



## **Traditional Marriage System of the Maras**

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### **Abstract**

*Mizoram is a land inhabited by different tribes. These different tribes had their own culture and traditions. Of the different tribes, the Maras who inhabited southern part of Mizoram are endowed with rich variety of cultural and traditional practices. The rich traditional marriage system of the Maras is very much complicated, especially in respect of the bride's price and its payment procedures. There has been continuity and changes on the traditional marriage practices of the Maras over time. As Christianity had tremendously influenced the life of the Maras, certain rituals and customs revolving around traditional marriage practices are now discarded. In recent times, there is no much difference between the price of Lal (Chief's clan) and that of the plebeian/commoners. The marked difference in respect of the bride's price between higher clan and the commoners is increasingly irrelevant. Person of plebeian origin, by virtue of attaining economic wealth is now claiming as much bride's price as the chief's price.*

**Keywords:** *Marriage, Plebeian, Uncle, Paternal, Chief.*

### **Introduction**

Marriage has always been considered a universal social institution. It is founded in all societies all over the world. The institution of marriage controls and regulates the life of mankind. It is through this institution that the sexual and procreative needs of individuals are satisfied in a legal and customary manner. Many sociologists have attempted to define marriage in different manners. Harry M. Johnson had defined marriage as a stable relationship which society allows to man and woman in the community without losing its existence. This stable relationship had two conditions, namely sexual gratification and procreation<sup>1</sup>. G.P. Murdock emphasizes marriage as living together of man and woman as

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husband and wife with regular sexual relationship and economic co-operation. Procreation, bringing up children, mutual love and economic co-operation are other necessary elements of marriage<sup>ii</sup>.

Westermarck in 'History of Human Marriage' defines marriage as the more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offspring<sup>iii</sup>. According to Malinowski, Marriage is a contract for the production and maintenance of children<sup>iv</sup>. Robert Lowie describes marriage as a relatively permanent bond between permissible mates<sup>v</sup>. For Horton and Hunt, Marriage is the approved social pattern whereby two or more persons establish a family<sup>vi</sup>.

There are also different theories on the institution of marriage which had been advocated by different theorists like Marcel Mauss, Claude Levi Strauss, Gayle Rubin, Edward Westermarck, Robin Fox and others. Marcel Mauss in his book, *The Gift* presented systematic study of the system of exchange which exists in all primitive societies. One can solicit a friendly relationship in the offer of a gift in the form of marriage, and acceptance of it implies a willingness to reciprocate and confirmation of the relationship<sup>vii</sup>. Mauss proposed that gifts were the means by which pre-state societies were held together in the absence of specialized governmental institutions<sup>viii</sup>. Mauss emphasized throughout the book that gifts play a huge role in maintaining social ties, reinforcing legal principles and keeping the society in function in a certain way. Mauss has given us an insight in understanding marriage as a system of gift giving which forms alliances and solidarity in the society.

Claude Levi Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* is a structuralist method of studying kinship relations. Levi Strauss sees that kinship system lies in the exchange of women between men<sup>ix</sup>. He further argues that the exchange of women with all its incest taboo constituted the origin of culture, and the world historical defeat/subordination of women occurred with the origin of culture. If there were no exchange of women, there would be no culture. According to him, exchange of women is a fundamental principle of kinship, and subordination of women can be seen as the product of the relationship/marriage alliance by which sex and gender are organized and produced<sup>x</sup>.

Gayle S Rubin in her essay, *The Traffic in Women* reinterpreted the ideas of previous writers who discussed gender and sexual relations. Rubin argues that previous writers like Karl Marx, Fredrich Engels, Claude Levi Strauss, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan fail to adequately explain the genesis of women's oppression. According to her, women's oppression in Capitalism is the product of long historical patterns of women oppression<sup>xi</sup>. She attempts to analyze these historical patterns by considering sex/gender system in order to exactly locate the genesis of oppression towards women, and to provide what would constitute a true feminist revolution. According to her, gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes, and this gender is created with the exchange of women as a gift in patriarchal societies, and this has perpetuated the pattern of female oppression<sup>xii</sup>. Women became gendered when distinction between male gift giver and female gift is made with this exchange. The exclusion of women from the exchange system establishes men as gift giver

and women as commodities fit for exchange. For men, giving the gift of a daughter or a sister to another man for the purpose of matrimony allows the formation of the kinship ties between two men. Rubin ultimately hopes for a genderless or sexually egalitarian society in which sexual difference has no socially constructed and hierarchical meaning.

The Maras who inhabited the south-eastern part of Mizoram were distinctively known for their distinctive traditional marriage system, which was very much complicated, involving a good number of rules and procedures to be followed. Knowledge of the customs surrounding marriage is important to understand the social life, especially women's status in the society<sup>xiii</sup>. This is because marriage has exclusively changed women's role in the society, and there are certain rules, customs and norms, which women are obliged to follow after marriage<sup>xiv</sup>.

Although marriage is a universal institution, the nature, types and structures of marriage cannot be the same in all the societies. Different types of marriage exist in different societies, and these can be categorized in different ways. Based on the number of partners that can legitimately enter into matrimonial relations, marriage can be either monogamous or polygamous marriage. Monogamous type of marriage was the most prevalent form of marriage among the Maras. However, in the olden days, persons belonging to the chiefly clans and wealthy families could have more than one wives at the same time. The legitimate wife was called *nobei*, and the second wife or concubine was called *notho*. The *notho* enjoyed lower status than the *nobei*<sup>xv</sup>. According to the custom, the concubine's son is not entitled to inherit the father's property if the father had legitimate heir. In the meantime, the practice of polyandry or polyandrous marriage (a woman having more than one husbands at one time) was never known among the Maras.

Monogamous type of marriage is prevalent in all societies, and it is the universal form of marriage throughout the world. It is rational from the viewpoint of the fact that the proportion of man and women is more or less equal throughout the world. Monogamous marriage is of two types, serial monogamy and straight monogamy. In serial monogamy, individual is permitted to marry again on the death of the first spouse or after divorce. In straight monogamy, individual is not allowed to remarry under any circumstance. Among the Maras, there was no bar or restriction against the widow or widower in marrying again<sup>xvi</sup>.

However, remarriage usually took place after the erection of the memorial stone of the deceased husband or wife. But, a widow usually continued to stay in the house of her deceased husband's house till she married again. It is a common practice among the Maras for a man to marry the wife of his deceased brother<sup>xvii</sup>. In such case, a woman could not claim a separate marriage price. However, the new husband is obliged to pay whatsoever balances of the bride price that had been left by his deceased brother. The widow could marry freely in case her deceased husband's brother refused to marry her or deceased husband had no brother. A widow who had outlived three husband was called *maluso*, and the Maras were reluctant of marrying a *maluso* for they believed that she would outlive the fourth one also.

On the basis of internality and externality, marriage is again classified into two types, endogamy and exogamy. In the endogamous marriage, individuals marry within their own group, and the group may be caste, class, tribe, race, village, religious group etc. In caste endogamy, marriage has to take place within the caste. Brahmin has to marry a Brahmin. In sub caste endogamy, it is limited to the sub caste groups. In the exogamous marriage, individuals can marry outside their own caste, tribe or community. However, in actual practice, both endogamous and exogamous marriage system exist simultaneously in all societies. Among the Maras, marriage within and outside the clan is equally permissible. In the meantime, a person always wanted to marry from a higher clan than his own<sup>xviii</sup>. This was due to the reason that although a wife taker could not change his original rank and lineage of the clan, he could raise his status in the society by marrying a wife belonging to a clan higher than his own<sup>xix</sup>. Although a man could never change his clan, he could claim a higher marriage price for his daughter than the rate of his own clan provided that his grandmother, his mother and his wife belonged to a higher clan than his own.

There are always certain taboos connected with marriage in all societies. No society allows complete freedom in choosing partner. Likewise, few restrictions are also imposed on the choice of matrimonial partner among the Maras as well. Marriage within very close relatives like sister and brother is generally prohibited, as children would not prosper. Children of the same father but by different mothers may not marry, but children of the same mother by different fathers may marry. The children of a brother and sister may and do marry if the sister's child is a son and the brother's child is a daughter. Thus, they prescribed preferential marriage between children of siblings of opposite sex. The most preferential marriage among the Maras is with the mother's brother's daughter as it keeps the maternal avuncular relationship in the same line<sup>xx</sup>. But, this marriage with the mother's brother's daughter is not obligatory. The two sisters of the same parents who married on the same day, before intercourse with their husbands could exchange their husbands if each husband mutually accepted the proposal.

The institution of marriage among the Maras is very costly and complicated matters. Traditional marriage among the Maras may be classified into Common marriage and Chief's marriage. Chief's marriage is much more complicated and expensive than commoners' marriage<sup>xxi</sup>. Mara chiefs usually preferred to take wives from other villages to improve their influence<sup>xxii</sup>. When the Mara chief married a girl from another village, the girl's parents usually erected a pyramid of stones to commemorate the event, and this pyramid was named after the name of the bride<sup>xxiii</sup>.

In both common marriage and Chief's marriage, negotiations were made through mediators known as *lyuchapa*<sup>xxiv</sup>. But, before *lyuchapa* was sent, the boy's parents secretly sent their female relative to the girl's parents to see whether a proposal for their daughter's hand is likely to be welcomed or not. This preliminary marriage proposal is known as *athitly*<sup>xxv</sup>. If the report is favorable, boy's parents took immediate step by sending two mediators-senior mediator and junior mediator to the girl's parents to propose marriage. The mediators presented the girl's parents with a dao, *thuaso* which is supposed to bring a lucky

dream to the girl's parents. The final decision on such marriage proposal depended upon the dreams of the girl's parents. If they had lucky dreams, they would gladly accept marriage proposal. But, if they had unlucky dreams during this engagement period, they would openly reject this marriage engagement<sup>xxvi</sup>. Dreams about fish, clean water, necklaces, guns and *dao* are considered as lucky dreams. Dreams like wild animals that had been killed by a tiger or shot by a man, dead snake, or anyone stealing pigs or fowls are considered as unlucky dreams<sup>xxvii</sup>.

If the girl's parents had lucky dreams, they gladly accepted marriage proposal. Thereafter, they prepared rice beer *sahma* and invited the *lyuchapa* and the suitor to their house to discuss the bride's price. Once when the bride price is settled, the wedding day is then fixed.

Bride's price of the Maras and its payment procedure is a very complicated affair. The bride's price consists of several parts, and each part in turn is having several subsidiary prices attached to it. As the bride's price is usually high, this makes it necessary for a family to save up for many years before they can afford to buy a wife for their son. The main price of the bride is called *okia*, and this is payable to the father of the bride. If the father was no more, the elder brother of the bride is entitled to get this price. There are several subsidiary prices attached to *okia*. These are the *okia* proper, *seihra*, *seipihra*, *seicheihra*, *mahra*, *seipawchyu* and *chawchyu*. If the father is going to take all these *okia* prices, he had to kill three pigs to enable him to claim them. He may also divide the *okia* prices among his sons and brothers.

But, each person claiming the price must kill a pig for it. Persons getting *seihra*, *seipihra*, *seicheihra*, and *chawchyu* can still claim two additional prices called *chanonghla* and *sawhla*. In addition to these six subsidiary prices of *okia*, there are still other subsidiary prices attached to it. These are *raipihra*, *dawhra*, *keimaand* and *awruabawna*. The claimants of these later prices do not need to kill pig for it.

*Okia* being the main price is very important. The rate of *okia* determines the rate of all other prices. The higher the *okia*, the higher the other prices. It is significant to note that a man usually claim a higher *okia* for his daughter than his own clan usually do provided that he himself, his father and grandfather married into higher clans. This is the reason why the Maras usually try to marry into a higher clan than their own.

*Puma* is another bride's price payable to the bride's maternal uncle who is called *pupa*. If a woman (bride's mother) has several brothers, *puma* goes to the eldest brother. *Pupa* has to kill a pig of the size at least of six fists to claim his niece's *puma*. *Pupa* can claim the price on the wedding day. But, he usually waits till the couples have fully settled down. Like *okia*, there are several subsidiary prices attached to *puma*.

*Nochyu* is the price payable to the bride's mother's sister provided that her parents are still married. If they have been divorced, *nochyu* goes to the bride's mother. The procedure for claiming this price is the same with those dealing with other prices.

*Norihra* is payable to the bride's eldest paternal aunt. The claimant of this price follows the same formalities to claim this price. Four subsidiary prices are attached to *Norihra*.

In addition to the above-mentioned prices, there are minor dues which are payable to the chief, the elders, the cooks, beer makers, water carriers etc. and these are known as *ahlas*. The custom regarding the payment of these *ahlas* varies from place to place. In some places, in case the bride and bridegroom belong to the same village, no *ahlas* of any sort are paid.

One peculiar feature regarding traditional marriage system of the Maras was the practice of child marriage. This was called *nongapahaw*. However, child marriage among the Maras was not the kind of the child marriage, which was found in other societies. It was a marriage between two children of the same age instead of it being marriage between mature and immature person<sup>xxviii</sup>. The desire of the Lakher parents to marry higher clan for their son and the desire to preserve the purity/virginity of the girl until she got married were the two motives that encouraged this practice of child marriage among the Maras. When such marriage was arranged, the immature bride would spend her time partly in her father's house and partly in her husband's house, as she likes. The couple did not sleep together until they attained the age of puberty<sup>xxix</sup>. This child marriage was however, a very rare practice among the Maras.

## **Conclusion**

Marriage practices of the Maras have been changing from time to time. For instance, in the past, there was a clear-cut difference in terms of the bride's price of the chief and that of the commoners/plebeians. However, in modern times, person of plebeian origin, by virtue of attaining economic wealth is now claiming as much bride's price as the chief's price. Besides, consequent upon the advent of Christianity, indigenous marriage system of Maras had significantly compromised with Christian system of marriage. Modern elements such as arrangement of marriage function at the church, preparation of the wedding dress, exchange of wedding rings, certification, oath taking etc. are being introduced. In the meantime, some of the old traditional practices such as courtship, activities of the intermediaries to propose marriage to the girl's parent, settlement of the bride's price, wearing traditional dress by the bride on the wedding day etc. are still retained in the contemporary marriage system of the Maras.

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## Endnotes

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