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Marriage and Singleness

An Overview

The ideals of marriage and singleness display a nexus of religious values orchestrated in concert with a society's most intricate arrangements of sexuality, political order, and domestic economy. Heterosexual pairing is set forth as normative in most human societies, with the languages of religion proclaiming the primordially given necessity of marriage as the link between the order of the cosmos and the order of society.

Religion offers marriage a supernatural sanction: in many societies the event of marriage is highly ritualized, with weddings performed by religious leaders, though arranged through economic and political negotiations. Religious discourse naturalizes heterosexual marriage, defining which and whose sexual practices are moral through doctrine and primordial myth. Polytheistic pantheons pair gods and goddesses in heterosexual union; abstract cosmologies posit the marriage of such gendered entities as earth and sky; the creation narratives of the Bible (Gen. 2–4) and the *Bṛhadāranyaka* upanishad (1.4.3–4) portray the primordial person as a singular man, from part of whose divided body a woman was created, after which they reunited in heterosexual intercourse that resulted in the procreation of humanity. Religious narratives present marriage as a primordial paradigm for humans to emulate as a religious practice, instituting social norms in terms of cosmic structures.

Marriage domesticates sexuality and biological reproduction, producing not just new human lives but persons to be socialized within the family system, persons whose family socialization trains them to perform their class and gender roles within the larger social system. Marriage produces heirs to a society's property, ideals, politics, and religion, and is often the crux for the perpetuation of asymmetrical power relations between men and women. Men exercise control of the means of the reproduction of society by implicit and explicit requirements that women be sexually, economically, and socially subordinate to them in marriage: while women bear its heirs, those children are fully accepted by society only if they were produced within its construct of acceptable union.

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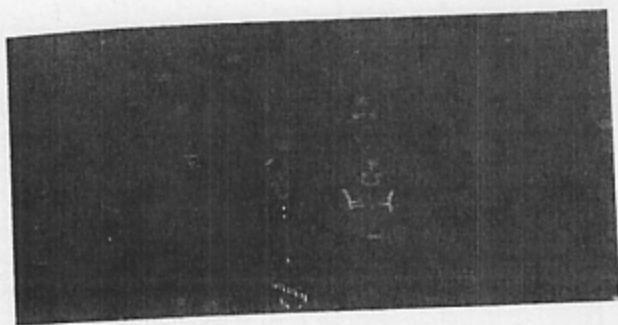
Although women's subordination in marriage is ubiquitous in human societies, women across cultures manage what power they have artfully. Contemporary feminist ethnographies show that women in many societies are not passive but outspoken, self-assured actors in the social life of their communities. Yet social status and the ability to exercise agency often depend upon women fulfilling the requirement of marriage and childbearing; not doing so commonly results in social and economic marginalization. Women may exercise degrees of power and resistance within patriarchal marriage, but their privilege is usually at the price of supporting the social order that systematically subordinates them to men.

Where marriage is the condition of women's access to social agency, religions can pose marriage as a woman's access to the divine: some Muslim, Hindu, and Christian traditions direct women's devotion toward the deity through or solely for the sake of her husband. According to the *Laws of Manu*, a Hindu women's deity is her husband, and marriage is her religious practice: "A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities" (5.154). While Paul implies that Christian marriage recreates primordial union when he says "A man shall . . . be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh" (Eph. 5:31), he also defines marriage as a hierarchical arrangement: "the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband" (1 Cor. 11:3; c.f. Eph. 5:23); the seventeenth-century poet John Milton reflects Paul when he describes the religious structure of Adam and Eve's marriage: "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (*Paradise Lost* II:299).

TYPES OF MARRIAGE

Common forms of marriage are monogamy, the union of one woman and one man; polygyny, where one man has multiple wives; and polyandry, where one wife has multiple husbands. The term polygamy, commonly used to mean polygyny, actually means both polygyny and polyandry.

Polygyny occurs in African, Hindu, Islamic, pre-eleventh-century Jewish (and subsequently among some North African Jewish), Native American, and some Mormon societies. Many polygynous societies use men's, and especially kings', accumulation of wives as displays of wealth and power. Solomon reportedly had seven hundred wives (1 Kgs. 11:3); Muslim Sudanese and Bedouin men make their economic stature known by the number of wives they support. Women's status in polygynous marriages depends on factors of seniority, production of sons, and favoritism of the husband. Younger co-wives are often expected to perform the bulk of household labor in service of older wives.



A Muslim Uighur man rests with his two wives and their six children in front of their house at the Buzak Commune in Xinjiang Province, China (Earl Kowall/Corbis).

Polyandry is known to occur in Tibet, Burma, the Himalayan plateau, and some tribes of India. Nancy Levine's study of polyandry among Tibetan Nyinba of Nepal shows them practicing fraternal polyandry, where a group of brothers marries one wife, and where the eldest brother, who holds authority over wife and younger brothers, has priority of sexual relations early on in the marriage so as to father the first-born children. Some Nyinba practice polyandrous polygyny: a group of brothers, married to one woman, will jointly marry another woman, ideally, her sister.

SINGLENESS AND MONASTICISM

Many religious traditions reflect a deep ambivalence toward marriage and sexuality by sanctioning both marriage and celibacy as competing religious ideals. Paul enjoins Christians to resist marriage if they can, saying "those who marry will have worldly troubles" (1 Cor. 7:28) which distract from their religious work; he considers marriage a concession: "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9). Although women are generally enjoined to marry, women who avoid or leave marriages in order to devote themselves more fully to religious devotion have also been enshrined as demonstrating a religious ideal, as with, for example, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya of eighth-century Basra, Margery Kempe in medieval England, or Mirābāi of sixteenth-century India. In societies that support monastic institutions, virginity is often an ideal. Yet unmarried women (or formerly married, as with widows) may be seen as threatening to the social and religious order. Some religions afford women an avenue of singleness through monastic life, sometimes defining a woman's monastic vocation as marriage to the deity. Where celibate women's religious communities have shown great independence and growth, there have often been movements to suppress them—as with the Beguines in medieval Europe—or to bring them under the care of

men's authority. Women may not always have the choice of whether they marry a man or join a monastic community. Christian convents have functioned as depositories for women whose families considered them unmarriageable for reasons such as deformity (as was the case for the Italian nun Archangela Tarabotti), and women longing for monastic life have likewise been forced to marry.

SAME-SEX UNIONS

While there is compelling historical evidence of the practice of same-sex sexual activity across many cultures through millennia, evidence of same-sex marriage—where a same-sex couple's publicly established sexual, economic, and domestic union is accorded the same social and religious status as heterosexual marriage—is historically sparse. Historian John Boswell argues, by reconstructing evidence of medieval Christian ceremonies solemnizing same-sex unions, that same-sex couples' unions were accorded the status of marriage in certain parts of medieval Europe. Same-sex marriage has been the focus of intense debate in the United States. While public rituals that pronounce and celebrate same-sex relationships hold a deep appeal to many lesbians, the emulation of the institutional structures of marriage in these relationships enjoins much controversy.

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- There is a rich history of scholarship on marriage, much of which expresses theoretical assumptions about gender organization that accept without question the idea that women are naturally, even biologically, driven to marry a man, depend on him economically, and bear children—that marriage is a given female need rather than a result of elaborate historical socialization. The following sources, in varying ways, engage and challenge this assumption in their analyses of marriage as a complex social practice and institution.
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KAREN LEE ANDERSON

In Microhistorical Traditions

In the microhistorical traditions nearly everyone enters into a socially approved sexual and economic union with another person at least once in a lifetime. Prior to modernization it would be rare to find a woman who did not marry, but there are numerous instances of men who, for social or religious reasons, remained single. For example, among the Huli of Papua New Guinea some men became permanent members of the *haroli* bachelor cult. In kin-based societies seeking to expand their membership, society would expect that adults play their part in bearing and raising children. Although colonialism, modernization, and urbanization have given individuals more options, it is still the case that nearly all indigenous women enter into marriage of a traditional, transitional, or modern type. Entry into marriage takes myriad forms and usually involves exchange of goods (variously called bride wealth, bride price, bride service, or marriage goods). In some groups the process of marriage is not considered to be complete until a child is born. Then, too, many societies require that affinal payments be made at the birth of the child to compensate the side of the family that forgoes adding the child to its membership. Thus, in a patrilineal society the mother's family would receive gifts from the father's family.

Many of the microhistorical traditions permit polygyny, but polyandry is restricted to a few groups in Tibet and Nepal, southern India and Sri Lanka, and northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon. Less common is the pattern of group marriage reported in the nineteenth century of the Nayar, a caste group in southern India whose men were hired soldiers. The Nayar did not enter into permanent marriages but, after a ritual marriage in which the "groom" placed a gold ornament around the neck of the "bride," the woman joined a

large household where she was visited by many "husbands." Her children were provided for by her blood relatives. In traditional small-scale and kin-based societies, single women include those waiting to enter into marriage, those whose husbands have died, and those who have divorced (or been divorced by) their husbands. As Diane Bell's work on the religious life of Warlpiri and Kaititja women in central Australia has shown, mature women not attached to men may bear a particular responsibility for women's rituals, through which ties to land and kin are renewed and transformed, and for providing a place of refuge and female sociality for married women seeking respite from spouses and male-dominated contexts.

In the worldviews of indigenous traditions the sexual relationship of woman and man is often seen as homologous with that of land and gardener or land and hunter. A sense of the fruitfulness of male-female conjunctions informs ritual and myth. Moreover, social and economic exchanges may be conceived of as "marriages," and the partners, whether male or female, may be referred to as "mother" and "father." Hence marriage, with its reciprocal rights and obligations, is not only a social institution but also a metaphor for conceptualizing life-giving relationships. No society leaves sexuality to nature; all have rules and most have religious sanctions for the breach of rules. For example, it is common that sexual relations be prohibited before activities such as hunting, fishing, fighting, planting, brewing, and iron smelting. The understanding is that energy and potency should not be expended in sex when they are required elsewhere. Similarly, taboos may apply during menstruation, pregnancy, and mourning.

The microhistorical traditions vary in their attitudes toward homosexuality. The Siwan of North Africa and the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea expect all males to engage in homosexual activities for a period of their lives, while traditionally the Cheyenne of the Great Plains allowed married men to take on berdaches (male transvestites) as second wives. Prior to the establishment of British rule in Sudan, temporary homosexual marriages occurred among the Azande, with warriors who could not afford wives taking on "boy wives." Some theorists suggest that homosexuality, as a permanent status, is more acceptable in societies that, because of resource limitations, wish to limit population. Female-female marriages are reported to have occurred in a number of African societies but it is thought that they did not involve sexual relationships. Rather, they were a socially approved way for a woman to assume what were usually male roles such as those of trader, political leader, or religious officiant.

Even in matrilineal societies men usually occupy the positions of political and religious leadership, but some

rately venerated previous generations through ancestor worship. A woman gained status and power primarily through her husband. Marriages among the imperial family were arranged for the purpose of powerful allegiances and dominance. Wives in certain ways participated in this power, but often the mother and sisters of the emperor wielded more influence than did the wife of the regent. Women who married into the educated elite did so through arrangements made by their fathers. Women in these positions shared more of the power with their husbands. But in so doing they were required to personify the honor of their family by demonstrating chastity and virtue.

Men often had more than one wife. Women's roles, therefore, could fall into several categories. These included wife; secondary wife, who might be a younger relative of the wife and who was legally married to the husband; concubine, whose function was similar to that of the second wife, except that she was not officially married to the husband during periods where the law prescribed monogamy; and second wife, a subsequent wife after divorce or the death of the first wife.

Traditionally, little or no choice existed in the selection of mate. After marriage, at the onset of which the woman went to live in the home of her husband, she enjoyed little personal freedom. The extreme pressures under which many women lived led to an expectation of high suicide rates among them.

The Communist Family Law of 1 May 1950 set forth new guidelines for marriage in modern China, although it essentially codified a change in attitudes that had already begun in the early part of the twentieth century. The new law sought to undo the hierarchical attitudes both between the sexes and between the generations, in which the parents decided upon their children's marriage partners. Marriage was now to be based solely on love, and the exchange of money, whether as a dowry or as bride-price, was prohibited. Even as early as 1931, the state officially withdrew its financial support of ancestor worship, which has been foundational to the Confucian-based familial hierarchy.

Although contemporary China has radically changed its political structure, and the large extended family as an idea has disappeared with the imperial families that fostered it, marriage continues as a priority in contemporary China. In certain ways, the face of the family has changed completely, as in the "one couple, one child" mandate. In addition, it has become increasingly necessary for spouses to live apart because of employment; in 1998 an estimated fifty million people were living in this situation. However, in what may seem to be a natural holdover of ancient allegiances to family, the law requires adult children to care for their aging parents. Even under such changing circumstances, however,

the single person—whether male or female—continues to be an unusual exception in Asian cultures.

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CONSTANTINA RHODES-BAILLY

In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Marriage in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has traditionally been based on a heterosexual contract in which a person secures sexual and reproductive rights to the body of another person. Procreation, kinship, and transfer or conservation of property have all been core issues in marriage in each of these traditions to varying degrees in different times and places.

JUDAISM

Heterosexual marriage in Judaism is the normative state for adult men and women, based on the example of Adam and Eve in Genesis. The first divine commandment after creation is to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28); later in the narrative, companionship is added to the advantages of the male-female bond (Gen. 2:18). For the Hebrew prophets, marriage is a potent metaphor for God's relationship to Israel (Hos. 2:21-22; Isa. 61:10, 62:5; Ezek. 16).

women should enable them to "join in stemming the tides which threaten to engulf the home," as Pope Pius XII wrote in his 1945 encyclical.

Most Protestant Christian churches allow remarriage after divorce or the death of a spouse, as do Eastern rite Catholics. However, for Roman Catholics, marriage is the seventh sacrament and the symbol on the earthly plane of the heavenly unity between Christ and the Church. The marital union is consecrated by a permanent sacrament that the bride and groom administer to and receive from each other, as they acknowledge their mutual consent to enter into the state of matrimony. For Catholics the symbolic reality of the unity of Christ and Church as expressed in the unity of husband and wife is permanent until the death of one of the marriage partners. Catholic marriage is conceived as being exclusive and permanent. Therefore, concubinage, which is considered adultery, is officially forbidden.

Not everyone is obligated to enter the marital state, according to Catholic doctrine. Anyone, male or female, is free to withhold the power of their bodies to generate offspring by refraining from marriage. But once marriage is freely chosen, then the sacramental joining of the couple signifies that they have entered into a marriage contract that consists of yielding permanent and exclusive power over their bodies to their partner with the specific view of engaging in procreative acts. Catholic theologians regard marriage as a vocation, to which the majority of human beings are called by God.

Within the Abrahamic traditions, the practice of celibacy is an almost exclusively Catholic institution. Beginning in the New Testament, virginity is presented as an earthly expression of the heavenly state (Luke 20:36, Matt. 22:30, Mark 12:25) and a powerful means of worshiping God. Celibacy in Catholic canon law is a freely undertaken renunciation of marriage in order to practice perfect chastity and dedication to God's service. Celibacy and consecrated virginity are considered even higher vocations than is the vocation of marriage (1 Cor. 7:26-35). Although married male clergy were permitted in early Catholicism in the Roman rite and are so even today in the Eastern rite at the lowest hierarchical levels, all Roman Catholic clergy today must be celibate. For women, virginity and the consecration of one's life to God transcends physical motherhood as a vocation, representing as it does a public affirmation of God's transcendence and the primacy of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 19:11-12).

The Protestant Reformation abolished celibacy, terming it a human institution and not divinely decreed. In 1522, several years after his break with the Catholic Church, Martin Luther condemned celibacy and was

himself married on 13 June 1525. Although John Calvin did not condemn it, in 1561 he wrote that celibacy was not to be preferred over the married state.

Christian feminists today are focusing on the mutuality of the marriage bond that has been traditional in their religion, emphasizing individual personal and sexual fulfillment more than the primarily procreative emphasis of earlier times.

ISLAM

In Islam the extended family is the central economic, social, and political unit, and marriage, with its profound impact on family relationships, is the peak experience of an individual's life cycle. Marriage in Islam is regarded as a universal obligation, the appropriate state for every mentally and physically competent person. Temporary celibacy is advocated by some in Islamic mystical traditions as a way of purifying oneself and enhancing self-control and spiritual receptivity. Permanent celibacy, however, is viewed by Muslims as a violation of the Qur'an and was rejected by the prophet Muhammad.

Marriage in Islam is a bilateral contract between the bride's family or guardian and the groom. The bride's consent is generally required, although, in the case of a virgin, silence may be taken to signify consent, and some interpretations allow her to be coerced into her first marriage. All women are expected to be virgins the first time they marry. Islamic law sets no minimum age for the marriageability of either men or women, though civil laws in some areas do. Also required in Islamic marriage is the cooperation of the bride's guardian and the payment of a bride price, called *mahr*, for the rights that the husband acquires over the wife. Often the contract stipulates that only part of the bride price is to be paid upon marriage, the remainder to be paid to the wife in the event of divorce. Marriage does not result in community of property between husband and wife, and the woman retains ownership of her bride price. The husband is obliged to maintain the household and support his wife in a particular manner befitting her status or she may demand dissolution of the marriage. If the wife is not obedient and prepared to meet her husband's conjugal needs, she loses her claim to support. A husband is forbidden to take vows of celibacy.

Pre-Islamic society permitted temporary marriage in which a man and woman cohabit for a fixed period mutually stipulated in a marriage contract. At the end of the stipulated period, the husband declares the divorce formula and the marriage is over. Some Muslims adduce Qur'anic evidence that Muhammad permitted his devotees to contract temporary marriages, termed *mut'a*, especially on lengthy expeditions (4:28). After the prophet's death, this practice was prohibited by the

early caliph Omar, who regarded it as fornication, although some factions of Islam still permit it today.

Islamic marriage is endogamous within the community of believers, based on Qur'anic stipulation (2:200). According to some interpretations, Islamic men may marry women of other "scriptural" religions such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (5:7), though Muslim women may marry only Muslim men. In general practice marriages are made within the even narrower confines of tribe, clan, and extended family and are frequently arranged by the bride's male relatives or another intermediary.

Marriages are forbidden among certain degrees of affinity and consanguinity (4:26-28), though often the preferred marriage is of a daughter to her father's brother's son, who, in some Islamic circles, must renounce his right to marry his paternal cousin, termed a *bint amm*, before she can be betrothed to another suitor. This form of marriage serves to build the extended family and ensure loyalty to the father's house. Polygyny is permitted in Islam, though the Qur'an stipulates that a man may marry no more than four wives and must undertake to treat them equally (4:3).

Divorce is permitted in Islam, and remarriage after divorce is common for both men and women. Both men and woman have the right to initiate divorce, but it has generally been the prerogative of the male. He can do this by simply pronouncing a formula stating his intention, although civil law in different regions often requires more procedural formality. The woman receives that portion of her bride price that was reserved, in her marriage contract, for payment in case of divorce.

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DIANE M. SHARON

Martyrdom

Martyrdom, from the Greek *martyria*, meaning "witness," connotes the death, understood by those who champion it as a willing death, of an individual on behalf of a belief or principle. Its earliest emergence in the West occurs in the Apocrypha to the Hebrew Bible, in the account of the persecutions of the Jews by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes at the beginning of the second century B.C.E. Already these early sources display the particular magnetism of gender in the context of martyrdom: the texts emphasize the heroism of a mother and her seven sons, in terms that underline the outrage the reader should feel at the suffering and heroism of women and children (2 Macc. 7:20ff). The peculiar narrative magnetism of female suffering recurs in a variety of religious contexts: the persecution of Fātimah and her sons, for example, serves as the foundation myth for Shiite Islam.

The conjunction between the perceived heroism of unjust suffering and the narrative magnetism of female suffering raises important theoretical issues. The social meaning of acts of religious heroism can shift dramatically according to the socially constructed connotations imposed by the gender of the agent (Saiving, 1992). Thus, self-sacrifice would have a different meaning for women—assuming a social context in which women are exhorted to engage in self-abnegating behaviors—than it would for men. Where gendered social constraints play a coercive role, as in the case of sati, the self-immolation of Hindu widows, it may be impossible to uncover the "voice" or intention of the woman in question; and the interpreter is left to adjudicate among the assertions of