Overview of Marriage

From the Latin *marito*, "to marry," marriage is the social institution making the sexual union of two heterosexuals (and recently in some societies, also of two homosexuals) official, accompanied by an (often religious) ritual. It is one of the most important areas of study in social anthropology, since it is a social event as widely spread across the globe (despite the objections made as to its universality because of its multiple juridical, economic, ethical, and ritual implications) as it is exceptionally important for each society in particular. Because of this, societies, and especially those defined as "hot" by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962), that is, those characterized by continuous change, have instituted the registry of the event.

The aim of marriage is to have legitimate offspring who have the right to bear their ancestors' name and inherit their wealth. By analogy, the biological, material, and symbolic reproduction and perpetuation of the *family* (i.e., the group of relatives, with the married couple and their married and/or unmarried children, etc., at its base, with which they cohabit, work, and share goods) and of the *lineage* (i.e., the wider group of individuals beyond the family who are interconnected through consanguineal kinship either patrilinealy or matrilinealy and who acknowledge a common ancestor) are achieved through marriage. By extension, the biological, material, and symbolic reproduction and perpetuation of the *ethnic group* (i.e., the group of individuals belonging to the same culture and acknowledging themselves as such) and of the *tribe* (i.e., a group that owns a territory and is homogeneous and autonomous from a political and social viewpoint) are also achieved through marriage. As a consequence, unmarried individuals and childless couples are marginalized and of low social esteem.

Marriage develops a dense network of rights and duties, starting from the spouses and the members of their close family (parents/children) and extending as well to those of their extended family (husband's or wife's parents and siblings, wife's or husband's parents and siblings) as to their

lineages; in some cases, it even extends to the states they originate from. Its aims range from any sort of benefit and strengthening to the resolution of enmities, as can be seen in the following Greek cases: reconciliation of lineages engaged in vendettas in Anogeia in Crete or belonging to opposed political parties after the civil war (1945–1949) in the village of Didima in the Peloponnese.

Processes

Despite marriage being primarily about sexual intercourse and resting on sexual attraction, love is seldom the sole criterion for choosing one's spouse. Most often, marriage is the result of an agreement between the two interested parties (arranged marriage), an agreement reached by the said parties after employing *strategies* (in this case, *matrimonial strategies*). These are, according to Pierre Bourdieu, activities repeated in time and aimed at satisfying the material and symbolic interests of families and lineages and, by extension, the interests of the entirety of the local community in a system of determined economic and social convictions. Even the case of marriage because of love is often the result of such a strategy, as ascending relatives from both sides of the intended couple consider the marriage to be in their interest and often arrange favorable conditions to promote sexual attraction between the said individuals that will, of course, conclude in marriage.

Apart from arranged marriage, the other process through which a couple can be driven to marriage is the abduction of the woman. According to common perception, the perpetrator of this act is always the man, although it is performed with the woman's consent in most cases. It is worthy of note that abducting one's wife-to-be is considered a sign of virility. The main reason usually brought forth for the abduction is disapproval of the choice of spouse on the part of the ascending relatives. However, it appears that other reasons, usually connected to *marital prestations*, can drive to this choice (see below).

Marital Prestations

Marital prestations, that is, provision of services and movable and immovable goods by one of the spouses (or their family) to the other spouse (or their family), are within the aforementioned rights and duties and an integral element of marriage in most societies. The most common instances of marital prestation are the *dowry* and the *bride price* or *bridewealth.*

The dowry, that is, the goods offered to the bride by her family (and which, directly or not, are offered to the groom and possibly his family), is encountered in Europe and the Near East. It may consist of one or more houses, farms, servants, animals, jewelry, money, and the bride's trousseau (house equipment such as furniture, cookware, and mainly textiles as well as clothing for both herself and her husband). For instance, in modern Greece, the dowry represents an unofficial but particularly powerful customary institution that was even included in the Civil Code in 1946 and stood until 1983. When the female members of the family acquire the dowry, they waive the right to inherit the family's wealth, a right reserved to its male members. After 1983, the dowry is replaced by a *parental prestation* toward the daughter.

The bride price/bridewealth consists of services, money, or other movable and immovable goods given, as opposed to the dowry, to the bride's father (and occasionally her mother as well) by the groom. This custom stands mainly for societies outside Europe and the Near East. However, it is known that it equally took place in central and northern Greece until about 1950.

Still, there are cases where the marital prestation in place (dowry or bride price/bridewealth) is not given, such as when a woman is abducted. In some societies where the custom of the dowry is present, it is therefore not uncommon for a girl to be abducted with the covert agreement of her relatives; this allows the marriage to take place without them giving any dowry, as an abducted girl loses her right to dowry. Elsewhere, in societies where the custom of the bride price stands, a poor man might abduct his intended wife; in this case, he is relieved of having to pay for her.

Although these two kinds of marital prestation (dowry and bride price/bridewealth) are obviously contradictory and the existence of one appears to exclude the other, this is not necessarily always the case; they can sometimes coexist. Usually, though, if the prevalent custom is the dowry, the value of the bride price/bridewealth ranges from small to entirely symbolic. If the bride price/bridewealth prevails, then the dowry is of little value (usually limited to the trousseau).

Another form of marital prestation is the *premarital donation* (of money or other goods of value) offered by widows wishing to marry again to their next spouse, who has not been previously married. The same tactic can be used toward intended spouses by less wanted individuals, who are, for example, divorced, of old age, bad health, or reputation.

Marital prestations have been explained either in economic terms or in the light of considerations of reciprocation and exchange. At any rate, however, their analysis and interpretation has clarified several points pertaining to the study of marriage.

Rules

Marriage is regulated by rules, among which one of great and global importance is the interdiction of incest, that is, of marriage between relatives. Each society has different conceptions as to who is a relative, with a view of preventing incest. The stringency of the rule forbidding incest thus varies from the interdiction of marriage between parents and children as well as between brothers and sisters, to the interdiction of marriage if even a single common ancestor is discovered. Some cases of marriage taking place between relatives are known, but these are exceptionally rare and connected with the devolution of authority (e.g., within royal families or the pharaohs in Egypt—Cleopatra originated from such a marriage). In general, societies stand in awe before the case of such a sexual intercourse, as can be seen in examples from mythology and literature (e.g., Oedipus and his mother), history (e.g., Alexander Borgia and his daughter Lucretia, Lucretia and her brother Cesar), and popular literature (fairy tales, ballads) that corroborate this finding. Despite this, in certain cases that border on incest, society (and the Christian Church) appears tolerant in order to avoid illicit cohabitation and especially the birth of illegitimate offspring.

In some societies the rule of *isogamy* or *homogamy* is particularly powerful; according to this, the spouses must be of equal social, financial, intellectual, and so on status. If, on the other hand, the spouses originate from different social, financial, intellectual, and so on environments, this is a case of heterogamy. In this case, there is *hypergamy* on the part of the lower status spouse and *hypogamy* on the part of the higher status spouse.

Other rules govern the postmarital residence of the couple. Its most common forms are the *patrilocal*, if taking place in the groom's father's house or community, and *virilocal*, if taking place in the groom's house. Their opposites are the *matrilocal*, where the newlywed couple settles in the bride's mother's house or community, and more specifically, the *uxorilocal* installation, where they inhabit the bride's house. When the postmarital location is independent, it is termed *neolocal*. The *avunculocal* installation, that is, when the couple settles in a spouse's uncle on the mother's side (e.g., in the Trobriands in Melanesia), is rarer. Still, there are cases where the postmarital residence is *bilocal*, that is, the

couple chooses which spouse's relatives to live with, or even *ambilocal*, in case of alternate residence in both.

The locality of postmarital residence is directly connected to the systems of kinship. Usually, patrilocality goes together with patrilineal descent and matrilocality goes together with matrilineal descent. However, there are cases where this does not happen. For example, in the Congo, the husband lives in the same village as his father and sons but inherits goods from his matrilineal descent group. In general, the place of postmarital residence is more inconstant and complex in matrilineal populations, such as the Bemba in Zambia, where the husbands abandon the matrilocal group of their father-in-law after having served him for many years. Patrilineal populations are not entirely exempt from the aforementioned inconstancy and complexity either. The residence of the husband in his wife's homestead, when she belongs in a family with no male children, is such a case present in Balkan patrilineal societies (where patrilocality is the rule). The husband then takes the place of an adopted son, assuming the duties (work and care) toward his in-laws as well as the benefits (e.g., inheritance of their wealth, in addition to his wife's dowry) that come with this place.

The rule of *polygamy*, that is, the existence of more than one legitimate spouse at a time, applies in some societies. *Polygyny*, the simultaneous occurrence of several legitimate wives, is the most common form of polygamy and is present in most Islamic countries (up to four wives), in China of the imperial era, in some African and Oceanian tribes, among others. *Polyandry*, when a woman has more than one husband (for example, in the Toda in India and some groups in Tibet), is rarer because of the inherent uncertainty as to the children's paternity. Therefore, *fraternal polyandry* is the most common form of polyandry, where a woman's husbands must all be brothers. It is thus at least known which lineage the children originate from. An extreme case of polygamy is *group marriage*, that is, simultaneous intercourse of several men and women, which has been the subject of much discussion in the past; however, this theory never achieved widespread acceptance.

The rule of *monogamy*, that is, marriage to a single man or woman at a time, applies in "cold" as well as "hot" societies and tends to become predominant. As long as this is in place, the spouses are prohibited from incurring another marriage.

The rules of *endogamy-exogamy* are related to the above rules (interdiction of incest, isogamyheterogamy, postmarital installation, and monogamy-polygamy). In endogamy, the spouse is selected from within the same

group (kindred, ethnotic, religious, etc.). Exogamy occurs in the opposite case.

Procreation

As the main aim of marriage is to have (legitimate) offspring, that is, to create a family, a good state of fitness of the individuals to be married is an essential requirement, because it guarantees the viability of the family through the ability to work as much its ability to reproduce through children. The latter is also related to the couple beginning their common sexual life before marriage in some areas (e.g., in areas of France, Corsica, and Greece) in order to prove a woman's fertility. However, in most societies, a woman's virginity is yet another requirement for marriage, and its demonstration during the first night of marriage is widely celebrated.

The inability to have offspring, a condition blamed on the woman, according to popular belief, can lead to several practices. These include social practices, such as breaking up of the marriage and taking a second wife or taking a second wife and keeping the first one in the same house (a type of *polygyny*, as happened, for example, in Mani in Greece). Another social practice is adoption, sometimes of a child chosen from one of the spouses' kindred group (an act with a clear sentimental motive, as children relatives are closer to natural children). In the village Didima, in Greece, the bond between the parents and the child can be further strengthened by marrying the child to a relative of the other spouse. In addition to the aforementioned sentimental dimensions, the above is also a strategy aimed at keeping wealth within a lineage. Nonsocial practices range from taking herbs and other homemade remedies, to, in modern societies, resorting to medical treatment or in vitro fertilization in order to have children.

Dissolution

In monogamic societies, the undoing of a marriage can occur by a legal process, the *divorce*, which does not, however, relieve the spouses of all the rights and duties contracted in their previous marriage. In general, the divorce appears to be an acceptable practice in Western societies, while in others, even when it is present, it receives a particularly skeptical treatment.

The death of one of the spouses does not end the rights and duties deriving from marriage; however, in monogamic societies, it allows another marriage to take place. This is often almost mandatory, either because there are children (who must be raised by two parents) or, when there are

no children, in order to have some. Particular forms of *secondary marriage*, as this type of marriage is termed with regard to the first (*primary*), are the*levirate* and the *sororate*. In some societies the second wife must be a sister of the first (sororate), while in others the second husband must be a brother of the first (levirate). An even more peculiar form of marriage subsists in the Nuer of Sudan, where, when a man dies without leaving any children behind, one of his younger brothers will marry a woman who will be considered the wife of the dead man. The children born through this*ghost marriage* are considered to be the dead man's children.

—Maria Velioti-Georgopoulos

Velioti-Georgopoulos, Maria. "Marriage." *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. 2005. SAGE Publications.