

Tradition and Transformation of Marriage Practices in Oman

Maysim Mohammed Salim Al Jabri

Student ID: 2023015370 | 2023015370@bayancollege.edu.om

*Ms. Divya Hariharan, Lecturer, English Studies Department,
Bayan College, Oman | divya@bayancollege.edu.om*

Abstract

The paper aims to present the marriage system in Oman and represent the vivid divergences between the traditional practices and the changing forces of modernity, education and globalization. Omani marriages have been largely families that join together for arranged matching. The wali (guardian) played a central role. There were substantial mahr (dowry) payments. First-cousin marriages were very common. The traditional practices possess social significance, functionalist experts opine. These practices promote social stability and appropriate relations with kin. In this way, continuity is achieved with the past. Through the perspective of conflict and feminist theories, the essay analyses the challenges that have come to be associated with the practice. These include health risks associated with consanguinity, restrictions on autonomy, growing economic burden due to high wedding prices and gender bias in the law. The essay demonstrates that modern Oman sees a rise in marriage ages, less consanguinity and even semi-arranged marriages. So we can conclude that traditional values like modesty and religion still persist, but they are adapting and changing with the times. In conclusion, the study proposes recommendations that are sensitive to culture and religion, including increased premarital genetic counselling, enhancing real consent, and managing the costs of marriage, to improve current practices but which do not undermine important Omani culture and Islamic values relating to family solidarity and moral guidance.

Keywords

Traditional Marriage, Omani Culture, Modernism, Gender, Family, Conventional Marriage

Introduction

The institution of marriage is one of the major societal institutions in the Omani society because not only are the personal lives of people shaped in intimate ways, but also the broader family

of kinship, inheritance, and solidarity. Marriage in Oman is viewed as a religiously based relationship based on Islamic law, as well as an act of civil contract that is set under the Personal Status Law provided by Royal Decree No. 32/97. According to this legal framework, marriage can be described as a contract where both spouses must agree, and they have to be registered with state authorities (Sultani Decree No. 32/97, 1997). The minimum age of marriage is 18 years for both men and women, but the judges have the authority to authorise young marriages in case they consider them useful (Musawah, 2017). Meanwhile, culture, tribal affiliations, and family pressures remain influential in the manner, in which marriages are planned, glorified as well as maintained.

In this essay, the sociological aspect of marriage in Oman is discussed with respect to the conflict between tradition and change. It outlines first the main traditional customs, such as arranged marriage, the family, as well as the suitor (wali) role, the importance of dowry (mahr), and the fact that consanguinity (and cousin in particular) intermarriage is very prevalent. It then explains the merits and demerits of such practices to an individual, family and society. Lastly, it examines how socio-economic change, education, and globalisation are transforming marriage in Oman and gives suggestions on how to ameliorate the current practices without affecting the Omani cultural and Islamic values.

The Omani Traditional Marriage Practices.

In Oman, marriage has historically been very family-oriented. Wife and husband are usually chosen by the extended family and tribe, with parents and the elders taking a decisive part in marrying them off. One of the central participants in this process is the wali (in most understandings of Islamic and Omani law) which generally is the father or the closest male relative of the bride, the consent of whom is necessary to sign the marriage agreement (Sultani Decree No. 32/97, 1997). Although the agreement of the bride is legally obligatory and forced marriage is forbidden, in the real world, there is a lot of communication between families, and young individuals may have a moral obligation to comply with the decision of their families.

The other major theme is the mahr or dowry payment by the groom to the bride. Mahr is not only a religious duty, but it is also a symbolic acknowledgement of the position and rights of the bride. In Oman, mahr can be paid in cash and in gold, jewelry, or other commodities. Moreover, families have a habit of holding huge wedding parties that consume huge finances in terms of location, food, wedding attires, and presents. These practices show the value of honor, generosity, and the declaration of the marital union in front of society.

Another characteristic of Omani marriage patterns is that consanguinity unions and especially first cousin marriages are very high. According to the statistics provided by national surveys, approximately half of all marriages in Oman are consanguineous, and most of them are the marriages between the first cousins (Islam, 2012; Islam, 2016). Historically, such marriages were maintained to strengthen the tribal unity, retention of property in the extended family and to cement the existing kinship ties. Oman, like most other Gulf and Arab nations, also permits polygyny as Muslim males can marry up to four wives, if he is able to take care of them, and polygynous marriages seem to be less widespread in the country than monogamous marriages (ESCWA, 2018).

Benefits of Conventional Marriage rituals.

In sociological perspective, traditional marriage in Oman has several benefits to the people as well as to the society at large. The functionalist theory focuses on the significance of family and marriage in ensuring social stability and passing the values to the new generations. In Oman, family arranged marriages assist in the pairing of the marital partners to have similar tribal affiliation, faith, and societal anticipation. Such homogeneity can minimize conflict in marriage and promote marital stability.

Empirical research on the concept of consanguineous marriage in Oman indicates that this type of marriage is related to high levels of marital satisfaction and prompt family development. According to Islam (2012) consanguinity marriages in Oman are associated with young age of marriage and young age of birth which can be understood, culturally, as being able to meet the social norm of marriage and having children at a very young age. Secondly, in case of spouses being family members, their families are already familiar with each other, and it might lower the uncertainty about the character of the partner, as well as assist in developing a dense network of support in case of conflict or financial crisis.

Collective responsibility is also enhanced by traditional practices. Informal social control can be through the role of elders and extended relatives in organising and overseeing marriages. In case of conflicts, relatives can step in and solve the situation avoiding divorce. Such community participation may save the couple from the risk of being isolated and provide emotional and practical help, such as childcare or housing. Mahr and wedding rituals are also symbolic, which highlights the seriousness of the marriage promise and the dignity of both families.

Negatives and Problems of Standard Practice.

Nevertheless, the traditional patterns may also become serious issues. Conflict theory and feminist approaches attract attention to the ways of reproducing power disparities and occasionally injuring vulnerable members in the family structures. The health risk that might be posed by the high rate of consanguinity marriage is one of the major areas of concern in Oman. It has been found that consanguineous marriages occur in connection to a higher risk of recessive genetic disorders, anomalies during pregnancy and some other negative consequences (Islam, 2012; Islam, 2016). Even though many Omani adults know certain risks associated with their health, the attitude toward cousin marriage is predominant, and these medical outcomes might be less significant than the attitude toward marrying a cousin (Islam, 2016).

A second problem is the problem of individual autonomy and choice. Although Omani law states that marriage should be voluntary, and forced marriage is explicitly forbidden (Shamsaha, 2020), the high role of parents and the ethical values of obedience may force young people to accept the offers to marry created by relatives. Especially, young women can find it difficult to go against family pressure and marry a cousin or a tribal member so as not to cause family discord or be socially stigmatised. Feminist theorists would believe that this would foster a continued patriarchal control of female sexuality and choices in their lives.

There are also economic strains that concern marriage. The high mahr demands and extravagant wedding cost can postpone marriage among the young men who find it hard to get a good job and house. The families can get into debt to fulfill the societal expectations of weddings. With an economic uncertainty and increasing cost of living, these expectations may make marriage something less positive than a transition in life and at times, on the premise of exerting stress and marital discord after the marriage.

Lastly, gender inequalities can be entrenched in aspects of the legal framework of marriage and divorce. According to the Personal Status Law, husbands have a unilateral right to pronounce divorce (talaq) without the necessity to justify it (and wives have fewer options, including judicial divorce or khul), which also presupposes the return of the mahr (Expat Legal Hub, 2018; Shamsaha, 2020). Women have acquired greater rights in education and work, but legal asymmetries can have an impact on the forces in marriage and limit the ability of women to leave abusive relationships.

Modernization of Marriage in modern Oman.

Marriage in Oman is gradually changing, and although many of its traditional elements are still upheld, the changes are still significant. The education, employment, and urbanization are structurally changing, bringing a new approach to expectations in terms of spouse selection, gender roles, and when to get married. Increased secondary and higher education, especially amongst women, has led to higher marriage ages and expanded the social networks among the youth outside their extended families. Research has shown a slight decrease in consanguinity union trends, and in part, this is because the first-cousin marriages are declining among the younger generations (Islam, 2012; Islam, 2016).

The process of globalization and online communication has also affected the way Omani young people meet and check their potential partners. Although family approval is still very important, couples can engage each other in university, work or even under supervised online communication before they become formal. Such semi-arranged marriages in most instances are a compromise between a romantic choice and traditional family involvement. Simultaneously, the focus remains on such values as modesty, religious observance, and adherence to parents, which demonstrates that the change is taking place within an Islamic and Omani cultural context, but not opposition to it.

These trends are supported by the legal and policy developments. Marriageable age, consent, registration, and divorce were made clear in the codification of the Personal Status Law (Sultani Decree No. 32/97, 1997). The talks concerning human rights on the international level and local advocacy have sparked debates regarding early marriage, domestic violence, and access to justice by women (ESCWA, 2018). The fact that these changes suggest gradual shift towards the acknowledgement of the rights of both men and women in family, though the complete equality is not achieved yet.

Recommendations on Improvement without losing the Cultural Values Considering both advantages and problems of traditional marriages, it is significant to find out the reforms that should be oriented to Omani culture and Islamic values and overcome health, financial, and gender issues. Several practical solutions may be proposed.

To begin with, governmental education and premarital counseling need to be increased with much emphasis on the health consequences of consanguineous marriage. Couples who are blood related might be advised to go through genetic counseling and screening before marriage as per the World Health Organization recommendation to know their possible risks and make well-informed choices (Islam, 2012). These programs can be put in a language that is culturally

sensitive, with the focus on responsible parenthood and Islamic principles of safeguarding life and well-being, instead of focusing on family traditions.

Second, there should be additional efforts to reinforce the exercise of true consent by men and women. The importance of religious leaders, educators and media campaigns can be used to emphasise the Islamic teachings that a marriage contract is not valid unless the bride expressly agrees to the marriage and that coercion is against the spirit of the Sharia. In practice, this might mean allowing brides the chance of giving their opinion to the judge or marriage registrar in private, without the pressure of the family.

Third, communities and policymakers may collaborate to deal with the economic cost of marriage. One of the ways is to encourage social practices to support simpler, cheaper weddings and less radical mahr. Collective agreements to restrict the value of mahr and the number of guests on a wedding day have already tested by some Gulf and Omani communities in a bid to make marriage affordable to young men. The encouragement of such initiatives would allow decreasing debts and financial stress, which would make marriage more sustainable.

Fourth, ongoing legal changes and execution is significant to advance justice in marriage and during the divorce process. This involves making sure that women can successfully access courts and legal aid and have clear procedures when it comes to harm, neglect, or abandonment. Enhancing mediation and family counseling services can also be done to solve conflicts before they are getting out of hand, and at the same time, leave the option of dignified separation leave.

Lastly, the suggested reforms must make an explicit reference to conserve the good sides of Omani marriage culture: solidarity within the family, respect to elder generations and introduction of religious values in the daily life. Instead of the rejection of tradition, sociologically guided reforms would be geared towards updating it to new social realities, in order that it remains a source of emotional support, social stability and moral guidance within Omani society.

Conclusion

The contemporary marriage practices in Oman can be described as one that is characterized by the interplay between the traditional and modern aspects of social change. The fact that arranged marriages are common, the emphasis on extended family, the high marital mahr, and the fact that consanguinity marriages are so common all show how tribal and religious values

are taking their deepest in Omani life. Such practices are capable of leading to good family networks, marriage stability, and culture continuity. Meanwhile, they bring up quite significant concerns regarding health hazards, individuality, financial costs, and female equality.

This essay has demonstrated using sociological approaches that traditional Omani marriage practices cannot be considered good or bad. Rather, they play crucial roles in society and cause tensions in a society that is fast modernizing. The dilemma of policymakers, religious leaders, and families is to keep the tradition that is good, including solidarity, mutual support, and moral commitment, and to change the parts that restrain the good of the individual or conflict with new insights of justice and rights. Oman can still take pride in its traditions but change the methods of marriage in line with the new demands and expectations of the new generations through informed public discourse, evidence-based counseling, and culturally based legal amendments.

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