist, 1985). In other words, there is no grain debt-bondage, no system of patron houses with client grain-suppliers. No household is above giving help in *nga-lak*. The absence of established patronage networks can be seen from the fact that in the 1979 panchayat elections Lhomi contenders personally went round to bribe people to vote for them.[26] When there was a famine a few years back there was no institutionalised safety network, and people had to have recourse to the individual generosity of others. The main benefactor in Pang-Dok village was widely described by other people as 'religious'.

We return here to the subject of morality, or rather the coexistence of various kinds of economic transfer and moralities within this society. I shall briefly discuss these in order to make clear why I see the ethics of *karma* as particularly salient in relation to barter. The Lhomi have a strong notion of collectivism or inclusiveness, which coexists with their recognition of people as different species. This is expressed economically in a proliferation of *sharing* institutions, chiefly the distribution of food at religious festivals. A village has its own mountain guardian god, given propitiatory sacrifices twice a year by the whole community, and clans also have their own deities. *Standardised collections* for the sacrifices are made from each household. Then there are from five to seven Buddhist temples ('*gompa*', '*lhakang*') per village, and each of these have regular monthly rituals of a mainly expiatory kind. The contributions are made by rotas of the households attached to the temple, but anyone can attend to worship and consume the food and beer. Finally, the most important temple in each village holds several big festivals during the year, at the Buddha's birthday,

Dasein, Tihar, the Tibetan New Year, etc. Again, provision is by rota from the wealthier households, everyone is invited (including Gurung friends), and food and drink are ladled out irrespective of contribution or status. People sit on the hillside by the temple in great communal huddles (See Figure 4). The great number and frequency of these occasions for sharing means that almost everyone has occasion to be a donor, even though the clan attached to the major temple can think of itself as *the* donor on behalf of everyone else.

Another type of economic obligation, now in decline (Humphrey,1985) are the dues or tribute which used to be owed to *gobas* (hereditary chiefs) and are still owed to lamas for what they provide the people: good government and religious blessings respectively. Dues took the form of either labour or tithes in grain. The rendering of dues is perhaps similar in rationale to contributions to sacrifices, being fixed in amount and a necessary statement of the petitionary relationship with political leaders, lamas and gods. But it is unlike barter, because dues contain an inherent status difference and have no bargaining element.

Sharing at religious festivals among the Lhomi is still very important, and is not just a source for ideas of commonality, but also a destination for wealth. It is thus essential to the reproduction of the egalitarianism of Lhomi society. However, it may be under threat. We can contrast the Lhomi with groups such as the Khumbu Sherpa, which had easier access to Tibet and whose *tshong-pa* (traders) became very wealthy indeed. Furer-Haimendorf (1975: 294) notes that Khumbu high-level trade was rapidly monetised; traders amassed their wealth by using money in the metropolitan centres of both Tibet and Nepal to buy goods in demand the other side of the frontier, creating great economic differentials inside the Sherpa community. Now Fisher suggests for the Tarangapur Magars of North-West Nepal that money and barter form two incompatible trade circuits, the money one leading to accumulation and the barter one reinforcing communal values (1986: 184–7). But the Lhomi example suggests that the incompatibility between money transactions and barter Fisher observed may be an accident of locality and timing in that particular community. What is important is the distinction between the accumulation and the circulation (sharing) of wealth. When thirst for accumulation takes hold, as Sacherer demonstrates for the Rolwaling Sherpas who have been flooded by tourists with cash, there is a decline in religious traditions and donations (1981: 164). Very few tourists as yet struggle into Lhomiland. But perhaps all we can say here is that these 'old hands' in the world of goods have pretty good defences, but they may not be impermeable in the future.

The present prevalence of barter over 'formalised exchange' (to which

Lhomis at a communal festival.

the salt-grain trade, with set rates, places, times, amounts and ritualised group relations, may have approximated at various periods in the past, Jest (1975)) indicates a flexibility and openness to change necessary in unstable economic conditions. Barter is an agreement to treat an incommensurable mutual transfer *as if* it were of equal benefit, but this does mean that ratios may actually change over time to the detriment of one side or the other. Barter thus seems like a precarious 'holding strategy', which allows an egalitarian ideology to remain in place over the shifting sands of actual transactions.

Relative to twenty years ago, when the Tibetan trade flourished, exchange ratios have declined for the Lhomi. These days, when talking of barter, they do not discuss 'brilliant coups' and what they stand to gain. Rather, they grumble about the difficulty of it all, about their need for things, particularly Tibetan goods, to maintain their own way of life. For them, nothing these days comes up to scratch: their temples are denuded, their children illiterate, their clothes and possessions old and worn. My Gurung, Rai and Tamang assistants commented that the Lhomi are in fact well-off in regional terms, and that even the poorest of them are not really poor. But as the Lhomi seem to see it, barter is not so much a question of 'good deals' cleverly accomplished, as a matter of taking whatever action one can, of self-reliance, of seeking any opening where one may give, in order to get back what one 'needs'. But it is also a way of keeping up the ritual friendships, often by quite trivial transactions, which are important for other reasons too: support in times of trouble, safety when travelling, and simply friendship as such. It is significant that in this 'difficult' situation the Lhomi talk not of exploitation but of religion.

The morality of exchange and religious life

I never heard Lhomi blaming their exchange partners for their decline. Deceit or non-fulfilment of an agreement would be culpable, but for general changes in barter rates they make no distinction between reductions in what they are able to get and what they themselves are able to provide. Both are explained by external events: landslides, hailstorms, the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the flimsy bridges swept into rivers in spate, the invasions of monkeys and other animals and insects which destroy the crops, thieves, corrupt officials and so on. Now there is an apocalyptic religious view which attributes such disasters to the epoch, the decline of the age, but more salient is the attribution of two alternative, and more immediate, causes: 'our sins', on the one hand, and the retribution of the gods on the other.

What 'our sins' might be was never specified exactly rather the idea seemed to be that since there had been so many landslides, etc. there must

have been sins. I was present at two extravagant collective rituals to banish sins accumulated through *karma*. Performance of the rituals had been delayed for several years because the lamas had gone on strike, angered by the new panchayat government's decision to charge them tax like lay people. In the lamas' view rituals for the exorcism of sins *were* their service to the community. Many people, but particularly lamas, attributed the disasters causing decline in exchange rates to the build-up of unexorcised sins of the entire community in the period of the strike and absence of expiatory rituals. But in private at night, to the alarming cracks of boulders crashing down the mountainside – any of which might cause a landslide – people also used to blame the lamas, for their sins, which must have weakened their spiritual strength and their defence of the community. Furthermore, it did not go unremarked that the prosperous village of Walungchung in the next valley, formerly home of several extremely wealthy traders said to have been extortionate in their methods, had been virtually destroyed by a landslide a few years ago.

The same *karmic* reasoning was also used to explain individual success. Even as a child, the Lhomi girl or boy is not regarded as a *tabula rasa* on which society inscribes its features; the *karmic* weight of actions in previous lives are brought into this world with the baby, and one might say that their result is represented by the sum of personal characteristics and social 'property' which children inherit. People used to hesitate to say who was rich in the Lhomi villages (which may, of course, have been related to our work for a government-linked development project), but several times people murmured, 'So-and-so is said to be rich. He must have good *karma* from his previous lives.'

We can see two implications of these explanations: first, the time-scale of *karma*, which in theory has results only in subsequent lives, can be shortened to include retribution in this life. Second and more important, just as persons represent their communities in this region (for example as lamas, workers or traders in the Gurung villages), the misdoings of persons or groups were held to incur *karmic* retribution for whole communities. In other words, the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* was moulded to fit the nature of Lhomi social life. Here the self is never simply an individual as in the modern West, but is a composite, including supposed previous selves and the refractions of the person implied by identification with concentric social groupings (the household, village, ethnic group).

But taking action, as opposed to explaining misfortune, serves to specify and unite the sense of self. Good *karma* does not wipe out sins (bad *karma*) but coexists with it. There is a sense in which even for the single person this general *karmic* balance need not be tied to anything as particular and trivial as specific daily actions, if only because no-one knows how their spiritual state stands. And yet it is the accumulation of all these actions, in

this and previous lives, which constitutes *karma*. This means that if people actually invoke *karma* in relation to themselves in real life situations attention should be paid to the moral implications of every action. It is in this active sense, as opposed to the general idea that 'being ordinary humans we must have sinned', that I suggest an analogy between the rationale of *karma* and that of *jeba* (balanced recompense, barter). The agency of the self is the same in both cases and both are concerned with actions involving choice and their just reward.

So, as barter is a particular type within the general context of economic transactions, it can perhaps be linked to a specific way of thinking within religious morality. *Karma* is only one of the strands in the complex religious thinking of the Lhomi, and the extent to which it is invoked to explain misfortune is variable. *Karmic* thinking co-exists with a supernaturalism which attributes independent action to spirits and deities: they may attack you just for the hell of it, irrespective of your deeds in this life or any other. I agree with Lichter and Epstein (1983) that, although *karma* theoretically encompasses every activity, it can be analysed as separable from propitiatory sacrifices to unreliable deities. The point I wish to make here is that barter is not afloat somewhere beyond any thinking about ethics, and that its 'self-interest' is closer to the *karmic* way of thinking than to that of the propitiation.

This may seem a perverse argument, in that, like barter, sacrifice to capricious deities has often been seen as a self-interested contract. But in Lhomi culture I would suggest that propitiatory sacrifice should be classified with other forms of propitiation as a rendering of dues. We have seen that in donations to lamas the reward is a blessing, hoped to be immediately auspicious, i.e. to bring luck. Justice does not enter here. The layperson cannot choose to act 'fairly', because he or she is religiously another order of being from the lama, and can do nothing to equal his blessing. The same was true, in terms of political protection, for dues to the *gobas* where payments were a recognition of subordination to the intrinsic power of the *goba* clan. In propitiatory 'sacrifices' to the gods the sense of offering dues is given by the *fixed* nature of the contributions from a *rota* of households which are *obliged* regularly to provide this service. On the other hand, sacrifices for the expiation of sins explicitly invoke a *karmic* explanation. But even here in fact, as we have seen, rituals are held and scapegoats are constructed not when 'a sin' has been committed, but when a disaster threatens or has happened. In other words, sacrifices in general are not seen as actions freely chosen by the self, but as social obligations, or as forced by capricious and fortuitous external events.

As Lichter and Epstein (1983: 240–2) point out, Tibetans have a notion of a person's worldly luck or life-force (*rlung-rta*) which can be contrasted

with *bsod-nams*, the stored-up merit of a soul's career (*karma*). Lhomi also have this idea of life-force, symbolised by the 'wind-horse' flags flying in front of every house. In theory, it is this luck or life-force, not the moral *karmic* state, which is improved by propitiatory sacrifices and which is damaged by impending calamities. But in popular religious thought *karma* and *rlung-rta* seem to get mixed up. Lichter and Epstein say that in Tibetan lay people's religion it is thought that high *rlung-rta* can succeed in stalling the consequences of bad *karma* until some other life (1983: 241). The Lhomi, whose Buddhism is even more compromised by a backwoods village life far from the literate monastic tradition, seem to bend the idea of *karma* itself, so that it comes close to *rlung-rta*, and is used as the explanation for worldly success. The two ideas can be distinguished, however, in relation to intention: in *karma* what is important is particular intended acts, which go with faith, and with remorse that can ameliorate the results of sins. Although Lhomi people said in a general way that over the years of the lamas' strike there must have been unknown sins, they acknowledge that *karma* is really about known, intended actions. But intention is unimportant to *rlung-rta*, where the emphasis is all on god-inspired accident or a fated astrological cyclicity beyond human control. These in brief are the religious ideas within which the morality of exchange has taken place.

The term for exchange, *jeba*, itself appears in religious expressions connected with the notion of *karma*.[27] We find it used in a colloquial expression for 'death-and-rebirth' or the 'transmigration of the soul', i.e. with the meaning 'to barter one's life' (*che brje ba*). Too much should not be read into this metaphor, but it does indicate that *jeba* can be used in the context of the idea of transformation and that of just desserts, because this is of course what the Buddhist receives on death. Whether reborn as a mouse or a prince, this result has a cause which is the cumulation of actions. One's actions and the result for one's destiny are not qualitatively the same, but they inevitably imply one another and are linked by the mechanism of *karma* to the idea of abstract and ultimately non-social justice.

This paper does *not* suggest that people when bartering are consciously motivated by the idea of *karma*. But it is proposed that the notion of a fair deal is a moral one related above all to intention, and that we should see this in the context of the religious ideas present in this culture, of which the most relevant in my view is the concept of *karma*.

In Tibetan culture the most common term for *karma* is simply '*le*', work and the fruits of work. Lhomi regard both trade and farming as work. They live in the knowledge of labour in the fields and its products which are bartered. There is no notion of the non-workers, the less than responsible

adult person, the moral minor (as women are sometimes designated in other Asian societies). Work and its result are universal for all individuals, and thus determine what is an abstract principle. Transmuted to the notion of the fruits of one's actions, and thereby to the abstract notion of fairness or justice, this central idea becomes integral to barter too, or rather to the whole range of economic activities (barter, trade and credit) which imply conscious reciprocity. It is in the moral, and yet relative and contextualised, meaning that barter is reciprocal. It takes into account what goods mean to people in their particular circumstances. Essential to it is the notion of the morally responsible person, giving one thing and receiving something different, the link created by the two being not measured value but immeasurable justice.

NOTES

1 I use the word 'morality' to mean a system, within, and less inclusive than, 'ethics', which states commonly held ideas about obligation. If ethics is about how one should live, morality states one's specific obligations, usually in terms of a general rule (Williams, 1985).

2 In 1979–80 some Lhomi informants quoted the sum of 61 rupees for the brideprice, while the total cost of a wedding was between 3,000 and 5,000 rupees.

3 Inverted commas indicate approximate pronunciation.

4 Similar trade circuits exist in the region between other ethnic groups with complementary economies, for example the Kulung Rai act as intermediaries transporting grain from lowland farms to the Khumbu Sherpas in return for salt, forest produce and Tibetan goods (McDougal, 1968: 11).

5 For a discussion of this see Lionel Caplan (1970).

6 Currently there are only a few individuals in Lhomi villages who maintain herds of yaks and cross-breeds. These are all fairly recent (two–three generations back) immigrants from Tibet, who use their links to use pastures over the border. They are much envied by the Lhomi *jimi*s, i.e. *kipat* land-owners, who still resent them for their intrusion into the district. In their turn they despise the Lhomi for not having the 'tradition' of yak-breeding, which is profitable because of the high demand for yak products.

7 This is one point on which I should correct information given in my earlier paper on barter (1985) where I stated that most loans are taken outside the village. Looking at my data again, I find that although the Lhomi do also take loans from Gurung farmers, which has different social implications, many loans are also taken out inside the village.

8 Individual Tibetans in 1979–80 did still come to Lhomi villages to trade, but not regularly as before, and in much smaller numbers and with fewer goods.

9 Jest writes on comparable barter in Dolpo, 'Qu'il s'agisse des échanges de Tarap avec le Tibet (grain-sel) ou avec les vallées du Sud, une pratique traditionelle préside à ce troc. Elle est marquée tout d'abord par un attitude de fidélité entre les échangeurs; ... cette fidélité est la base de la vie communautaire,

car seul le respect des taux convenues et l'absence de mise en concurrence des hommes et des marchandises peuvent garantir l'honnêté des transactions' ['Whether it is a matter of Tarap's exchanges with Tibet (grain-salt) or with the valleys to the south, a traditional practice presides over this barter. It is above all marked by an attitude of trust between the exchangers;... this trust is the basis of community life, because only respect for agreed prices and the absence of competition between men and between merchandise can guarantee the honesty of transactions] (1975: 164–5).

10 Virtually all Lhomis also use money to buy subsidised rice at Tumlingtar. This, they say, is necessary for subsistence, but some of it is also used in the Tibet trade.

11 Animals used for sacrifices, such as sheep, goats and chickens, and also other animals such as cattle, have prices quoted in money, which usually rise the more distant the place from the market at Khandbari. This does not prevent the Lhomi from acquiring them by barter or by work if they can. Otherwise, they must buy them (particularly chickens) with money at the Khandbari market.

12 Schrader quotes his informants as saying that this 'moral economy of trade' allows for high profits to be taken from the unsophisticated Tibetans. The Walungchung traders could extract these profits because their own moral code is only binding in their own community. The southern groups, on the other hand, are distrustful of the 'strange' northern people, making high profits in the culturally foreign setting impossible (1988: 283–4). I find this argument unconvincing and illogical, since it annihilates any sense the 'moral economy of trade' might have. In my view the barter traders will attempt to make profits wherever they can, but always bearing in mind the estimation of the economy of the other and the need for repeated transactions.

13 Poor people will sometimes ask to be paid for a day's labour in grains or some other needed product. These rates are agreed within the village, but differ between villages. Adolescent boys are sometimes hired by a rich household on an annual basis to do shepherding and other livestock work. The pay, in kind or in money, is made to their parents. This does not last after adulthood, i.e. after the boy is married in his mid-teens. I never encountered a household with a permanent servant (*hali*, Nep.) except in the case of one or two subnormal men and women not capable of maintaining their own households.

14 Research by Diemberger and Schickelgruber among the Khumbo Sherpas (Nawa) of Seduwa has provided details of the division of labour by sex. In this society, which is essentially similar to that of the Lhomi, the absence of a division of labour by sex is the result of the pasturing system, whereby most households have to split into two parts, one in the village and one with the livestock, and the general shortage of labour requires both sexes to be able to perform all tasks. Both men and women do handiwork and barter their products. Despite the virtual absence of a sexual division of labour the Khumbo do see the male and female genders as complementary and opposite from the ideological point of view (Schickelgruber, personal communication).

15 Lhomi women maintain their own 'accounts' within the household from their transactions. There is severe criticism of people who use relatives' products such as food, even those of close kin within the household, to make themselves out to be generous hosts. Nevertheless, for large transactions involving the

outside world (marriages, sacrifices, ritual dues at festivals) the household pools its resources and acts as an economic unit.

16 Nancy Levine kindly told me of the following instance from North-West Nepal:

> There was a man from whom I used to buy much of my wheat. He was a lama and husband of one of my ceremonial friends. Because I lacked storage facilities I could not take delivery at once of all the grain I bought each autumn and chose to take delayed delivery from the people I trusted most. Late in 1983, the year of the famine, this man began showing a certain reluctance to deliver my remaining wheat. What friends advised me to do was to visit his home together with all members of my household to 'remind' him of what he owed us. This obliged him to fix us an elaborate meal. I had to do this several times, and, in the end he paid me only part of the grain owed and used a very tiny measure in so doing. The response of my household was resignation, and we contented ourselves with the fact that we had eaten a good bit of grain at his house, enjoyed the visits, and in future would take immediate delivery of grain from this man. We also told everyone we knew about how he cheated us. People were sympathetic, but the fact of the matter was that he had the most high-quality wheat in the region and there was no choice but to deal with him in future. (personal communication)

17 The major display of wealth is in women's jewellery, but women from the richest families are not necessarily those who wear the most magnificent necklaces in everyday life.

18 Bahuns do not eat any kind of meat, nor take alcoholic drink, but all of the hill peoples do both. Tamangs and Lhomis will eat the cow, but Rais and Gurungs do not, although they will eat buffalo. Yaks are counted the same as cattle, though differentiated from buffalo, and the Lhomi eat them. Rais eat pork of all kinds, but the Gurungs will only eat the meat of white pigs, not black ones, and they will not eat goat. Some groups of Rai also will not eat goat, and hesitate before the innards of the pig. Lhomis eat all kinds of meat, including game, but they do not eat fish.

19 Schrader describes a hierarchy of three distinct named classes among the Walungchung people, based on the date at which these groups arrived in the valley and ideas of purity. He links this to the economic advantages of ownership of the best land and the consequent edge given in trade. Trade down this valley at an earlier period was far larger in scale than along the Arun and resulted in much greater differentials in wealth (1988: 275–7).

20 There are no lama monasteries in the upper Arun. Lamas are people who have some training in religious rituals, but otherwise they marry and maintain farming households like other people.

21 As Fürer-Haimendorf has pointed out, the egalitarianism and absence of food restrictions of the Buddhist trading peoples of the Himalayas can be related to the need to move freely among many different ethnic groups (1975: 289).

22 This situation at the village level is documented also by Jest for Dolpo, who say, for example, 'Aujourd'hui encore, afin de réserver le monopole des échanges, les Tarap-pa interdisent aux habitants de Panzang de franchir le torrent de Do, limite de la vallée de Tarap en direction du Sud' ['Still today, in order to preserve a monopoly over exchanges, the people of Tarap forbid the inhabitants of Panzang to cross the river Do, which is the border of the Tarap valley in the south'] (1975: 158).

23 Formerly, the headman (*goba*) of the southernmost Lhomi village, Syaksila, used to maintain an armed band for the control of the trail. Today, the *goba* having lost power to the Nepali panchayat government, there is still a supernatural threat. Syaksila is distinguished by the presence of a gigantic rock, the size of a large house, which is attached by a mere corner in a most dangerous-looking way to the mountain-side. I was told very seriously that the head lama kept it tied there by spells, and he might at any time release it to cause a landslide and block the road.

24 The idea of the clan '*ru*' (*rus*) meaning 'bone', is continuous with *rik* (species), since it also implies a qualitative and fundamental differentiation (see also Levine, 1981). The clans are patrilineal and exogamous; there are around 10–15 clans in any village.

25 Also common is the exchange of grain, oxen hire, manure, salt, etc. against the use of a spare field for a season, again at rates accepted in a given village.

26 The election in 1979 in Hatiya panchayat nearly ruined the father of the winner, who had to sell most of his cattle to pay for the 'entertainment' of the voters.

27 The latent homology between *karma* and barter has a metaphorical base in language. I am aware of the dangers of attributing too great a significance to 'conventional metaphors' (Keesing, 1985), and in what follows I have no proof that the conceptual associations are made by Lhomi people. Nevertheless, the links may be sufficiently salient to be mentioned here. *Karma* is translated in Tibetan as *rgyu'bras*, 'cause-effect'. In everyday language it is known simply as '*le*' (*las*), 'work', the idea being action and the inevitable moral consequences of that action, the reciprocity of the universe. The linguistic link between *karma* and barter is the term '*len*' (*lan*) 'reply', which we noted earlier is one of the words used for barter, in the sense of 'recompense'. '*Len*', whose root meaning is 'a time', as in once, twice, thrice, etc. occurs in several compound terms denoting *karma*, destiny or fate, notably in the common expression 'len-chá' (*lan-chags*) meaning any bad thing which happens to someone which is looked on as retribution for crimes in a former life; '*ĺen-len*' is the expression of the dependence of one thing on another, recollection, consideration, or kindness.

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