

## Life on the Porch: Marginality, Women, and Old Age in Rural Bhutan

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This article examines the shifting status of women in rural Bhutan, some of whom, while living in a social arrangement characterized by matrilineal inheritance and matrilocality, can become seemingly marginalized in old age. It analyzes the occupancy trajectories of women against the backdrop of aging, the loss of power, and the traditional land tenure system, considering their linkages to the transformation of one's home from a secure and inclusive to an insecure and disorienting place. Landlessness or "houselessness" is provoked not just by capitalist relations; the potential for marginality in old age is also embedded in the gendered structures of inheritance. The elders living on porches nevertheless view their dwellings as socially secure even as they experience socio-spatial marginality and alienation not only from the larger community but also from their own families. This divergent view of their situation is intertwined with the Buddhist notion of karma.

**Key words:** marginality, women and old age, home spaces, traditional land tenure, karma, Bhutan, South Asia, matrilineal practices

I met Lhazom in early 2017.<sup>1</sup> She is a widow who, at 98 years, is also the oldest person in Goleng, a village of less than 300 people in central Bhutan. When I first saw her on the porch, she was seated on a threadbare mattress covered by a mosquito net (Figure 1). The space itself was disarranged with the clothes and semi-improvised toys of her grandchildren, who occasionally gathered around her bed during their leisure time but disappeared when they were needed the most by Lhazom. My research assistant, Sangay, who is from Goleng, declared that Lhazom is a former head of household, given the ownership she had once assumed over the house and the land. As she became older, this position was relinquished to her eldest daughter, but Lhazom maintained that, since becoming blind in recent years, she had voluntarily moved to the porch on account of her incapacity to adhere to household etiquette.

By "household etiquette," she referred to her inability to walk, even in broad daylight, but also to deal with fecal incontinence, which I was told was the primary basis of her voluntary acceptance of relegation to the porch. What was self-evident were the cracks between the planks encircling the periphery of the bed that served as an alternative to the pit latrine which is detached from the main house. It was in such a condition that Lhazom lived a "life without the promise of stability" (Tsing 2015:2) characterized by deficient care and marginality, thereby somewhat resonating with the conditions of precarity—a feature of neoliberal capitalism (see Allison 2012, 2014; Standing 2011). When asked if other older adults were living in a similar situation, Sangay took me to another house where the fate of its former head of household (i.e., grandmother) was no better than Lhazom's. In the course of my fieldwork, I interacted with two older adults, one of whom was also a former woman head of household, who were displaced and living on their respective porches.

Given a matrilineal social arrangement in which women own the family house and other possessions, and also control the land, the transition of the lives of these older adults from a secure to an insecure existence in their very own home spaces merits close attention. In this

paper, I will consider how some women can become marginalized in old age. How do they lose power in later life, and why is it that only some of them lose it? In so doing, I examine the shifting status of women in the management of households and lands against the backdrop of spatiality and temporality of the rural houses in central Bhutan. In particular, I provide an analysis of how the transition from house to porch, or the move from the center to the periphery of their house—a cycle that ends on the porches—is viewed differently by the marginalized elders themselves and the families thereof. To make sense of the apparent contradiction between appearance and what the elders say, I illustrate the complex entanglements of karma and village life by considering the ways in which the local Buddhist ideas and practices of merit and rebirth inform behaviors and attitudes about aging and dying.

Methodologically, this paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in Goleng between 2017 and early 2018 (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> Data were primarily collected through empirical observation and participation, but I also made extensive use of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with a range of people. My key informants were ten elderly persons along with their daughters and daughters' husbands who lived under the same roof, plus the older adults' sons residing in their wives' houses. The elderly persons were aged between 68 and 98 years, and eight of them were women (of whom four were widows). While I was usually accompanied by my local research assistant, my familiarity with the older adults and the trust they developed in me was because of my proficiency in the local language.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, my multiple visits to the houses of older adults, particularly during the latter part of the fieldwork, were sometimes one-on-one occasions when I would spend substantial time with each individual informant. In other words, my observations of and interactions with the key interlocutors occurred in the presence of daughters and their husbands—not to mention my research assistant; but I also made a point to visit them alone, especially when everyone else had left for work or bed. The informants' accounts and my own observations were corroborated with village elites,<sup>4</sup> and with out-marrying sons from different households.

In what follows, I begin by providing an overview of property ownership and inheritance patterns from which women derive influence and power in the family in relation to the management of household resources. Then, by examining the transition from the “head of household” to “elder,” I take my discussion about the forms of structural inequalities in rural Bhutan beyond a Marxist critique of capitalism to demonstrate how traditional systems of land tenure that are often valorized for their collectivity or matrilineal practices, along with old age and long-term sickness, can marginalize and exclude certain categories of people in later life. Particular attention is given to the occupancy trajectories of elders, often eventuating to residence on the porch and hence living in a pitiable state. I end the paper by arguing that the logic of Buddhist karma and merit is analytically useful for explaining the elders' understanding of their situation—marginality. Prior to dissecting the role of women in central Bhutan, the general circumstances of women and old age in South Asia are sketched.

#### LAND, WOMEN, AND OLD AGE

Although diversity has characterized the inheritance and family systems of South Asian societies, “classic patriarchy” (Kandiyoti 1988) marked by patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence has been a dominant practice in many parts of South Asia. Land and houses in these societies are inherited by men from their fathers, and women leave the natal house at marriage to become members of their husband's families, visiting their parents from time to time. The social, political, and economic subordination of women in India, according to Agarwal (1994, 2003), is

undergirded by their lack of rights to property, and even in the few cases where they inherit certain property, only some of these women actually control it. In Nepal, equal inheritance is being refused by women because of the fear of straining relations with their brothers and their sisters-in-law (Kunreuther 2009:546). Despite the prevailing patrilineal practices, however, it is posited that women enjoy substantial “authority and autonomy” (Lamb 2000:240) as they transition among the roles of daughters-in-law to mothers-in-law to heads of household, reflecting the fluidity of women’s status, or the lack of uniformity in the meaning attributed to “female” in relation to the nature-culture divide (Ortner 1996).

With respect to old age and care, one comes across gerontological discourses being dominated by the idea of “successful” aging, particularly in many Western countries, which translates to staying young, active, and independent in later life. Whereas dependence on one’s children in later life is said to be strongly feared in the West (see Rowe and Kahn 1998), receiving financial support and intimate care from and co-residence with their children is widespread across Asia and other developing countries (see Lamb 2013:67–68). In India, the idea of living alone has been described as “impossible and unthinkable” (Lamb 2015:38), yet the feelings of apprehension and worry over the unpredictability of adequate support and care from their children in later life (see Cohen 1998) is not uncommon in South Asia. Given the patriarchal practices in most parts of Asia, including Tibet and the Himalayas in general (e.g., Holmberg 1989; Levine 1988; March 2018), it is the sons and daughters-in-law who are responsible for providing care and support for elders.

After sixty, aging begins to take its toll on women as the power of mothers-in-law is lost to their young daughters-in-law (see Wadley 1995). Marginality in India has been generally studied through the life worlds of the low caste groups and religious minorities (see Shah 2010). Peripheralization and marginalization become evident in the households, and as they get older, some of them (including men) did not receive adequate care and emotional and economic support from their children (Lamb 2000:241), thereby rendering their lives precarious. This condition was well attested in Varanasi (India), where old age characterized by debility and senility was metonymized as a “dying space” not only by the children but also by the elderly persons themselves, who live on *charpoy*—a traditional bedstead in India—found ubiquitously in areas that are spatially decentered from the inner spaces of the house (Cohen 1998:182).

Marginality is generally described as a condition of an individual or group living on the urban fringes of the mainstream society to which they are not fully integrated, whether religiously, politically, or economically.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, characterized by fluidity in terms of its meanings as well as the social and spatial experiences of the marginalized themselves (see Williams et al. 2011). The marginalized may be people “on-the-move,” or they may be found in “out-of-the-way” places (Tsing 1993), yet the marginalized are very much part of the society whose conditions are determined by a “range of power relationships” (Di Nunzio 2017:92). This is because marginality is often perpetuated by development policies that are intended to integrate the marginalized groups into the wider society (Gupta 2012:24), resulting in an asymmetrical vulnerability to poverty, disease, and neglect.

My interlocutors’ lives are framed by a condition of being in a state that is neither really outside of the society nor fully inside the family home. Central to the shifting status of women are the changing power dynamics in relation to the control of key resources and decision-making within the household. The older adults are accorded the same rights as any other member of village society, but with the gradual loss of power through the process of aging and disease, they

have become marginalized quite profoundly, not only from participating in social activities but also from fulfilling key familial roles.

It is the marginality, abandonment, suffering, and so on, through which precarity (Han 2018) and precariousness exist.<sup>6</sup> Such precarious states are not only experienced by the elderly and sick persons living in urban slums; it is also widespread among both the young and the old in other Asian societies that are transitioning from agrarianism to capitalism. For instance, with the onslaught of capitalism in a rural highland area of Sulawesi (Indonesia), Li (2014) has shown that land, which was traditionally a common property of its inhabitants, was privatized through land enclosure as highlanders began to compete in cacao production—which itself is a primary ingredient of capitalism. As a result, capitalist relations eroded agrarian relations which are known for their collectivity, and landlessness became rampant in this region of Sulawesi. The livelihoods of the dispossessed farmers who had either failed to secure or sold their enclosed land were characterized as insecure and precarious (Li 2014:180), indicating that landlessness is provoked by capitalism. Indeed, such untoward effects of capitalist accumulation such as the weakening of kinship-based ties and the rising nature of social inequalities were also felt in parts of China following its recent turn toward capitalism (Yeh et al. 2013).

While capitalism can bring about economic growth and development, it also entrenches, rather than eliminates through de-proletarianization, the historical forms of exploitation, oppression, and marginalization of the low caste groups, thereby not only perpetuating the practice of bonded labor but also deepening capitalist class relations (Guérin 2013; Shah 2013; see also Besky 2017). The dynamics of unpredictability and uncertainty triggered by capitalism are best reflected in the lives of Dalits of South India, who owned some land but gradually became landless due to the arrival of corporate capitalism, which resulted in their land becoming a site for industrial development by multinational companies. The former Untouchables today practice “multiple livelihood strategies”—a combination of farming if they own a land and of working “in the most uncertain, precarious, and exploitative work conditions” (Shah et al. 2018:10) within the labor market.

Studies in gendered analyses of property ownership and inheritance in rural South Asia tend to presume that women will always be marginalized. Yet in Goleng, women are the property owners. Further, capitalism has yet to penetrate Goleng and the neighboring villages even as landlessness and joblessness have recently begun to create precarious conditions for some people living in the major cities. This means that it is not simply capitalist relations alone that provoke landlessness or homelessness. Instead, they are, as will be clear, also embedded in the gendered structures of the inheritance systems that are prevalent in many parts of rural societies in Asia. The common human vulnerability that is inherent in such practice only becomes marked in later life. Consequently, certain categories of people’s vulnerability intensify in later age as related to inadequate care and support from their children—a condition that is neither linked to the decline of the joint family system due to Westernization and modernity nor embedded in capitalist relations. That said, the transition from an autonomous “head of household” to a senile “elder” is a common trajectory in South Asia.

#### WOMEN AS HEADS OF HOUSEHOLDS

There is certainly no homogeneity in inheritance patterns in Bhutan as a whole, with gender roles varying from region to region and even from household to household within the same village. For instance, polyandry and inheritance by primogeniture are ubiquitous among the nomads in northwestern Bhutan; some villages in lower Zhemgang in central Bhutan and a majority of the Hindu population in southern Bhutan are characterized by patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal

residence. One such patrilineal group consists of the former nobility: the *choje*, who are the descendants of Buddhist masters, and the *dungje*, who are associated with the pre-Buddhist Bon religion and antedate the *choje* (Tashi 2020). Both of these former nobles had their own serfs (*drapa*) and slaves (*zapa*), and they clearly constituted the hegemonic class of their time until the enactment of a series of social reforms by the third king of Bhutan in 1958. One reform pertains to the abolition of the practices of serfdom and slavery by granting the former underclasses equality in terms of status and land rights (Penjore 2016).

While most people across Bhutan now tend to favor bilateral inheritance following the new land legislation in the 1980s, many women in central, western, and eastern Bhutan continue to be the ones who inherit the natal house and a larger portion of land (cf. Barth and Wikan 2011). Today a handful of descendants of the former nobles characterized by patrilineal descent reckoning are scattered across Bhutan, with only a few of them retaining a “residual standing in some ritual settings,” rather than in political spheres (Tashi 2021:42). In central Bhutan they are outnumbered by the commoners, indicating that a matrilineal social arrangement in relation to the organization of household and land inheritance constitutes the greater part of central Bhutanese society. For instance, 64.6% of households in Bumthang are still headed by women (National Statistics Bureau [NSB} 2017a:vii). Anthropologists Barth and Wikan (2011:14–17) demonstrated the ubiquity of matrilineal stem families in central and western Bhutan, consisting of a married couple, who live at the house belonging to the wife, along with a married daughter, her husband, and their children. The people of Goleng (who are known as “Golengpa”) live in such extended family households, which more often than not include a widow or a widower, and sometimes unmarried kin.

In fact, strong matrifocal practices in most villages in central Bhutan give women a powerful position in relation to the management of the household, particularly the eldest daughter.<sup>7</sup> In addition to making decisions pertaining to the house, land, and household economy, women ensure adequate cereal food for the family; manage household finances, such as paying taxes; and facilitate the conduct of annual rituals. In contrast to the Hindu societies described above, women in Bhutan are also responsible for the care of children and the elderly (Brauen 1997), and hence having a daughter ensures support in old age. Both men and women can engage in transplanting, winnowing, and other farming and household chores, but it is quite rare to come across men doing this work.

While the eldest daughter is empowered by the matrilineal inheritance, the remaining daughters, who do not inherit their mother’s house, practice neolocal residence in either the same or a different village and usually receive less land than the new family head. However, they automatically become the heads of new households built on their share of land, which is “split up and scattered in separate blocks across the village” (Tashi 2020:34). In this sense, women in Goleng are quite influential in their family, although they constitute by no means a centralized system of power (cf. Pain and Pema 2004).

Among the members of former nobility of Goleng, men are entitled to inherit the family title and status, but since they marry out, the connection between the married men and their natal family is steadily weakened as their wives succeed their mothers-in-law as new household heads. The other adult men, as in other villages in central Bhutan (Wikan 2012:230; see also Pommaret 2015), have in the past largely had no entitlements to any part of their matrilineal family estate. Except for households without daughters, husbands (*magpa*) move to their wife’s house, where she is the head of household. The daughters may marry virilocally to men without sisters; however, the in-marrying women cannot become the household heads (cf. Barth and Wikan

2011). In such cases, the son contracts a wife (*nama*) from either the same or a nearby village without restrictions or the consent of his parents.

The in-marrying woman joins her husband's household with a portion of land inherited from her mother, but they along with the landholdings and properties inherited by the husband are transmitted to his daughters rather than to his sons or his sister's sons and daughters. A Golengpa woman's brother apparently has no right to or control over his sister's land, nor any role in the upbringing of his sister's children. The wife's brother may, however, single-handedly build a house for the family, but it cannot be inherited by him. For instance, some of the houses in Goleng were built by the mother's brothers who took up residence in their own wives' houses. After the mother's brother has married into his wife's household, his relationship with his sister's children begins to weaken, but nonetheless, stronger kinship ties are usually maintained with maternal rather than paternal uncles.

Currently, 50 of the 59 households in Goleng are still headed by women, who uphold and own the land and house. For example, when Taumo, a woman who is now in her mid-seventies, married her husband, who is originally from a different village, he joined her family bringing nothing but a short sword (*patang*).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the majority of household goods were inherited by Taumo even though she and her husband jointly worked to furnish the house. While women's powers are not unlimited in women-headed households, they are not easily subverted by husbands and brothers. In some households, control is still retained by widowed grandmothers, and they are therefore vested with the responsibility for the well-being and collective activities of the family members, including the management of household resources.

There is no common practice as to when the current head should yield up her position in favor of her daughter, but some women ended up living a marginalized post-head-of-household life—that is, following the transfer of the power to their daughter. Indeed, they were marginalized within the household family structure, suggesting that matrilineality does not on its own make the household fully egalitarian, nor does it protect them from marginality due to old age after yielding their title as head of the household. The following vignettes of three additional elderly women undergird the condition of Lhazom, who was, as described in the introduction, experiencing marginality and alienation under the guise of her inability to keep up with household etiquette. These four cases are the only ones I encountered in Goleng, but I know of similar cases in another village of the same region.

#### THE MARGINALIZED ELDERS

Old, sick, and frail is the condition of Yangki, who lives on her porch, which is by far more unstable than Lhazom's house. While the definitive diagnosis for her illness has never been established, I was told that she has been ill for many years. Like Lhazom, Yangki is a widow who voluntarily moved to the porch on the grounds of household etiquette—namely, incontinence after she recently became very sick. The other two older adults living on their respective porches were old and ill in equal measure, except that one of them is a man, Nima, who had held the very important role of village priest until his retirement in the early 2000s due to bowel disease. Yet, at 94 years of age, he is mobile in the sense that he can manage to walk to the outdoor latrine, but like to his female counterparts, is living exclusively on the porch for the same reasons. Lhamo, the third woman, is a former head of household who became widowed prior to her decision to live on the porch.

All in all, the four elderly adults have been sidelined in both social and physical ways. In addition to becoming socially disenfranchised from the decision-making processes of their

households, even if allegedly of their own free will, each of these four adults has physically moved from the secure inner spaces of their house to the periphery. As they grew older, their power and influence over the family dynamics has declined greatly, often rendering their once stable and powerful lives vulnerable. They were living on the porch—a peripheral space of the house with their lives in routinized isolation, not to mention spatial marginality, especially at night. Sleeping, dining, and simply living life have all taken place on the porch ever since their move. A house needs people to feel “house-like” (see Carsten 2018:104; Allerton 2013); however, given that the porch is occupied by elders who have lost their identity as full adults, the abandonment of the porch by other family members at night, particularly the working adults, means that the lives of incapacitated elders on the porch straddle the line between connection and disconnection vis-à-vis the household, and also between the actual-house and house-like spaces.

During the day, the elders’ loneliness was occasionally punctuated by the company of their grandchildren, who themselves require care and support. The grandchildren are not really fully adult and key contributors to family work, and these elderly persons “voluntarily” ousted to the porch have also lost the title of full adult able to contribute to the family’s central work. Neither are seen as full members of the family—the children will become such in the future, but the elders only did this in the past. The four older adults discussed here all share some common features: their physicality is characterized by immobility due to old age, illness, and frailty; they are single (a widow or widower); and most importantly, except for Nima, they are the former women heads of households. Although all of these older adults, regardless of gender, are equally vulnerable to marginality and alienation, only one of them is a man.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, elsewhere else in the village two elderly men and two elderly women were living secure lives even though they were old and ill. Whilst surveying the village, I discovered that despite their age and illness, two elderly women are still the heads of households and as a result live inside the house.

Wangmo, while a widow, was living with her daughter and her daughter’s husband along with their children, but unlike Lhazom and the others, she eats, sleeps, and spends her life inside the house. She has a very active and mobile life; for instance, she took advantage of a special discount airfare for senior citizens offered by the Bhutanese government and visited a number of holy Buddhist sites in Bhutan and India. Further, Wangmo was involved in spiritual practices such as reciting Buddhist mantras at her house and attending major religious programs and prayer ceremonies elsewhere. Occasionally, she also sponsored *tsechu* rituals (monthly Buddhist liturgy) at the village temple, and she was thus living a meaningful life. Apart from occasional time spent on the porch during the daytime to take a sunbath, Wangmo does not spend much time on the porch and can enter the house whenever she pleases.

Among elderly persons, marginality in one’s house is therefore triggered primarily by old age and long-term sicknesses. There is still no healthcare facility in the village, and as Lhazom notes, it was evident that she became blind due to a lack of medical care. Given the distance, I was told that going to hospitals at district headquarters was extremely difficult when she was younger, and her permanent vision loss was attributed to delayed access to treatment. For an old person like Lhazom, the condition is irreversible and permanent. Yangki, Lhamo, and Nima are not only old but are also suffering from long-term sicknesses. The former two had never visited hospitals; therefore, the etiology, or for that matter diagnosis, of their sicknesses remains unknown to this day. While Nima had undergone timely treatment, recovery from sickness at his age generates feelings of hopelessness in his daughter and son-in-law. During my fieldwork, I observed Nima can now climb down the ladder with the help of a walking staff, whereas Yangki

and Lhamo remain almost bedridden. Surprisingly, the movement of these older adults from the inner space of the house to the outside porch is viewed as volitional not only by their daughters, who are now the current heads of households, but also by the elderly people themselves.

But old age and illness do not appear to be the sole causes of marginality and exclusion in later life, as women are also likely to be more vulnerable when they initiate early distribution of land and property to their children, and, for that matter, yielding of the title of head of the household. This is attested to by the Golengpas' proclivity for viewing the land and property inheritance system as a mechanism for securing a better quality of life in their later years. In other words, their landholdings ought to be distributed only when advanced age makes physical assistance essential. Once the share of the family estate has been apportioned, some children are claimed by the elders to become oblivious to the debts and obligations they owe to their aged parents. The future of older adults can become even more uncertain when they do not retain any land used for subsistence (*tozhing*).

Studying power relations in a pre-democratic rural Bhutanese society, Barth ([2018:58) had rightly translated "*tozhing*"—a traditional land inheritance system in which a small plot of land was given to the former underclass by the former nobilities—as the "food-field" (see also Penjore 2016). Given that the former serfs were landless, this food-field was the farmland needed to feed an entire family. "Tozhing" in the context of Goleng, however, is a system by which a small portion of land is retained by the aging heads of households for themselves. As they age and transfer the head of household position to their daughters, this land primarily serves as their own subsistence farmland rather than for their family members. Although it is ultimately bequeathed to one of her daughters or sons who had provided her with the most care and support, the failure to retain this land reinforces an elderly woman's exposure to the unpredictability of the conditions of marginality and vulnerability in later life. In other words, frail and vulnerable grandparents were more likely to be marginalized and cast aside when they did not possess such land, which serves as one of the informal care and support systems for the elderly. Tshering, a young man, commented skeptically on the state of one of the elders who was not his relative:

That old woman is a widow and can hardly walk. Most of her children are living elsewhere in the town. I do not know whether she has retained *tozhing* or not. An old person without *tozhing* and children is a problem because people tend to help them when they have *tozhing*. A childless woman without *tozhing* had recently passed away, and only a few people were there to help her. On the other hand, I have seen someone with such land and even though she did not have children there were so many people willing to help her as well as to carry out her funerary rituals.

As indicated earlier, among ten Golengpa elderly persons who were between 68 and 98 years of age, three of them living in peripheral home spaces were women. Despite stigmatization, they were living on the porch outside their homes, where they had once pursued the security and happiness of the family. Some of these porches were clearly unstable, yet the elders eat, sleep, and, without discomfort, live their lives there with a strong sense of belonging. They are fed on the porch, and any conversation and interaction with them has now shifted from the inner spaces (shrine and kitchen) to the outer spaces (porch). Given that these households cannot be characterized as poor in this village context, it is the relinquishment of their head of household position combined with long-term illnesses, old age, and the lack of health facilities to treat their ailments—including socially unacceptable incontinence—that have led them to be cast out from the inner spaces of the house.

The older adults themselves, however, do not show any discontent or resentment at being displaced from the center of their house to the periphery—or for their partial abandonment by their own family members. Instead, as previously mentioned, the marginalized elderly women reasoned that, due to old age, they are not able to conform to the etiquette of the house. This same justification is used by their daughters who have now acceded to the position of head of household to explain the situation. However, the basis for such relegation to porches in later life is problematic since other elderly women are still living inside the house along with their daughter and their grandchildren.

As noted above, one such woman is Wangmo, who, despite being equally old and ill, is still the head of household. In fact, Wangmo's daughter and her husband are merely assistants, even though they are now the main economic providers of the household. Most of the elderly women inhabiting the inner spaces of the houses either have not yet apportioned their land, thereby indicating that the house and at least some land is still held by them, or have retained subsistence land, which prevents their physical impairment from undermining their matrilineal power. On the contrary, the land and properties of the four marginalized older adults were long ago distributed, and none of them had held onto the critical subsistence land. This indicates that land distribution and inheritance patterns also play a role in the future of old people.

This system of land tenure seems to have posed no problems before the recent implementation of the law enacted in the 1980s, which advocates gender-neutral inheritance except for those of lineage and status, which are arbitrarily denied to women. In the customary land inheritance practice, the old head of household not only had control over her land but also gave the new head of household the privilege of differential access to her parent's assets. Land reform, however, has invalidated these uneven privileges, giving all the children equal access to land, regardless of their gender and role. Nonetheless, the traditional system has not collapsed completely as the older parents in Goleng continue to live with the new head of household despite the fact that the other siblings have inherited some land. It has now become quite common for sons to inherit a portion of land, although most of the land is still owned by women householders.

It is clear that marginality in old age is fueled by the lack of options. Crucially, the practice of equal inheritance among families who own little land means that there is too little to inherit even for the new head of household. Hence, in the face of equal rights to inheritance, the retaining of land by elders represents a problem, particularly for people with too little land to meet their subsistence needs. In addition to the lack of sizable landholdings, becoming a widow and suffering from a long-term or stigmatized sickness also contributes to peripheral status. At the same time, the subsistence land has increasingly become a source of conflict and tension among siblings in the nearby villages such that some parents prefer not to retain any land, despite its agential role in securing support in old age. I now turn to the spatiality of the porch where the marginalized elders live, mostly alone.

#### FROM SHRINE TO PORCH

The house in Goleng is a basic unit of organization with social and economic functions. It is the place not only of dwelling, but also of production and distribution of the family's collective economy. Stone and wood are the main materials of most houses, but many Golengpas also construct a bamboo hut on their farms to serve as a temporary residence during the harvest season. The main house, as a "corporate body" (Lévi-Strauss 1983), remains the official unit. The word for "home/house" (*mai*) is only used to refer to this latter structure, which is

transferrable and inheritable. The Golengpa household (*gung*) consists of a group of relatives who eat together around the common hearth (*thab*); the hearth is often used to refer to the household itself. Although Goleng houses have only one hearth, which in turn indicates a single-family unit, co-residents, whether conjugal or agnatic, who cook on a different hearth are considered a separate household. In this way, the household is directly related to the kitchen (*thabtsang*), in terms of both meaning and function.

In Goleng, the house is mainly composed of a porch, a kitchen, and (a few) rooms. The porch is of varying size and construction (generally made from a combination of wood, bamboo, and stones); along with the designated shrine room it is a salient feature of the Golengpa house. The porch is attached to the main entrance door but lacks railings. Some porch floors are unstable, with broken or missing planks. Sleeping on the porch carries a social stigma; as a mostly unroofed wooden structure which extends the space of the house, it is shared with domestic animals. Despite its peripherality, it is sporadically used for social purposes during festivals and rituals. Important religious rites, formal meetings, family gatherings, and decision-making are usually organized in the shrine, but the shrine is also a repository for the family's wealth and possessions, and it may concurrently serve as a guest room for important visitors. Not all dwellings have separate shrine rooms; in smaller homes the living room may be used for sleeping and for conducting rituals. On the other hand, the kitchen is the common space where feeding, socializing, and congregating informally take place.

Upon closer scrutiny of the Golengpa home spaces, I discerned that for some elderly persons, “happiness is not guaranteed in a home” (Douglas 1991:289), nor are security and connectedness, regardless of the living/sleeping arrangements, architectural design, or the family members with whom they live. While older adults irrespective of gender or income are revered in their communities, there is an upswing in the number of older adults lacking proper care and support in both urban and rural communities. As reflected in the above vignettes, some older adults can be living alone in marginal spaces of the house, while others can be constrained by their aging bodies and isolated, without companionship, despite being surrounded by household members.

Unlike the shrine room—which is the source of ritual and material wealth—or the kitchen—which is key to the identity of family/household, the porch is a peripheral and less-valued space that exists outside the core family identity. It marks the boundary between the spatiality of people and animals in that, except for cats, animals (e.g., dogs and chickens) are prohibited from entering the house. It is not uncommon, however, for the people to spend their leisure time on the porch or to undertake tasks such as shelling cobs and setting out grain to dry during the day. What is anomalous is that the porch is never where the family members spend time at night, let alone sleep. Elderly persons who live on the porch are spatially marginalized from the household—a threshold which is neither associated with the inner spaces of the house nor detached from the house as a whole. By living on the porch they are not homeless per se, yet this liminality does not prevent them from living alone. Occupancy of peripheral space in the family home therefore undermines the possibility of living what Butler (2004:8) calls a “livable life” with “various degrees of stability.”

The idea of a formalized care and support system for the aged was met with ambivalence when it first emerged during the democratization of the Bhutanese state in 2008. Bhutan opened its first retreat house—a care home for elderly persons—in a suburb of the capital, Thimphu, as recently as 2018. This retreat house is part of the King's People Project that extends care and support to the elderly persons who were, after undergoing rigorous assessment of their condition

by case officers at the district offices, already the recipients of the King's Welfare Scheme (*kidu*). This welfare scheme operates to reduce social inequality by providing support, particularly through monetary allowances and services to persons who are poor, landless, single, or to anyone economically and physically disadvantaged, and, most importantly, lacking proper care and support (see Ugyel 2018). With the exception of this retreat house in Thimphu and another one for the monks in Punakha, there are currently no retreat houses in Bhutan's other districts.

The marginality of elders in Bhutan as a whole can be attributed to rural-urban migration by sons and daughters for education or employment. Leaving aged parents alone back in the villages disrupts the co-residence system—which is central to successful aging. Unlike in many Western societies (cf. Rowe and Kahn 1998), in Bhutan successful aging does not mean living independently, but rather ideally it implies depending on one's children for care and support as a person becomes senile and debilitated. According to the 2015 GNH Survey Report, Thimphu had the highest migrant population (84.92%), followed by Chukha 62.86% and Sarpang (70.7%)—the two major towns in southern Bhutan. Bumthang and Lhuntse in central Bhutan were two of the three regional districts with the lowest migrant population (29.0% and 25.58%, respectively), reflecting a high rural-urban migration rate. With the increase in young people moving to Thimphu, the number of people over sixty in the capital has also soared, with 15.4% of its population in 2015 consisting of a floating elderly population. More than 72% of elderly people currently lack savings or land (NSB 2017b; cf. NSB 2005), rendering them vulnerable to various forms of insecurity and exploitation.

Golengpa youth are by no means different in terms of frequent migration. Upon completing primary education at their village school, they attend high schools and colleges in bigger towns but come back during the summer and winter breaks to help their parents in the village. Also, most adults who work in public services visit their parents during the winter to conduct the family's annual well-being ritual. However, every elderly parent in Goleng lives with one of their married daughters who remained in the village to become the household heads. A few newly married couples with children were living neolocally, but the general living arrangement of Golengpa families is characterized by a strong coresidence system. Yet, as mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law lose their power in the household due to aging, some of them are able to co-opt the family porch as their living space.

The porch is a liminal space in which people with varied, but ontologically vulnerable conditions in terms of both forms and degrees struggle dialectically to live a good and secure life. It exists not only between inside/outside, but also between the human/animal and household/communities. Living on the porch marginalizes the persons from fulfilling key familial and social roles as much as it evokes de-intimacy and other layered affects within the household and the society as a whole. Yet to the eyes of the family members and the fellow villagers, inhabiting this exterior space by the marginalized elderly women is neither a sign of being homeless, nor are their lives seen as displaced and insecure.

The inner spaces of the house and the porch represent activeness and dormancy, respectively. Given that senility is devoid of physical activity and vigor, the lives of the older adults on the porch are characterized by idleness and dormancy even though the space is a site where grandchildren occasionally play during the day and household members come to deliver food, and into which domestic animals stray from time to time. The move from the inner spaces to the outside space of the porch reifies the loss of power, which in turn reflects the life course transition into old age. Indeed, during my fieldwork, none of the elderly persons living on the

porch were engaged in any sort of productive activity, rather displaying a distinct solemnity on their faces that exuded stagnation, bleakness, and lack of a future (cf. Allison 2012). Given that their lives are characterized by repetitive and sustained episodes of inactivity, the daily lives of the elders on the porch consisted of sleeping, sitting or reclining on the bed, and basking in the sun near their bed with monotonous regularity. Meals are consumed on the porch, often alone, or occasionally with grandchildren whose parents are away in the fields. Breakfast and dinner are hot meals, but lunch may be stored in a cabinet next to their bed. Either way, I found the elderly persons mostly alone, whether during the day, at night, or at mealtimes.

At the same time, the families of older adults are not landless; in fact, all of them own enough land to support their entire extended families. The rise of capitalism, for instance in India and other parts of Asia, has no doubt led not only to landlessness and exploitation, but also to proletarianization and pauperization of certain categories of people, rendering their lives precarious without any form of protection and social security—whether from employers or the state (e.g., Li 2014; Shah et al. 2018). Golengpas, however, largely remain full-time agriculturists, depending entirely on farming. Their livelihoods come from agricultural production on their land and from their domestic animals, mainly cattle. Cash crops popular in the region, such as oranges and cardamom, are not grown in Goleng, yet Golengpas are familiar with markets as a source of income from non-land-related activities, such as wage labor. While wage work has somewhat increased over time, it remains relatively scarce, particularly following the construction of a farm road in the village in 2009 and, more recently, an electric transmission line through the village. Since the completion of these projects, opportunities for wage labor have become fewer and farther between leading most Golengpas to focus solely on agricultural production.

Today, Golengpas grow paddy in abundance for local consumption. In 2017, vegetables such as chile peppers, broccoli, and beans were also increasingly cultivated, primarily for sale, in small-scale farms worked either collectively on a portion of land belonging to a group of households or individually in a person's family's land. These products, along with surplus rice, may be sold by the farmers themselves in markets in the nearby town of Tingtibi and other municipalities when the price is high, but they also sell them to a small local cooperative when there is poor market demand in a way similar to other transitioning societies (see Li 2014), indicating Golengpas' understanding of profit and loss. Their familiarity with markets is indeed a result of the traces of capitalism that are beginning to penetrate some nearby towns. For instance, after Tingtibi was made a satellite town by the government in 1991 because of its geographical position,<sup>10</sup> market development led to monetization of land. This capitalistic trend intensified when a plan for a new hydropower project became the focus of the government. Although the new government in 2019 decided to abandon the hydropower project, the pattern of surging land prices and increased rents given Tingtibi's strategic location was already in motion.

Goleng is a self-sufficient village that is quite close to Tingtibi, but its location is not as strategic. It is a few kilometers of bumpy secondary road from a highway. Further, there are no factories or large employers either in Goleng or in the district to generate jobs and incomes for Golengpas or that might need Golengpa's land to operate their businesses. Hence, there is no commoditization of land per se in Goleng, and market competition is still low. Given that there are no records of people selling or exchanging their land with other properties in their local history, and that land in Goleng is more than two hundred times cheaper than land in Thimphu—the capital city—selling and buying land in Goleng is entirely a new phenomenon. The radical shift from agriculture to industry is yet to take place in villages such as Goleng, and without a

factory for mass production of goods for export, Golengpas depend primarily on agriculture without neoliberal economic modernization.

Land alienation no doubt leads to increased vulnerability in the lives of elderly persons, but it is evident that this is not just driven by capitalist accumulation alone as landlessness and homelessness can also be provoked by the circumstances and situations that are enmeshed in the gendered inheritance system, old age, and long-term sickness. My informants maintained that moving to the porch in later life is not a long-standing practice; nevertheless, the everydayness of the marginalized elderly persons' life worlds is permeated by seclusion and physical inactivity. Given the lived experience of many elderly persons, why is there an apparent contradiction between the appearance of suffering that is too empirically obvious to ignore and what the elders themselves conceive of their lives on the porch as constituted by these features? This I see to be the underlying notion of karma and gaining merit that pervades Buddhist societies.

### THE PORCH AS (IN)SECURE SPACE

It is empirically evident that insecurity, uncertainty, and instability among the marginalized elders are engendered not by the lack of employment, but rather by long-term sickness, old age, and change in traditional inheritance patterns. However, interacting with the four Golengpa elders—three women and a man—facing exclusion and spatial marginality, I found out that none of them viewed their own lives in such bleak terms. If their move to the porch is voluntary, their disinclination to live inside the house cannot be involuntary. Lhazom, Yangki, and Lhamo did not want to set their feet inside the house ever again, nor did Nima, who is somewhat ambulant, echoing the voluntary acceptance of his female counterparts. During our routine casual conversations, Lhazom reflected that living on the porch is one way in which the loss of power and the relationship with her daughter is negotiated:

I decided to live here on the porch after it became increasingly difficult for me to walk. I find my porch safe and most importantly very convenient than the rooms inside the house when it comes to going to the latrine, whether during the night or day. I do not want to trouble my family members with unnecessary cleaning tasks in the house as it will only accumulate more sin [bad karma]. I have given up the household headship, and it is her [daughter's] responsibility to manage the house now. You know, I want to accrue positive merit! In fact, I wish to die here on the porch as doing so will minimize the burden associated with my death to my children. For me, living on the porch is by no means life in isolation. I feel connected with my family, and did not experience any boredom, neglect, or shame. After all it is my karma!

In contrast, take examples of vulnerable people among enterprising, neoliberal capitalist worlds. For the homeless people living on the margins of a city, boredom is viewed as an everyday affect (Stewart 2007) and as downward mobility that is characterized by social exclusion (Ferguson 1999). For instance, the lack of sense of belonging and the feeling of boredom are enduring features of precarity among the homeless, as well as among state-sponsored shelter residents in post-communist Bucharest (O'Neill 2014:11). Such boredom, idleness, and long periods of waiting at work have even led the *catadores* of Rio de Janeiro to temporarily quit their jobs (Millar 2014:47). Frequent leaving and returning to the waste disposal site where these urban poor are employed reflect not only the tendency to view their lives as economically precarious (Han 2011) but also lays bare the fragility or precariousness of life (Al-Mohammad 2012). In a migratory context, the lengthy "waiting time" experienced by spouses

for their partners in the Korean Chinese Autonomous Prefecture in China was also viewed as boredom, social exclusion, and precarious (Kwon 2015:492). The same is the case with the Japanese who, following the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant disasters, are experiencing a feeling of increasing insecurity and loss (Allison 2014).

Contrary to the marginalized people in post-Fordist worlds, these displaced Golengpa elders felt very much at home even as they live a vulnerable life on the porch with their interaction limited to the children who serve as their occasional companions during the day. Despite living on the porch for over a year, neither a sense of dejection and boredom nor a feeling of happiness was obvious among them. In other words, their livelihoods were conceived as secure—a portrayal that is rather the result of viewing the forms of vulnerability and uncertainty outside its ontological context. While they did not want to live inside the house, their physical incapacitation limits them from doing so in the first place, thereby confirming the idea of voluntary relegation. Nevertheless, my sustained engagement with these elders revealed that one reason for not viewing marginality and exclusion in their ontological forms and meanings despite the potentiality to provoke disruption of stability and othering of certain categories of people is because of the centrality of the idea of karma and rebirth to their life as a whole.

In Buddhism, the human realm is part of the wider *samsara* (*khorwa*)—a cycle of existence through repeated rebirths and deaths—characterized by suffering (*dukkha*) in many variables and differing degrees. Suffering is caused by successive rebirths in the multilevel or multiverse *samsara*; rebirth, in turn, is determined by an unequal distribution of karma (*las*) based on the merit (*gewa* or *sönam*) accrued during one's previous life. Positive karma leads to rebirth in the higher realms of gods and humans, whereas negative or bad karma generally attracts more suffering. The present actions of a person determine their afterlife, but it is the past karma that regulates their present existence. Within the human realm, there is great variability in one's karma as embodied by the unequal quality-of-life conditions. In order to effectively end or soteriologically release from this rebirth cycle, Buddhist monks strive to achieve enlightenment or nirvana—a state that transcends the cycle of rebirths and deaths and the effects of karma itself. Karma and rebirth in this sense constitute the heart of the central premises of not only Buddhist eschatology (see Spiro 1982; Tambiah 1968) but also of all non-Buddhist Indic religions in a way, reflecting the “ethicization” of Indic religions (Obeyesekere 2002).

For some Tibetan Buddhist monks, the highest ideal is not to renounce *samsara*, but rather to develop an awakened mind (*bodhicitta*) (Samuel 1993) which is key to the liberation of all sentient beings from the cycle of death and rebirth. Golengpas, however, view achieving nirvana in this life as beyond their scope (Tashi 2020) and an enlightened mind as too difficult or too advanced for them, thereby leading them to rely on the accumulation of merit rather than on the generation of an awakened mind. This indicates that the ultimate goal of Golengpas is to have a better life in their next rebirth in higher realms fueled by their positive actions oriented towards merit-making. Nevertheless, the sick bodies and everyday living conditions prevent older elders from attending or organizing religious activities so as to gain merit—a concept central to the future of one's next life.

The voluntary nature of the relegation and acceptance of their lives to the porch heralds the influence of antecedent karma that pervades Goleng. Indeed, Golengpa elders living on the porch view their current state of life as the consequences not of the bad karma per se, but rather of the exhaustion of the good karma accrued in their previous lives, suggesting its fluidity. Rather than increasing, positive karma decreases as the person ages because the merit accumulated in the present life can only be materialized in the next life. Life on the porch then

may be viewed as the reification of the declining karma—a state of multiple entanglements wherein past karma which is intertwined with old age is almost exhausted, and the present karma has not yet ripened. It is a conjunction of positive karma, which is doomed to decline, and the present sufferings, which are set to intensify, thereby leading the elders to accept their life as the consequences of changing karma. Doing so, according to the marginalized elders, can generate merit as a result of the minimization of burden on their children, which is otherwise tantamount to accumulation of negative karma or sin. In this sense, the notions of the everydayness of life on the porch, or the affectivity of the displaced elders on the uncertainty of life, conform with the religious and cultural conceptions of the Buddhist notion of generating positive karma and merit for higher rebirth.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed how marginality is produced in an agrarian context by examining the integration of elders, some of whom, following the loss of power, moved to the porch, thereby living a pitiable life. While the condition of marginality among these older adults was provoked by multiple physical, cultural, religious, economic, and political circumstances, the elders' view of their everyday lives on the porch has been shaped by religious convictions rather than economic and political dimensions. In examining old age in the context of marginalized elders, I have argued that the elders' divergent view of their situation on the porch, which is otherwise an ontological reality of marginality, has been heavily influenced by the idea of karma and merit-making. Ideas about karma allow for a reframing of the spatial and social marginality, transforming it into a self-conscious act of society and family participation by these physically frail elders.

I have presented an overview of the local land tenure system, considering its linkages to the transformation of one's home from a secure and inclusive to an insecure and disorienting place. Alienation and marginality is portrayed as an asymmetric and disproportionate human condition since not all the older adults experience relegation to the porch in later life. For instance, the majority of elders in Goleng whose lives are marked by inequality and deferential exposure to vulnerability were women. With the transition of their position from head of household (inside the house) to grandmothers (outside the house), their secure lives are transformed into insecure lives. While such a change in condition is synchronized with their age, age is not the only underlying driver of instability.

The loss of power of older adults through the agency of aging is exacerbated by the convergence of disease and the failure to retain some land, particularly by those senior women who had relinquished the position of head of household and withdrawn from the inner space of their house, which in turn embodies the source of or locus for resources that are necessary for living a secure and happy life. This is particularly true for those older adults who have not vacated the central spaces of the house and therefore not ceded the head of household position to their daughters. With the subsistence land allocation provided in the traditional land tenure system being eroded, stability for women who yield their role as heads of households has become threatened, indicating that it is not capitalism that is the common cause of landlessness or homelessness; rather it is a shift in traditional inheritance structures that is making some people vulnerable. The repositioning at such a stage of life reifies the fact that marginality and social exclusion are not bounded and can occur even within a person's own home space.

The general result of all forms and conditions of marginality, exclusion, and vulnerability, regardless of their intensity or severity, is that they ultimately push people away

from a safe and meaningful life. Persons at the margins of a livable life are thrust into the sphere of heightened vulnerability and insecurity. At the same time, there is a lack of uniformity among the marginalized elders when it comes to how they perceive and deal with such conditions. Living on the porch was not viewed by these elders as a form of spatial alienation or imposing suffering on them despite the lived experiences of social marginality and the relinquishment of not just their power as head of household, but also their place—from the inner space of the house to the outer space on the porch. Although these elderly persons no longer set foot in the inner spaces of their houses, there is also a sense of being at home even as they live their lives on the porch at the very edge of what constitutes the family home.

The commonality between those who inhabit the center and those who inhabit the periphery of the house is that there is no feeling of marginality or mortification whatsoever. This indicates that socio-spatial exclusion and boredom are not seen as persistent forms of suffering, but rather as extricable parts of their lives. The marginalized elders' behaviors on the porch and their perceptions of sufferings have their antecedents in the idea of karma. The elders' insistence that they gave up their status as household heads voluntarily and are content to be on the porch is, in effect, oriented towards conforming with the local conceptions of the logic of Buddhist karma and merit. Here, the person's karma changes throughout the life cycle as reflected in their move from the shrine to the porch which can be seen as an exteriorization of the declining karma. Much as in the eyes of the marginalized elders this is not considered homelessness, neither do these older adults consider it to be suffering. To move to the porch in old age is neither to recalibrate the present karma nor to seek independence or solitariness, but rather it is to endure declining karma by residing in the liminality between the binary oppositions of porch/shrine, human/animals, household/community, and ultimately life/death. The porch disjoins the social as much as it peripheralizes the spatial. Inhabiting the in-betweenness of domestic intimacy and de-intimacy, only a few of the incapacitated elders can make their way back to the shrine—which constitutes the proper house. For those who cannot return to the shrine, voluntarily living on the porch is understood as a related means of family fealty.

#### NOTES

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1. The research assistant's name and the place names are real, but all names of elderly persons are pseudonyms.

2. Both my research assistant and I are men, but this did not hinder frank and open communication with elderly female informants. For six months, I was accompanied by Sangay and then for another six months I conversed with Golengpas mainly alone. I am a native of this region of Bhutan but not of this village.

3. Golengpas speak a dialect of the East-Bodish language group.

4. Village heads and priests.
5. See also Wacquant (2008) for the features of what he calls “advanced urban marginality.”
6. Butler (2006) distinguishes “precarity,” which is an unequally distributed social and political condition, from “precariousness,” which is seen as a common human condition of vulnerability. See also Standing (2011) on the notions of “precarity” and the “precariat.”
7. In contrast, it is reported that the ultimogeniture pattern of inheritance is popular among the matrilineal Khasi society (see Nongbri 2000: 371).
8. Men in rural villages carry either a short sword (*patang*) or a short knife (*dozom*) on their hips. Both are symbols of manhood and masculinity.
9. It should, however, be noted that Bhutanese women’s life expectancy is slightly higher than men’s. See World Health Organization (2020).
10. A small regional town.

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Figure 1. Lhazom on the porch. (Photo by Kelzang T. Tashi)

Figure 2. Goleng village in Zhemgang district, Bhutan.