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Marriage Practices: United States

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Marriage is central to social life and religious practice for Muslims throughout the Islamic world as well as in the United States. Given the considerable diversity of the American Muslim population – composed of first- and second-generation immigrants of many different nationalities, long-established Arab and African American Muslim communities, and converts to Islam – it is not surprising that there is a range of marriage practices among Muslims in the United States. Indeed, marriage-making may differ based on many factors, including parental and community expectations, peer influences, religious beliefs, ethnic and national background, age, education, employment status, social class, length of residence in the United States, societal integration, and cultural ties to other countries.

Endogamy

Endogamy, the selection of a marriage partner based on a common religion, race, ethnicity, or nationality, is a major means for minority groups in any given society to maintain their particular identity, cultural customs, distinct values, and way of life. Therefore, it is not surprising that Muslims in the United States stress endogamy as a way of preserving their faith. Because Muslims make up only a small minority of the United States population, the transmission of Islamic values, approved social behaviors, and certain cultural practices to subsequent generations is of significant concern in the United States cultural context where Muslims are likely to intermingle with people of different faiths and origins in schools and the workplace. Moreover, the prevalence of mass media in American popular culture poses a challenge to the maintenance of a distinct religious identity. It is partly for these reasons that American Muslims stress marrying only within their faith.

Despite Islamic tenets that deem marrying another Muslim – regardless of racial, ethnic, or national background – appropriate, interethnic marriages are not always accepted or encouraged in the United States. This is often due to significant family and cultural pressures, which demand that Muslims not only marry within the faith, but also marry within the same ethnic group. In response, many young American Muslims are grappling with whether marrying a Muslim from a different race, ethnicity, or nationality will be accepted by their families and within their communities. In response to various pressures, the process of spouse selection is changing in the United States context. Additionally, different sorts of marriages are being made by young Muslims, which may emphasize ethnic, religious, or American identities.

Spouse selection

In individualistic societies like the United States, the mate selection process is a self-choice system based on love. The decision is an individual one made by the man and woman involved. In this context, young men and women are expected to date, court, fall in love, and then decide whether to get married, in accordance with their choice of a marriage partner. Both romantic love and companionship are perceived as critical components for marriage. In contrast, in many Muslim societies, the joint or interdependent family system is the norm, and parental consent is required.

The limited research findings on marriage practices in the United States suggest that there has been a gradual change to adapt to a more autonomous mate selection process for young second-generation American Muslims. For immigrants, as family ties to the country of origin and traditional culture decrease, family involvement in the mate selection process decreases as well. Studies also show that United States born Muslims are intent upon having a greater say in decisions relating to marriage – everything from asking that they be allowed to decline marriage proposals to

choosing their spouse. Depending on their educational, religious, economic, and social backgrounds, families are coping with these changes by modifying the traditional authoritarian structure of the family system and their attitudes toward marriage.

Spouse selection methods

In response to pressures to follow Islamic principles while also adapting to United States norms regarding mate selection, Islamic organizations in the United States at the local and national level may function as “matchmakers.” These organizations serve as a kind of extended family network assisting people to find the right marriage partner by providing conferences and activities with an Islamic focus. Given the relatively small number of Muslims living in the United States, which often makes it difficult for individuals to find people they know and trust, these matchmaking services have become increasingly important.

Many Islamic journals and other media, including the Internet, contain matrimonial sections in which both men and women describe themselves, their characteristics, and their interests and indicate their hope to find a like-minded spouse. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) plays an important role in matching marital partners through their website (<<http://www.isna.net>>), which includes a matrimonial service section. Other websites, such as <<http://matrimony.org/>>, <<http://shiamatch.com/>>, and <<http://muslimweddings.com/>> have gained increasing social acceptance.

In a typical scenario, a man or woman may answer an advertisement placed on a website. Before meeting, they exchange more detailed information and then go through the process of checking out each other's references. If they do meet, it will probably be in the presence of friends or family rather than alone. If both parties agree, and often if the attending families also feel that prospects are good, the courtship begins in earnest.

The Internet offers a technological twist to the traditional system of matchmaking where older members of the family or others find a bride or groom from a wide circle of influential kin. Some Muslims believe that a woman who desires to get married should designate a male member of her family (usually her father) to serve as a walī , or representative, to handle premarital negotiations. She and the walī will research as thoroughly as possible the background of the Muslim to whom she is to be engaged, on the understanding that commonality of religious belief and commitment are the most important ingredients in a successful marriage. Appropriate questions for the prospective groom can be asked either in person by the walī or in writing. Once the suitor's piety is ascertained, the task is then to investigate his personal life, including his financial resources and his willingness to have children.

Muslim men have customarily been financially responsible for women. At least in theory, this custom assures that women will always be provided for. Some Muslim women who consider this issue seriously decide this is a small price to pay for security. However, as American Muslim women increasingly enter the mainstream workforce, the question of financial responsibility in the mate selection process continues to be debated.

Increasing numbers of Muslim couples are spelling out the conditions of marriage and divorce in detailed premarital agreements. Marriage is a legal agreement in Islam and is secured with a written contract. While some more conservative Muslims oppose the practice of prenuptial arrangements, others argue that facing potential problems before they arise will help couples to be better able to address the everyday concerns of marriage. These agreements are considered to be especially important when couples come from different countries and social backgrounds and can go a long way in anticipating problems that might otherwise lead too easily to divorce.

Types of marriage

In addition to normative changes regarding spouse selection, attitudes toward marriage type have also undergone significant change in the United States cultural context.

Arranged marriages

Arranged marriages result when the parents choose their children's spouses, and are typically religiously and ethnically endogamous. Many immigrants to the United States are in arranged marriages themselves, so it is not surprising that they are more likely to favor the practice than Muslims born in the United States. Reasons cited for engaging in an arranged marriage include parental obligation, community expectations, and not being able to find a suitable marriage partner otherwise.

While many people in the United States believe that arranged marriages allow no personal choice for the bride and groom, this is not always the case. In fact, various types of arranged marriages have been identified in the research literature. The first is the planned type, where the parents plan the entire process based on family and community variables. Personal agency and interaction between the bride and groom is lacking. In another form of arranged marriage, children, especially males, make known their desires for a future spouse to their parents, and the parents try to fulfill their

children's conditions. Chaperoned interactions between potential mates may occur in this case. A third type of arranged marriage actively involves both children and the parents in the mate selection process. Open courting or dating with the prospective spouse may occur in this case.

Parental consent and self-choice marriages

One concern of younger Muslims is that their parents may not understand enough about United States culture to select an appropriate spouse. Hence, with the coming of age of second-generation American Muslims, there has been a shift from the traditional pattern of marriage arranged by parents without the consent of the couple, toward a more Western pattern of marriage of a child's own choice. However, most often compromise prevails where the marriage may be the child's own choice, but is undertaken with the participation and approval of the parents. Although Muslim parents may not always agree with their children finding their own mates, and dating is largely not accepted in the American Muslim community, parents seem to be more willing to grant some degree of freedom to their children regarding marriage. This is largely due to recognition of the strong cultural forces imposed by Western notions that love should precede marriage rather than follow it. However, compared with United States youth from other groups, children of the Muslim community have less flexibility in choosing their own marriage partners. Thus, while there is a trend toward more liberal marital attitudes in the American Muslim community, certain traditional customs persist.

As marriage moves toward the more active involvement of the children in the self-choice model, parents and community leaders fear that Muslims will not maintain their distinct religious, cultural, and social identity in the United States. These concerns are often accompanied by calls to return to more traditional types of marriage that help fulfill religious obligations toward the family, community, and society. Future research is needed to map these social trends, as marriage practices are among the markers of levels of assimilation and acculturation for minority groups.

Youth weddings

Marriage practices in the United States also include "youth weddings" at which the bride, and sometimes the groom, may be teenagers. One of the reasons for these early marriages is the fear of daughters marrying outside the parental sectarian or ethnic group. Moreover, instead of fighting teenage sexual activity, some Muslim groups accept adolescent sexuality as inevitable and control it through marriage. Inherent in the importance of marriage among Muslims is the socialization of girls and young women to marry early in life (although this is changing, as young women are encouraged to pursue higher education and careers). Because there are cultural proscriptions against dating, women are sometimes raised to look forward to marriage at an early age.

Mut'a marriages

A mut'a marriage is entered into by contract for a fixed period of time, and basically legitimizes sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. This is justified as a way for poor or widowed women to gain support and protection or a way for men to achieve sexual satisfaction when traveling away from home, studying abroad, or going on long business trips or pilgrimages. Most believe that mut'a marriages rarely occur in the United States, although the practice was prevalent enough that the imam at a local Islamic Institute in Dearborn, Michigan, wrote a booklet about it. In Houston, Texas, an Iranian Shi'ī seeking to understand the different discourses of African American Muslims interviewed an African American convert who had experienced several mut'a marriages. Systematic studies of mut'a marriages are lacking, and warrant further consideration.

Polygyny

Non-Muslims have often had difficulty understanding the Islamic sanction of polygamy, or more accurately polygyny (having more than one wife). Although not unknown, multiple marriages are generally not an issue in the United States for the simple reason that they are illegal. Most American Muslim women understand that it is their right to stipulate in the marriage contract that the husband may not take a second wife. Over the centuries the taking of multiple wives has often created difficult circumstances for the first wife, and normally is not viewed as a socially acceptable practice in the United States.

Gender differences and interfaith marriage

Most Islamic scholars interpret Qur'ānic legal codes as permitting Muslim men to marry women who are Christians or Jews (People of the Book). In-depth and comparative research regarding the number of Muslim interfaith marriages in the United States is lacking. However, it has been estimated that more than half of the marriages between immigrant Muslim males and non-Muslim American females result in the wife's conversion to Islam, although it should

be noted that surveys of female converts indicate that in many cases their adoption of Islam came before marriage to a Muslim male.

Although the Qur'ān is less explicit about Muslim women marrying outside the faith, most scholars interpret Qur'ānic passages as opposing a Muslim woman marrying anyone but a man who has been raised as a Muslim or who has converted to Islam prior to his marriage. This difference traditionally has been accepted because the husband has the final say in how the children are raised. Some Muslims in the United States believe that this principle holds with the same force today, since men of other religions might not support Muslim women in raising their children according to the tenets of Islam.

This freedom of choice for men and not for women has caused some difficulties in American Muslim culture. When young men choose to marry non-Muslim women, Muslim women have sometimes found their choice of potential marriage partners to be seriously curtailed. In some circumstances, families of eligible young Muslim women have had to look to their countries of origin to find suitable husbands. However, this is not always the best solution, as young American Muslim women may have a difficult time adjusting to marriage to a man who was raised in a different cultural context – particularly a strongly patriarchal tradition. Furthermore, the practice of looking to other countries to find a bride or groom is often questioned by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In some cases, the bride and groom may not have met, whereas the INS assumes prior acquaintance between fiancés.

Compromises have been offered in response to these issues, including restricting Muslim men from marrying outside the faith, or allowing Muslim women to marry non-Muslims. However, these changes are problematic, as neither corresponds with Islamic law. Therefore, young Muslims are usually cautioned against interfaith marriages, given the problems associated with such a choice, and advised that an interfaith marriage should be entered into only with serious forethought.

Conclusion

Trends regarding Muslim marriage practices in the United States are important indicators of the maintenance of traditional values as well as social and cultural change, yet in-depth studies are few. There is a need for systematic and comparative research to gain a more accurate and nuanced picture of marital choices and strategies among Muslims from various groups – including new immigrants, converts, and those from well-established Muslim communities. American Muslims will likely continue to be confronted with difficult decisions regarding the adoption of United States norms and ways of life and the retention of traditional Islamic marital values.

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