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## Group marriage: Morgan was not wrong

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### Abstract

It is argued that the commonly asserted non-existence of group marriage arises solely from an abandonment of Morgan's (1877) definition of marriage and that the commonly accepted alternative to that definition lacks ethnographic generality. As defined by Morgan group marriage has been practiced by over one-third of the hunter-gatherers listed in Murdock (1971).

George P. Murdock (1949: 24-25) has functioned as the definitive source for the characterization of group marriage:

Group marriage, though figuring prominently in the early theoretical literature of anthropology, appears never to exist as a cultural norm... These tribes and others, to be sure, often extend sexual privileges to a group of males and females, but never the economic responsibilities upon which *genuine marriage* must likewise always rest. In fine, there is no evidence that group marriage anywhere exists, or ever has existed, as the prevailing type of marital union. (my emphasis)

Murdock's statement constitutes the unchallenged conventional wisdom of contemporary anthropology, acting as the reference source for encyclopedias and introductory texts. But it is incorrect on two counts: First, Murdock's concept of "genuine marriage" has no cross-cultural validity; secondly, it can be shown that group marriage, *as defined by Morgan*, has been very common in every part of the world.

In *Ancient Society* (1877, Part III Ch. 1), Morgan provided this definition of group marriage:

### II. The Punaluan Family.

It was founded upon the intermarriage of several sisters, own and collateral, *with each other's* husbands, in a group; the joint husbands not being necessarily kinsmen of each other. Also, on the intermarriage of several brothers, own and collateral, with *each other's* wives, in a group; these wives not being necessarily kin to each other, although often the case in both instances. In each case the group of men was conjointly married to the group of women. (My emphasis)

Note that Morgan tells us of the marriages of women "with each other's husbands". Hence, he is constructing two classes of marriage, a class of *primary marriages* which involve conjugal rights

as defined within a particular society, and a class of *secondary marriages* involving fewer rights to persons who have or will eventually have primary marriages with others. To be sure, this is a conception which may confuse some readers, especially when Morgan uses the phrase “in a group.” In fact, Morgan is seeking to distinguish this form of marriage from marriage “between single pairs.” But there should be no doubt about Morgan’s meaning: Each woman has a true husband, but each husband is intermarried to other women in relationships which rest on a more limited set of rights. *For Morgan the essential and minimally sufficient feature of the marital relation is rightful sexual access.* Only for the primary marriage are additional features, such as economic support, required.

In many societies, a set of *secondary spouses* is defined at birth. That is, people are assigned at birth to a category of individuals (often in an adjoining moiety) with whom both premarital and extra-marital sexual activities are rightfully established and from among whom *primary spouses* should eventually be selected. However, those whom a person does not choose for a primary marriage remain legitimate secondary spouses, regardless of the identities of the persons to whom they are eventually affianced. This is the salient arrangement whereby women can be intermarried “with each other’s husbands”.

Speaking of people in north Australia, Berndt and Berndt (1951: 47) point out that

...a wife may have access to a number of tribal “husbands,” and “brother-cousins” of her actual husband; while a husband enjoys the same privilege with his tribal “wives,” the classificatory sisters of his wives and their female “cousins.” Should the husband or wife object, or take steps to terminate such a union, this would be contrary to public opinion, and the protesting party is soon made to understand that he or she is part of an institution which legally sanctions such relationships.

This is Morgan’s group marriage; and the *rightfulness* of sexual access for secondary spouses is unambiguous. Similar marriage systems have been found among the Siriono, the Haida, Chippewa, Yao, Cherokee, Apache, Nyoro, Gilyak, Lepcha, Murngin, Aranda, Gilbertese, and many others. One of the nineteenth century followers of Morgan, Lev Shternberg (1910), in his highly praised study of group marriage among the Gilyaks, was explicit in defining marriage as the right of sexual access. However, Murdock denied the existence of group marriage without telling us that it was simply a matter of definition. Instead, he implied that Morgan had his ethnographic facts wrong, when he definitely did not. At least one-third of the hunter-gatherers listed by Murdock (1971) have had some form of group marriage.

The common practice in anthropology has been to deny group marriage in the very many places where it actually exists *by Morgan’s definition*, while imaging it to be practiced in places where it does not. Murdock offered the Kaingáng as a singular example of group marriage, but in fact this society possesses only the bare trappings of marriage. For example, two women, or a woman and her daughter, might solicit the economic support of a man who then might be joined by other men, all of whom gain sexual access *in exchange* (not as a right) for their contribution. Henry (1941)

refers to these relationships as marriage because sex with non-household members, although very common, must proceed with caution. Men gain access to women by providing food to them and their relatives, but this process proceeds *informally* in the absence of an overarching institution which might convey rightful claims. “Even the biological family had little permanence as a cooperating unit, as children wander away...” (Henry 1941: 36). But it is, as Murdock points out, a very fluid situation, with men and women joining or leaving as conditions allow. It is not an example of marriage, group or otherwise. “The Kaingáng have no system of clans or moieties to impose social obligations on them” (p. 36). There are no *rightful* claims; it is only an informal process of household formation; and these households may consist of any arbitrary, transient, assemblage. It should be noted, however, that among the Kaingáng, sexual relationships, which an adult is likely to have had with almost all others of the opposite sex, have an enduring social and emotional significance and allow men to refer to the children of most woman as *klq* (my children) with biological probability.

A more accurate example of group marriage *by Murdock's definition* is presented by the Pahari who have resided in certain regions of the western Himalayas, as described by Berreman (1975). In this case, marriages are formal and registered with the state; but since the government of India does not recognize (fraternal) polyandry or group marriage, these marriages are legally with only the eldest brother. However, brothers share agricultural land and other assets, so that the sharing of wives follows a basic form. Initially, there might be only a single wife for a group of brothers, but as more wives are added, a joint household emerges. Then, as men age and die, there might be only a single husband with several wives. Unlike the group marriages described by Morgan, group marriages among the Pahari are “genuine”, by Murdock's definition; and, indeed, marriage systems of this kind are exceedingly rare.

But how does it happen that anthropologists of the nineteenth century employed a definition of marriage which recognized the right of sexual access, alone, as a necessary and sufficient coding for marriage, while Murdock and most twentieth century anthropologists have required economic support, or some other factors as additional and essential attributes? Arguably, the root of the problem was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century political effort to claim prehistoric essentiality for the independent nuclear family, a family in which the husband carried most, if not all, of the economic responsibilities. This new ideology did not originate within anthropology; it was promoted primarily in the service of capitalist elites who sought to promote independent nuclear families among the working classes. The highly mobile nuclear family, featuring an employed husband and his economically dependent wife and children, was a useful structure for the rapidly developing industrial system. However, this new family model arose in the face of radical marriage experiments in the Soviet Union which challenged the structural specificity of marriage. Hence, the possibility of promiscuity and of various other forms of marriage, which the nineteenth century had chronicled as universal elements of human social evolution, had to be removed as feasible alternatives to the independent nuclear family, a task made easier by the emergence of an anti-communist hysteria which associated Morgan with Marxism.

Malinowski (1962:3) argued that: “It is thus the combination of mating with parenthood which constitutes marriage in higher animals, including man.” And while Malinowski later adds

economic support to the set of factors associated with marriage, we see that he and Murdock differ in identifying the essential and critical supplement to mating in the production of “genuine marriage.” However, in the United States and perhaps in many other places, parenthood does not require marriage; and marriage seems never to require parenthood. So, Malinowski’s definition of marriage betrays clearly a victory of ideology over reason.

In M. F. Ashley Montagu (ed) (1956: 76) Malinowski suggests that: “If once we came to the point of doing away with the individual family as the pivotal element of our society, we should be faced with a social catastrophe compared with which the political upheaval of the French revolution and the economic changes of Bolshevism are insignificant.” In this heavily politicized context, Murdock seems to have accepted the prevailing conception of marriage as it had been defined within Western cultures of the twentieth century. Indeed, he has been joined in this by many generations of anthropologists. However, in Murdock’s case we must assume that he knew that “genuine marriage” was nonsense, because he possessed unparalleled knowledge of cultural variation. He had to be aware of the Chambri of New Guinea, first made famous by Margaret Mead (1935), where men make no significant contributions to the economy, spending their time with politics and warfare, prior to European contact. And as illustrated by the Aka of northern Congo (Kitanishi 1998), the rules which determine the allocation of meat within a camp can be frustratingly complex. The assumption that men provide special economic support to their own households or to their kin groups is often false. Kaplan et al (1985) who conducted careful measurements among the Ache, found that 91 percent of meat was allocated to non-kin. Similar findings would certainly apply to bison hunters of the American plains. It is clear, then, that there is no such thing as “genuine marriage” on a scale of ethnographic generality, as suggested by Murdock; and he had to know that. Indeed, Leach (1955) presented a set of ten rights as examples of those which have been employed in the construction of marriage and (because he assumed that marriage was universal) concluded that no right or combination of them constitutes a cross-culturally valid characterization of marriage, a proposition which Murdock should have accepted. Hence, one must conclude that Murdock was bending to a popular demand to define twentieth century Western marriage as a cultural universal, much like Malinowski (1962: 3) who projected the contemporary British institution into prehistory by suggesting that marriage in human societies “*has to be concluded in a public and solemn manner, receiving, as a sacrament, the blessings of religion and, as a rite, the good auspices of magic*” (my emphasis).

The efforts of Murdock and Malinowski to deny validity to the nineteenth century characterization of marriage fail critical examination. I say this without reference to, or defense of, the evolutionary schemes into which Morgan and others placed various forms of marriage. However, if every incidence of marriage in the ethnographic record is to have at least one characteristic in common, as elementary logic would require, that common feature is a man’s socially supported access to a woman’s sexuality (Bell 1997). Very few societies fail to possess marriage by this (painfully asymmetric) standard. Primary marriage within every culture includes one or more additional rights which are variably important cross-culturally in the effective cultural articulation of the institution. And like most people, I would prefer an ethnographic universe in which marriage manifested a broad set of contemporary ethical values. However, such a definition would deny

marriage in all but a few of the world's cultures. Indeed, the effort to establish a twentieth century model of the independent husband-wife family has prevailed more strongly in ideology than in daily life and now remains often as only a joking reference to Ozzie and Harriet, a nineteen-fifties hiatus realized more vividly in fiction. On the other hand, as data in Murdock (1971) make clear, roughly one-fourth of foraging societies feature manifestations of group marriage, as defined by Morgan. In these cases, rights of sexual access tend to be symmetric.

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