

## MARRIAGE IN NON-WESTERN SOCIETIES

Many Western Christians live under the impression that their own form of marriage is the only "natural" and workable one, and that all other forms are not only sinful, but barbaric. Christians in non-Western countries, however, who are used to observing "exotic" marriage customs at close range, may realize that the matter is not that simple. Human beings are highly adaptable, and they usually develop their particular forms of marriage in response to particular social and economic conditions. When these conditions change, marriage is likely to change with them. The following three examples may illustrate this point. The first form of marriage described here has virtually disappeared under Western influence. The second survives, but is gradually being modernized under increasing pressure. The third represents a radical reform of customs that had become obsolete.

### Marriage in Ancient Polynesia

Before their contact with Western civilization, the populations of the many Polynesian islands had their own marriage laws and customs which, however varied, nevertheless had much in common. They were also quite different from those of Europe and America. The Polynesians were sexually quite uninhibited and put a high value on sexual satisfaction. Marriage was considered highly desirable, and very few adults remained single. Widowed and divorced persons also remarried as quickly as possible. Boys and girls usually married as soon as they became adults.

However, the Polynesians were highly conscious of rank, and the marriage customs of the nobility were different from those of the common people. On some islands the nobility practiced polygyny (or polyandry as in the Marquesan Islands). In some cases, noblemen also arranged for child marriages, if this was politically advantageous. At any rate, the upper classes were rather restricted in their choice of marriage partners by complicated social considerations. The lower classes had more freedom in this respect, although most of their marriages were also arranged, or at least required parental consent. Marriage was prohibited between blood relatives to several degrees and outside one's social class. On the other hand, no great formalities were involved in starting a marriage. Bride and bridegroom simply began to live together. Marriages were monogamous, and fidelity was expected. Still, the husband was often allowed sexual relations with his sisters-in-law, and the wife with her brothers-in-law. (In this context, cousins were also regarded as brothers and sisters.) A husband would sometimes also allow his "name brother" (i.e., sworn brother or best friend) and his male guests to sleep with his wife. Under the circumstances, the marital relationship was not a very restrictive one. Still, if a marriage was unsatisfactory, it was easily dissolved by simple private agreement. The property and the children were divided, with the husband usually taking the older boys, and the wife taking the infants and girls. Remarriage was just as easy. Generally speaking, therefore, marriage in ancient Polynesia was a very flexible institution in which prolonged unhappiness of either spouse was unlikely. On the whole, the ancient Polynesians considered marriage a pleasant necessity. This basic attitude reflected their realistic and direct approach to sex and their high regard for physical contentment.

1 | Excerpt taken from *The Sex Atlas* by Erwin J. Haeberle (1981).  
| [http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ATLAS\\_EN/html/marriage\\_in\\_non\\_western\\_societ.html](http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ATLAS_EN/html/marriage_in_non_western_societ.html)

## Marriage in Islamic Countries

The faith of Islam has always strongly encouraged marriage and considered celibacy undesirable and exceptional. There is no Islamic tradition of monasteries or vows of lifelong chastity. In many respects the Islamic view of marriage is similar to that expressed in the Old Testament. Thus, for example, the Koran also permits polygyny. Since the time of Mohammed, a man could marry up to four women, provided he could adequately maintain and "do justice" to all of them. In addition, he could have several concubines who did not share the privileges of his wives. Islamic polygyny has survived in many parts of the world to this day. However, even in earlier times it has always been the exception rather than the rule. For most Muslims monogamy was and still is the normal practice.

Islamic culture has, at times, also known a form of temporary marriage known as mut'ah (Arabic:"pleasure"). A man could marry a woman for a predetermined period of time (sometimes only one night), if he paid her an acceptable price or "dower". At the end of the time period the marriage was automatically dissolved. Needless to say, apart from their specific agreement, the woman had no further claim on the man or his property. Mut'ah marriages were usually contracted by men on pilgrimages to Mecca or in other circumstances when they were away from home. However, many devout Muslims opposed and denounced the custom as nothing more than prostitution. It was officially discouraged and eventually became less common.

The Koran does not prohibit divorce, which therefore has always been found in Islamic societies. One form of divorce was that by simple mutual agreement, in which the wife paid her husband a price for her release. Another form was that by repudiation, in which the husband simply told his wife three times that he wanted to divorce her. This was entirely his private business, and he was not required to justify his action to anyone. However, if a wife wanted to divorce her husband, she had to sue for it in court on specific grounds, such as cruelty, desertion, or lack of support.

As this brief summary makes clear, the Islamic marriage laws and customs put men in a clearly privileged position. Women remained legally disadvantaged. More recently, however, industrialization and modernization seem to have made an impact on many Islamic societies that could lead to significant changes.

## Marriage in China

In Imperial China marriage was strongly encouraged, as single persons enjoyed little respect. However, marriages were contracted between two families rather than two individuals. Fathers made the best available match for their children, who usually had no opportunity to see each other before the wedding. The purpose of marriage was procreation, i.e., the continuation of the family line. Romantic love between husband and wife was not expected and, indeed, considered irrelevant. The husband enjoyed a privileged status and exercised great power over his family, while the wife had few rights. She owed obedience not only to her husband, but also to her mother-in-law. Husbands could also take concubines for their sexual needs, while wives had no right to take a lover. Divorce was possible, especially if the husband desired it, but the procedure

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was complicated. Moreover, since a divorce created problems between the families on both sides, it was frowned upon and usually avoided. In actual practice, therefore, even unhappy marriages often remained undissolved.

In the first decades of our century, after the end of imperial rule, the marriage laws began to be reformed, and the founding of the People's Republic finally led to the enactment of a new, modernized code in 1950. The 27 articles of this code are remarkable for their simplicity. They proclaim the free choice of partners and equal rights for both sexes. Older customs, such as concubinage, child betrothal, and the exaction of money or gifts in connection with marriage are prohibited. The code explicitly states that "marriage is based on the complete willingness of the two parties" (Article 3). Consequently, for the contraction of a marriage nothing more is required than registration with the government, which then issues a marriage certificate. Both husband and wife have the right to use his or her own family name. Divorce is easily obtained, if both parties desire it. They simply make arrangements for the care of their children and property, after which they register with the government and obtain a divorce certificate. When only one party insists on divorce, some official attempt at reconciliation is made. If these attempts fail, the divorce is granted. Divorced parents remain responsible for their children and are obliged to make adequate provision for their upbringing. If they cannot agree, an agreement is imposed by a court. Custody of the children may rest with either parent.

At the present time it is difficult for a foreign observer to assess how these laws work in practice, but one has to admit that, at least on paper, they look highly reasonable. They are certainly far ahead of American and most European marriage laws. However, they also contain two rather curious provisions which perhaps need some elucidation. Article 5 prohibits marriage "where one party, because of certain physical defects, is sexually impotent" and where one party suffers from certain specified diseases. In its English translation the language of this article is ambiguous, but it seems to deny the right to marry to many handicapped and chronically ill persons who would enjoy this right in most Western societies. The legal age for marriage in China is now 20 years for males and 18 years for females, although young people are usually encouraged to wait until they are several years older.