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0521381584 - Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society - Nancy Tapper

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Bartered brides is a detailed study of marriage among the Maduzai, a tribal society in Afghan Turkistan. It is the first study of the area which looks in depth at both the domestic aspects of marriage and its relation to the productive and reproductive activities of women, as well as marriage as a means of managing political and economic conflict and competition. The fieldwork was carried out in the early 1970s before the 1978 coup and Soviet invasion. In this respect the book offers a unique account of a world that has disappeared.

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Bartered brides

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Five women of a Maduzai household

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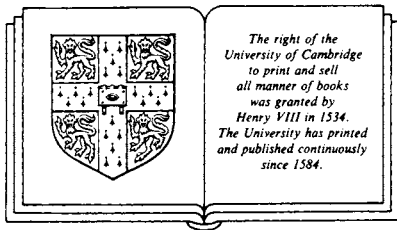
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BARTERED BRIDES

*Politics, gender and marriage
in an Afghan tribal society*

NANCY TAPPER

School of Oriental and African Studies, London



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For Richard

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Preface

Marriage – its ideology and associated practices – is the key to many societies around the world, not least in the Muslim Middle East. Not merely the central mechanism for social reproduction, marriage is also the main focus of social production. The choice of partners, the political circumstances behind a match, the negotiations between the two sides, the accumulation and exchange of the various customary gifts, the conduct and evaluation of the wedding ceremonies, the relations between affines and the eventual fruitfulness of the marriage – all these matters are the constant concern of all members of any community, so that any ethnographic account of culture or social relations in such a community that fails to recognize and examine the importance of marriage is necessarily incomplete.

In the Muslim Middle East, there is an additional problem for the investigator. The notorious seclusion and segregation of women has meant that the few recent studies of marriage are one-sided. Either they have adopted a ‘male’ perspective, treating marriage arrangements as a means whereby political and economic conflict and competition in the wider society are negotiated and managed, or they have concentrated more narrowly on the domestic aspects of marriage and its relation to the productive and reproductive activities of women. These are of course two sides of the same coin, but there have been few detailed studies of sufficient breadth to encompass both and to put the marriage system thus described into its wider theoretical context.

This book is a social anthropological analysis of marriage in an Afghan tribal society, drawing on both male and female perspectives, extended case studies, and historical and statistical materials. Central concepts concerning gender, kinship and affinity, and inequality and equality are examined, while the key values of honour and shame and responsibility are investigated through breach cases which reveal both the structure of competition and conflict for the control of political and economic resources and the role of the individual in the processes of social change.

The study is based on fieldwork done jointly with my husband, Richard Tapper (RLT), in the early 1970s in Afghan Turkistan among the Maduzai, a sub-tribe of the Ishaqzai, one of the major tribes of the Durrani Pashtuns. Although the Durrani people produced the rulers of Afghanistan from the founding of that nation until 1978, little has been written about Durrani culture or social organization. Tragically, since the 1978 coup and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this study has become a memorial; the Maduzai have, so far as we know, been forced to flee Afghan Turkistan, and their way of life as we knew it is almost certainly gone forever. As an ethnographic and historical record, the book offers an account of a world that has disappeared.

Nonetheless, I have chosen to use the ethnographic present tense to describe conversations, events and social activities at the time of fieldwork and I have suggested areas in which the society was changing at that time. Ironically, such discussions have an anthropological interest even though they concern processes which have been made irrelevant by the terrible war which has overtaken the Maduzai and their countrymen. My choice of tense is not meant to disguise or deny the dreadful content of their recent experiences; rather, it is meant to give an immediacy to my account of the Maduzai and their views then of themselves, their history and environment. It is one way of trying to share with the reader something of their vitality, toughness and humour which were so much a part of our experience with them in the then independent Afghanistan.

The Maduzai live in Afghan Turkistan, a region which is ethnically very mixed and where members of many different tribal and language groups are in fierce competition for scarce resources. One thread of the book is the relation between the increasing political and economic competition in the region, the political manipulation of marriage, and changing constructions of Durrani identity. Historical materials – related to the Maduzai arrival in Afghan Turkistan from their southern Afghan homeland from 1915 onwards, the murderous feud which arose among them in the 1930s and the gradual shift from pastoral nomadism to a settled mixed agricultural economy – are used to analyse the changing role of marriage in the intensification of inter-ethnic conflict, and in the recent shift from subsistence production towards cash-cropping and from tribal identities to social class.

All aspects of identity among Durrani are defined by ideals and practices relating to marriage and the control of women. Durrani ethnicity and tribal identity are constructed in terms of religion (Sunni Islam), language (Pashtu) and a patrilineal pedigree which links them with the founding Pashtun ancestor. However, these criteria of identity often operate retrospectively, to rationalize changes of ethnic identity which are ratified through marriage.

The most explicit rule defining Durrani identity is that a Durrani woman should never marry a non-Durrani man. In practice, the ambiguities implicit within this marriage rule, and in the related form of exchange marriage, offer

scope for both creating 'new' Durrani when allies are needed and redefining the status of other weaker Durrani who are exploited as workers and servants or even denied Durrani identity and political support altogether. Among themselves Durrani use exchange marriage as a device for resolving serious disputes and confirming social equality; over time, however, these same exchange marriages often become an excuse for conflicts which reflect and define the changing circumstances of former equals.

Durrani households and household identity are constructed in terms of a second explicit rule – that each household should form an autonomous unit whose head independently manages all household resources, including the behaviour of household women. One of the most salient indicators of the relative economic and political standing of a household is the marriages its members make. Economic success and political standing in the community may be expressed through the choice of spouses, the relative frequency of exchange and brideprice marriages, the scale of brideprice payments, the time and expense devoted to the marriage ceremonies and the numbers of people who attend and are feasted. But such public statements are open to interpretation and comparison and may also be seen to indicate a household's weakness and vulnerability.

Durrani discuss the control of resources in the language of honour and shame. A man's prestige – that is, his honour – depends on his ability to manage and defend human and material resources. Though a man's control of resources is expressed in absolute terms and includes, for instance, his power of life or death over the women of his household, the subordination of women to men is qualified in an important way. Where male prestige is heavily dependent on women, women have the ability to undermine male ambition and damage male prestige. This covert, subversive power of women is a second thread which runs through the book.

Much of the time, a woman's interests coincide with those of the household in which she lives. Where they diverge, her efforts to express and defend her own interests are usually hidden from public view, either behind a diagnosis of spirit possession or by the domestic secrecy which surrounds illicit love affairs. *In extremis*, however, a woman may openly defy the ideal of male dominance and the strictures of the ideology of honour and shame and precipitate a public scandal. Such scandals reveal women's potential power and the limits of their subordination in this patriarchal system. They also reveal the dynamic relation between gender and marriage in Durrani constructions of identity.

The book is divided into four parts, the first of which is introductory. Chapter 1 is a personal account of the fieldwork in Afghanistan and the aims and methods of the study. In chapter 2, the reader is introduced to some of the comparative issues concerning marriage in the Muslim Middle East. Chapter 3 provides back-

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ground information on the Saripul region of Afghan Turkistan and the social relations between the Durrani and other peoples in the area.

Part II of the book is a consideration of the extent to which the indigenous classification of social groups is variously reinforced, transformed or simply bypassed by Durrani marriage practices. In chapter 4 Durrani ethnicity is examined in terms of Durrani ideas of patriliney, endogamy and procreation. Chapter 5 is a discussion of the tribal system and of local communities, including an account of Maduzai migration to the region and the feud. Household autonomy, with respect to both marriage choice and economic self-sufficiency, is the subject of chapter 6.

The fluid and chimerical nature of social groups is explored further in the pivotal third part of the book, which is concerned with ideologies of equality and inequality. The seventh chapter describes the various marriage forms and contrasts marriage for brideprice with exchange marriage. Chapter 8 examines marriage procedures and ceremonies, in which prestations and ritual elaboration are a rich symbolic language for the articulation of status competition and differentiation. The topic of chapter 9 is the choice of partners in marriage; it includes discussions of widow inheritance, polygyny and variations in brideprice payments.

The final part of the book concerns a household's ability to control its resources, particularly in terms of successful marriage and the behaviour of women. Chapter 10 focuses on spirit possession and illicit sexual liaisons, the loss of social control and the downward mobility of a household. The parameters of the marriage system are revealed most clearly when individuals privilege their personal interests and in doing so redefine their own status and that of others. In chapter 11 the opposite perspective is examined in an extended case study of the marriage strategies of a wealthy household over fifty years in which the household's social position is created and confirmed through the medium of marriage. The case demonstrates the intrinsic connections between marriage and cooperation and competition with and between local groups, and the extent to which individual action may confirm or confound social ideals. Finally, chapter 12 summarizes marriage among the Durrani in theoretical terms as an example of a complex marriage system associated with non-exogamous lineage organization, and considers the wider implications of such Middle Eastern marriage systems.

Acknowledgements

My debts to Richard Tapper (RLT) are limitless, ranging from the knowledge that, had I been alone, the Afghan Government would not have given me permission to do the kind of fieldwork on which this study is based (indeed the very fact that I was 'accompanying' RLT initially made official support more difficult to obtain); to the fact that an important part of the argument I present here depends on economic and other data which were collected and collated by RLT; and to his assistance in many, smaller matters, including the translation of German texts. RLT and I have both written elsewhere about the Maduzai, independently and in a series of joint papers, many of which I have drawn on in various chapters of this book: I give complete references to these publications in the bibliography. Our collaboration much enriched our fieldwork in Afghanistan and deepened such understanding as we have of the Maduzai. RLT recognizes the Maduzai I have described here and his agreement with the final draft of this study has been of the utmost importance to me. Thanks go too to our sons, Ruard and Edward, for their enthusiasm and help in preparing the final manuscript; to Susan van de Ven for her editorial care and to RLT for reading the proofs.

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both benefited greatly from the comments of colleagues, students and friends in seminars, classrooms and elsewhere where we have discussed our work on the Maduzai.

I also thank the many friends with whom we shared our Afghan experience: among them members of the British legation and of the French, German and British Institutes of Afghan Studies in Kabul, and particularly, Jon Anderson, Veronica Doubleday and John Baily, Micheline Centlivres-Demont and Pierre Centlivres, Nancy and the late Louis Dupree, M. Hasan Kakar (the first Afghan I ever met, who has only recently been released after seven years in an Afghan prison for supporting academic freedom in his country), Laurence LeBrun and Pierre Lacombe, Pribislav Pitoeff, Greta and Mark Slobin.

Other Afghan friends and numerous people in Jouzjan and Faryab gave us assistance, but it would be inappropriate now to list their names; we remember them all with thanks.

As for the Maduzai: they often said that they liked our being with them because we afforded them an amusing way of passing the time. If this is what we gave them, it is so little compared with their warm friendship and the great trouble they took for us throughout our stay. We care very deeply for them. When we left them in 1972 we wished for them, as they did for us, that their land would always be green. Now, after the changes, losses and suffering they have experienced, we can only hope that they have preserved something of their cultural integrity and some degree of self-determination. This book is meant as a humble tribute to the Maduzai people and as a memorial to their way of life.

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Note on transliteration

I have not attempted to be absolutely consistent in transliterating Persian and Pashtu terms or proper names. The main aim has been to enable the ordinary reader to reproduce the pronunciation approximately, while the expert should have no trouble identifying the terms and names recorded. There are no diacritical marks; there is no distinction made between long and short 'a', and the Pashtu 'shwa' (ə) has variously been rendered as 'a' or 'e'; no attempt has been made to distinguish certain other peculiarly Pashtu sounds, such as the different forms of 'sh', 'n', 'r', 'd', 't'. I should note only that the diphthong in the English word 'dye' has been transliterated as 'ay' (as in the name 'Payz'), while that in 'day' has been given as 'ey'; that in 'how' is given as 'au' (as in *qaum*), that in 'owe' as 'ou' (as in Jouzjan).

Abbreviations and symbols

Abbreviations

Pa.	Pashtu
Per.	Persian
Afs.	Afghanis (unit of currency)
j.	<i>jeribs</i> (unit of land)

Kinship abbreviations

M	mother
F	father
B	brother
Z	sister
S	son
D	daughter
$\frac{1}{2}$	half-sibling
Thus, FBS = patrilineal parallel cousin	
MF $\frac{1}{2}$ BS = mother's father's half-brother's son	

Symbols

\triangle	male
\blacktriangle	deceased male
\circ	female
\bullet	deceased female
\approx	engagement
\napprox	broken engagement
=	marriage
\neq	divorce