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DOI
10.1163/22138617-12340246

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Oriente Moderno

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Cleuziou, J., & McBrien, J. (2021). Marriage quandaries in central Asia. *Oriente Moderno*, *100*(2), 121-146. https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-12340246

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ORIENTE MODERNO 100 (2020) 121-146

ORIENTE MODERNO

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Marriage quandaries in Central Asia

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Abstract

Many Central Asians speak of marriage as important and self-evident despite the fact that marriage in practice across the region presents a more complicated story. There is not only an extensive array of practices indicated by the single term marriage and a wide variety of things accomplishes by its conclusion and duration, but many non-marital sets of relations in Central Asia similarly realise what marriage does. This may lead one to question whether there is any sense in trying to pin marriage down at all. Yet, this tension — the flexibility of marriage in form and function, and its overlap with nonmarriage on the one hand, and its abiding importance and, at times, self-evidentiary nature, on the other — we suggest, lies at the heart of marriage-as-practice in Central Asia. Following recent turns in kinship studies, and long-standing feminist traditions, this paper envisages marriage as a relational practice of legitimization rather than pinning it down as a particular content. We argue that by focusing on the act of getting married in particular, its particular efficacy, as well as the disputes, questions, and conflicts that sometime arise as a result – in short, the quandaries of getting married – we get not only at this tensional nature of marriage, but at the everyday concerns and major societal issues wrapped up in marriage in Central Asia.

Keywords

marriage – Central Asia – kinship – gender – morality

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Introduction

Marriage has been a central topic of anthropology since its earliest days.[1] While many scholars attempted to craft a universal definition for the widely shared phenomenon, essentially trying to delineate what marriage *is*, Edmund Leach, rather ahead of his times, suggested looking instead at what marriage *does*. In his 1955 article on the definition of marriage, Leach surveyed and compared an impressive array of ethnographic material with the aim of distilling what marriage achieves in terms of status and relations. But even with this somewhat more narrowed scope, he concluded that, given the wide variety of practices bundled under the term "marriage" and their lack of overlap with one another, there could be no general definition (Leach, 1955). More recent investigations with more limited geographic scopes have come to similar conclusions, leading some authors to ask whether we should scrap the term marriage and focus instead on all kinds of relations that do what marriage sets out to do — like providing care or producing children (see for example Bamford, 2004; Das, 2010; Weber, 2013).

In terms of the breadth of what it accomplishes, marriage in Central Asia, the focus of this special section, is no different from the cases examined by Leach. Moreover, just as Bamford, Das or Weber have noted for non-marital relations in their field sites, many non-marital sets of relations in Central Asia likewise accomplish what marriage does — providing intimacy and care, facilitating citizenship, or producing legitimate offspring — leading one to question whether there is any sense in trying to pin marriage down at all. In this collection of papers, we follow Leach and many after him, by making no attempt at a universal definition of marriage.

Yet in our research in Tajikistan (Cleuziou) and Kyrgyzstan (McBrien), we have heard our interlocutors continue to speak of marriage as important, self-evident, and, at times, in danger and/or contestable. Whether they emphasise agnatic or cognatic descent; exogamic or endogamous affinity relations at different levels (blood line, village, clans, ethnicity, etc.); whether they are concerned by high levels of migration or the renewal of religiosity (Islamic above all); and beyond political regimes and regulations, people acknowledge marriage as fundamental in shaping life's course and social relations

1 We would like to warmly thank Diana Ibañez-Tirado and Ismaël Moya for their thoughtful comments on our introduction. We would also like to thank Annelies Moors, the Muslim Marriages team at the University of Amsterdam, and the European Research Council Project "Problematizing 'Muslim Marriages': Ambiguities and Contestations', 2013 — AdG-324180 for hosting the first workshop out of which this volume arose and Tommaso Trevisani from the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" for hosting the second. Thank you also to Professor Ersilia Francesca for discussing the papers during the workshop.

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across all Central Asian societies. This tension — the flexibility of marriage in form and function, and its overlap with nonmarriage on the one hand, and its abiding importance and, at times, self-evidentiary nature, on the other — we suggest, lies at the heart of marriage-as-practice in Central Asia. We are, therefore, intrigued by the moments when *actors* move to define certain relations or practices in Central Asia as marriage and others as not, or when they attempt to draw boundaries around what *proper* marriage is and how it should be concluded. In this special edition, we aim to interrogate how and why these ritualised relations and practices are defined or marked as marriage — in essence *how* marriage comes into being — at particular moments in Central Asia and why it is important for them to be defined, shaped, suggested, or guarded at these moments in these ways. To get at this, we look at how marriages are celebrated and concluded, and the debates around them, as sites where defining, defending, and delineating what marriage is and what it does (or what is *should be* and *do*), comes into particularly stark relief.

In Central Asia, there are three basic terms (in both the Turkic and Persian languages spoken in the region) that refer to the different, but intertwined, processes of getting married — *nikoh/nike*, *z.a.g.s.*, and *tuy/toy*. The first usually refers to a set of Muslim rituals, the second points to civil administration and the state, and the third is used in reference to a collective celebration with the family and/or the local community. Central Asians variously value these ritual acts which are not always preformed simultaneously, as do those in the civil, political, religious, and kinship networks invested in, connected to, or contesting them. Economic concerns, ethnic relations, and networks of influence are just some of the other intimately connected issues that play into concluding a marriage, not to mention migration, international trade and industry, or human rights and geopolitical positioning. Getting married in Central Asia, like anywhere in the world, is complex and the relations that go into concluding a marriage reach far beyond those of immediate kinship. Research on marriage in post-Soviet Central Asia is developing; in this volume, we present some of the emerging research, focusing specifically on the processes of *getting* married.

Marriage, Kinship Studies and Relatedness

Marriage is obviously about relations. Early kinship studies in anthropology primarily focused on three types of relations created or sustained through marriage: hetero-conjugality between the spouses, affinity/alliance between the two "married" families, and filiation/descent between the married couple and the children to come. However, from the beginning, theoretical engagement

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with marriage and kinship understood the institution to be relational in a much broader sense. In much evolutionist or Marxist thought, for example, marriage was considered a marker in the development stage of a society (among others: H.L. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 1877; F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884), while in structuralist approaches marriage was viewed as a component of all societies and the universal form of gift and exchange (C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary structures of Kinship*, 1949).

Kinship studies and marriages are of course not reducible to one another. Marriage is but one of many types of relations It is, however, one that has, at least implicitly, been at the heart of kinship studies (as well as of political or economic anthropology and the anthropology of religion), though often only as it related to procreation and descent. Debates between structural-functionalists and structuralists, which occurred in the second part of the 20th century, and which in many ways separated British from French anthropology, often revolved around debates on the role of marriage in societies. While in British anthropology, marriage was approached in a descriptive manner as a means to classify societies, French structuralism, following Lévi-Strauss, conceptualised marriage as a structural component of all societies, a universal formula of exchange orchestrated by men which enabled a community to reproduce, transform, and develop networks of collaboration. In this perspective, marriage was a component of a greater system of alliance (understood as the socially recognised union between two people that establishes a special bond between their relatives). Amidst these divergent views on marriage, Edmund Leach, often considered to have straddled the French/English divide, suggested studying what marriage does, in terms of status and relations. Ultimately, as already pointed out, Leach argued that the diversity of forms and practices labelled as marriage was so great that a general anthropological definition of it was impossible, bringing the study of marriage to an impasse similar to the one reached in kinship studies. Developments in both fields were left dormant for some time.

The last three decades, however, have seen a revival of kinship studies, in which scholars have attempted to break the impasse of earlier approaches by moving from the understanding of kinship as a fixed institution or structure to that of kinship as a process, or what some have called "practical kinship" (Weber, 2013). Janet Carsten has led the field by suggesting an examination of relatedness more broadly instead of a narrow focus on kinship alone (1997, 2000, 2003). Acknowledging Schneider's critique on Eurocentrism of anthropological kinship terms (Schneider, 1984), she suggested that the concept of "relatedness" avoided the Eurocentric nature/culture divide and facilitated a move beyond relations merely defined by procreation. Relatedness, for Carsten, gets at "indigenous ways of acting out and conceptualising relations

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between people" (Carsten, 1995: 224). Importantly, in her work, relatedness is not limited to people, but extends and relies on things like blood, food, or the home, all of which, like and with people, connect and nourish. Moreover, relatedness suggests a temporal and processual dimension: relations inside the family or the community are not taken for granted but analysed as on-going constructions through everyday practices and performances.

This turn in Carsten's work leads Michael Lambek to identify it, along with that of Pierre Bourdieu and Sherry Ortner, as a part of an "unacknowledged but productive" turn to practice-theory in kinship studies (Lambek, 2011: 3). Similarly, Lambek himself approaches kinship as "constituted through the performance of acts" which range from "the deliberate and formal" to the "relatively informal" and "even the unconscious" (idem). In this thematic issue, we approach marriage, like Carsten and Lambek on kinship, as something that comes into being through relational acts and which involves particular emotions in specific moments.

On this basis, we look more specifically at *getting married* and the quandaries that arise in the mode, definition, or act of getting married, in order to interrogate how marriage is variously constructed, negotiated and contested by people, and why it is important for it to be shaped in this way at this time. Rather than understanding marriage as a fixed structure, what interests us most are the broader relations, which produce marriage as it comes into being in specific moments in Central Asia, as well as the circumstances under which marriage is reckoned as such. Looking at these moments of construction and contestation is all the more important given that the relational approach to kinship has rarely been extended to studies of marriage. We ask: What relations are at play in making marriage as it is practised at that moment? What are the various concerns involved and what are the stakes? What happens when, for example, people are confronted with conflicting principles — when the law restricts wedding expenses while the whole community expects to be invited to the party? Or what happens when the gendered tacit exchange of security and livelihood for domestic work and obedience becomes unbalanced under the impacts of labour migration? In this inquiry we look not only at the relations created by marriage, and specific relations of care or mutuality, but also at the broader political, economic, social, and legal relations which produce marriage in a specific way at a situated moment.

Marriage, Gender Relations and Socioeconomic Change

The revival of kinship studies has been influenced not only by Carsten's move towards more expansive terms, but by a similar shift found in Marshall Sahlins'

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recent articulations. He argues that the hoary dilemma of "what kinship is" can be solved by examining it in terms of "mutuality of being" instead, "a manifold of intersubjective participation" (Sahlins, 2013: 20). In a Sahlins-like formation one might ask, for example, how marriage creates bonds that facilitate people's participation in one another's existence.

However interesting this proposal is in understanding the process of "kinning", it remains unsatisfactory when it comes to understanding what marriage *means* or *does* for at least two reasons. First, it describes kinship and affinity in very general "relational" traits, whereas for the actors themselves, marriage contains its own efficacy — irreducible to other forms of relationships, even if it varies according to cultural, historical, political and economic contexts. Sahlins' definition does not allow us to identify marriage's peculiarity, that which makes it so indispensable to so many different societies including Central Asian ones — a critique which also applies to Carsten's "relatedness". Our aim is not to provide a new analytical framework, but to suggest that describing the wide variety of practical marriage arrangements provides a better understanding of the (sometimes contingent) value people place on them as well as the relative lability of this process. From this perspective, all of the articles of this volume describe and analyse the effects of the particular efficacy of marriage in Central Asia and how it emerges at the crossroads of various relationships, at a certain point in time, under certain conditions.

Second, as Carsten herself has suggested, Sahlins' definition softens negative or violent dimensions of relations such as conflicts between kin (Carsten, 2013). Marriage, and getting married, like other kin relations, entails conflict, jealousy, disputes, or discontents, all of which are usually enmeshed in issues and relations which go beyond marriage or kinship itself. In the context of Central Asia where marriage is a family affair, it comes as no surprise that choosing a spouse or deciding on matrimonial separation likewise include kin, and that choices to marry, or to separate, hinge not only on these family relations but on (future) access to broader networks of power or influence in society. Again, the papers of this volume explore the wide variety of tensions and conflicts that marriage quandaries may generate, where kinship networks may play a highly coercive if not constraining role on individual desires and behaviours.

Beyond this, legal structures, economic relations, networks of money transfer, visa regimes, and geopolitical positioning, for example, are all relations of power that impinge on getting, and staying, married, especially when considering the circular labour migration of Central Asians — predominately to Russia — that have so profoundly impacted intimate social life. Married couples, as well as nuclear and extended families, live separated by enormous

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distances with scant opportunity for visits. Young men are pressured to marry before they leave for work to more firmly tether them to their villages and homes (Isabaeva, 2011; Reeves, 2011; Ibañez-Tirado, 2019). Single women working abroad are fretted over by family and nationalists alike (Roche, 2016; Suyarkulova, 2016; McBrien, 2020). Power relations, inequality and subordination are thus part of marriage relations — a dimension that feminist studies have addressed since the 1970s.

Since the feminist critique of the structuralist approach to kinship (Ortner and Whitehead, 1981; Mathieu, 1985; Moore, 1988), which pointed out the absence of lived experience and of agentive women in these studies, research on marriage has moved to include other avenues of exploration and other ideas of relations than just affinity or descent. Many feminist studies have also emphasised that it is in and through marriage that certain stratified social relations — gender, sexual, economic, reproductive — are created and authorised. Marriage has been viewed by many as a "label", a norm, claimed by people in order to legitimise specific relations and actions (Ortner and Whitehead, 1981; Tabet, 2004). Other moves have invited us to see marriage as an institution, which genders subjects, constrains bodies, and which tends to (re) produce heteronormative sexualities (Rubin, 1975; Borneman, 2001; Tabet, 2004; Lambek, 2011).

Gayle Rubin, for example, argues that marriage is the main institution of the heterosexual system. It intimately relates sexuality and reproduction, and de-legitimises any other forms of care, love and sexual relations (Rubin, 1975). By doing so, marriage also constitutes a crucial moment of the construction of heterosexual femininities and masculinities, and the related division of work that derive from normative gender roles. Similarly, Paola Tabet, argues that marriage is the means through which economic transaction and sexual relations are normatively aligned. She concludes that the distinction between marriage and prostitution cannot be drawn from the nature of the transactions or the goods which are exchanged. It is only through moral norms constructed through marriage, that the "good mother" and the "bad prostitute", are created, thereby exerting strong control over women's behaviour and bodies (Tabet, 2004: 200).

In a more radical approach, John Borneman has argued that "anthropologists have tended to assert the logical or temporal priority of power, gender, kinship, marriage, or sex, without rigorously justifying the violent hierarchies that result from such prioritising. They have also nearly totally ignored what is foreclose, abjected, or excluded in the production of this diversity" (Borneman, 2001: 30). He asserts that "anthropology should instead privilege in analysis caring and being cared for as processes of non-coercive, voluntary affiliation"

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(Borneman, 2001: 31). For him, marriage is rather a universal criterion of exclusivity and selection: it is the privilege of a specific category of the population and actively excludes others (homosexuals, poor, divorced, bachelors, etc.) and investigating marriage demands the exploration of the "(…) constant struggle for the cultural and political (de)legitimation of different forms of sociability" (Borneman, 1996: 230).

In Central Asia, labour migration and the pressure it has put on the taken-for-granted modes of gender, marriage conclusion, and marital life, reveal many of underlying normativities pointed out in the work by scholars like Rubin, Tabet, and Borneman. The sexual practices of unmarried female labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan, have, for example, become objects of anxiety for families and nationalists alike who seek to protect the heteronormative family and, implicitly, the reproduction of the nation (Werner, 2009; Suyarkulova, 2016; McBrien, 2020). These have resulted in violent attacks on women in both Kyrgyzstan and Russia. In Tajikistan, national narratives also encourage traditional, heterosexual gender roles, especially as they concern labour in the context of migration. Men tend to work abroad and women "stay put" (Reeves 2011), at home. Moreover, given the virtual absence of social protection in the country, marriages, including polygynous unions, have given rise to the development of a multiplicity of strategies for accessing resources as well as social and geographic mobility. Yet, even when women live alone, decide to remarry (Cleuziou, 2016a; Commercio, 2020) or to migrate (Kholmatova, 2018; Kasymova, 2020), their choices are framed by gender stereotypes that legitimise marriage as the norm, as well as the control it exercises over women's bodies. Finally, the regional appearance of feminist and queer movements, and the backlash against them (Suyarkulova, 2016, 2019), including recent laws to reinforce marriage as a heterosexual union (McBrien, 2020) also evince the kinds of struggles Borneman indicated.

Marriage is thus a means by which certain hegemonic moralities about care, sexuality, gender and intimacy are (re)created. Marriage is not only imbued with power, or created through economic, legal, social, or political power, but itself is a mode of exerting power. As Blackwood has argued, "marriage may stand in a particular relation of exclusion to non-marriage" (Blackwood, 2005: 4), leading many to argue that rather than a narrow focus on marriage, we should widen our gaze to include other forms of nurture and intimacy.

Recent studies on marriage have also looked at the ways new ideologies have impacted marriage norms and practices at a global level, and in particular the impacts of marketisation of marriage relations. Although anthropology has long looked at the connections between marriage and economic transfers (Leach, 1955; Dumont, 1959; Goody and Tambiah, 1973; Comaroff, 1980; Moya

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2015), recent research has explored the commodification of transnational intimacies (through care, labour or love) under the influence of world migrations and technologies of communication (Parreñas, 2005; Hochschild, 2009; Williams, 2010; Hannaford, 2017). The theoretical frame of Massey's geographies of power (Massey, 1994) has been widely used to understand how gender and sexuality have been impacted by global mobility, including through cross-border marriages (for a review, see Constable, 2009). Others have looked at the transformations entailed by the rise or the introduction of the market economy, liberalism, and the globalisation of marriage scenery and artefacts, as well as the commodification of "romantic love", associated somehow with the ethos' of local middles-classes and new forms of consumption (Moors, 2007; Van Dijk, 2010). Representations of nuclear families (in soap operas, movies, commercials, etc.), of happy family life and conjugality lend an important role to intimacy and complicity between two individuals — the couple — and contribute to shaping ideals and expectations regarding marriage (Patico, 2010). While anthropologists have shown how marriage is always enmeshed in familial, religious, economic and political systems, the "modern" vision of love and marriage has been spreading all over the world, most recently through globalised consumption practices (Illouz 1997). While it has been assumed that romantic love necessarily entails more "choice", "agency", and therefore freedom and satisfaction in marriage, recent scholarship has rather shown that the articulation of individual desire and marriage strategy occur in complex webs of meaningful relations, and are bound up with economic conditions and social expectations (Hart, 2007; Osella, 2012; Pande, 2015). Moreover, there have been visible efforts to "move beyond the binary of relatively rigid, "traditional" kinship structures versus modern, individualistic ideologies of romance as self-fulfilment — to recognise contexts of practice that are neither just hybrids of those two models nor simply changing from one to the other, but are far more contingent, charged, and uncertain." (Patico, 2010: 384).

Through a great variety of work, feminist approaches have shown the co-construction of marriage and the moral norms it creates with other realms of activities (work, politics, sexuality, economics, etc.), and the importance for scholarship to differentiate between ideals of marriage, actual marriage practices and the alternative norms and values that individuals may struggle for, in search for equal rights or recognition. Inspired by this work, we see marriage in this themed issue not as an institution but rather as a process, a set of practices which conveys social expectations, through which people engage their personal life, desires and ambitions, status and self-image, and even savings in an endeavour to legitimise their positions, actions and relations — whether one speaks about one's own marriage or when marrying off a relative. In contrast

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to other forms of care, cohabitation, sexuality or economic solidarity, marriage carries a legitimising dimension together with the desire to conform to particular representation of oneself and/or the community.

When considering marriage as a relational practice of legitimisation rather than a particular content, we ask what people want to legitimise when getting married or marrying off their children, and with whom. We also ask about the aims of groups and institutions who regulate marriage (state workers, influential religious personalities, etc.). What do individuals, groups or institutions promote and support in a specific context when they speak about marriage? Same-sex marriage laws in different parts of the world and the debates surrounding them have all highlighted the multi-faceted aspect marriage: while some claimed equal rights for people excluded from marriage and adoption in an effort to normalise alternative sexuality, cohabitation and care, others put forward cultural and religious views on marriage and family, while often speaking in terms of biological reproduction. Rhetoric strategies of "pros" and "cons" have usually taken place in different regimes of justification, reflecting the variety and porosity of the different meanings attached to marriage. While same-sex marriage is either un-regulated or explicitly forbidden in Central Asia, recent debates in Kyrgyzstan on the topic parallel those happening around the world.

In this special addition, we look at what happens when the process of "getting married" — and thus of legitimising one's position and relations — entails disputes, questions, and when it fails or does not work as expected. We speak about "marriage quandaries" to describe all these moments where marriage is put into question, in prospect or in retrospect, and whatever people mean by marriage at this very specific moment. What kind of relations do these quandaries reveal? How does marriage happen or not in specific moments? In addition to "getting married", "getting separated" (divorced, repudiated, abandoned, etc.) is also a central matter and part of the way marriage is called into question. Through it, norms — and how people reflect on and evoke them — are at play. As Carsten suggested, relatedness is also about rupture, jealousy and hard times. This volume aims at looking at the diversity of how marriage — made and unmade — is talked about, claimed, performed, and disputed in practice.

Marriage in Central Asia

Over the past two decades, Central Asia (illustrated in this volume by case studies from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the Uyghur region in Xinjiang, China) has experienced rapid social changes linked to the marketisation of its economy

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and waves of international migrations to Russia, South Korea, Turkey, and to a lesser extent, Europe, the Gulf countries or the United States. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, most Central Asians have also been living under authoritarian regimes since the breakup of the Soviet Union or, in the case of Xinjiang, since the Chinese state's increasingly severe and far-reaching exercise of power in the region. As alluded to previously, the rapid development of international migrations since the late 1990s has deeply affected marriage and family relations (Roche, 2017), spreading families over vast territories. ICT (information and communication technology) such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Odnoklassniki digital apps which allow cheap calls have become "the social glue for migrant transnationalism" facilitating families' communication and social interaction (Vertovec, 2004). In the meantime, migrations have also contributed to the weakening of the hitherto widely practised patrivirilocal residence (and to possible intergenerational mutual aid), as well as to a rising number of separations (divorce, repudiation, de facto separation). The number of single-parent families and of re-marriages — such as in polygynous unions — have also increased and lead to new relational arrangements inside kinship circles. Moreover, particular religious ideas and practices as well as discussions about homosexuality and gender equality have begun to circulate more broadly. The increased contact between Central Asians and other parts of the Muslim world, the significant influence of Russians and Han Chinese on the region, and the sway of development agencies and NGOs, have — voluntarily or not — spread alternative family models, ideals and values as well as ideas about how marriages should be concluded (McBrien, 2006; Ibañez-Tirado, 2016; Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev, 2016; Steenberg and Uyghur, this volume). For example, regular contact with particular modes of Russian life seems to have impacted people's views on family relations and marriage arrangements, leading to an increase in non-marital cohabitation (Agadjanian, Dommaraju and Nedoluzhko, 2013). Marriage, cohabitation, child-rearing, and care-giving continue to transform and to be transformed.

In this context of accelerated social changes, the revival of certain marital practices is also under question: public debates question the legitimacy and legality of polygynous relations, which may be disqualified as second-class marriages (Kasymova, 2006; Cleuziou, 2016; Thibault, 2017). The same goes for bride abduction (Werner, 2009). Both have also prompted parliamentary debates about their legitimacy, and, in the case of polygyny, its possible legalisation in contexts where they have been tolerated despite a legal ban (Kasymova, 2006; Werner, 2009; Beyer, 2016; McBrien, 2020). In Xinjiang, state repression of Muslim marriages, as part of a general policy of total control over the region, has led to major changes in the way weddings are now celebrated. Against

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the backdrop of these tensions and changes, conceptions such as tradition, authenticity, nationalism and modernity are being disputed. Controlling one's territory through marriage restrictions was also a national issue in Tajikistan, for example, when incidents of Chinese men marrying Tajik women to access land was widely discussed as an issue of "national survival".

Neo-familialist values regarding gender and family promoted at the state level have also significantly shaped Central Asian narratives about marriage over the last decade. Conservative views on marriage are seen as a safeguard for what is often locally pictured as traditional families (Megoran, 1999; Cleuziou and Direnberger, 2016; Suyarkulova, 2016; Ismailbekova, 2017). At the same time many of the states look suspiciously at the current rise of marriage expenses enabled by migration remittances and access to wider consumption (Roche and Hohmann, 2011; Gudeman and Hann, 2015; Trevisani, 2016; Hardenberg, 2017; Cleuziou, 2019). They have tried to regulate marriage expenses, through national laws (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) or pressure enforced at the local level (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan) with varying effects. Though presented as being in the name of people's well-being and of the country's development, marriage regulations become tools for the state not only to frame people's private life, but also to control how they demonstrate their socioeconomic status and, possibly, how they gain prestige and political support through festive and social networking. Certainly, marriage celebrations add to the performance of social stratification. Understandings of marriage as a civil institution and as a moment of sociability are competing, yet both are enmeshed in an attempt to legitimise a position, a status, in relation or in opposition to one another.

As mentioned earlier, Central Asians use various terms to refer to marriage, and different regimes of definition — Islamic, civil, customary– intervene in people's understanding of marriage. Some of the terms are exclusively dedicated to a marriage union: *nikoh*/*nike* is used only to describe marriage. Yet, while the term has historically come from Islamic law, people do not only refer to Muslim ceremonies while using it. Other terms that describe marriage are also used in varied contexts: "Z.A.G.S." is an abbreviation that refers to (formerly Soviet) civil registration in general and can also be applied to the registration of birth and death. *Tuy/toy* are terms used for different sorts of festive celebrations (circumcision feast, birth banquet, etc.) which often occur at home but increasingly take place in specially constructed, elaborately decorated halls.

Even when these terms are used to refer to different aspects of getting married, the rituals in practice may be much less distinct than the terms imply and the process of getting married is much more ambiguous. "Z.A.G.S." which often refers to the civil registration of the marriage, can also entail a distinct moment

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when the young couple wanders in botanical gardens or near monuments to arouse so-called spontaneous photographs. Yet this touring of picturesque places can also "happen" during the customary celebration referred to as *tuy/toy*. Marriage separations too are also characterised by fluidity and ambiguity: "repudiation", *taloq/talak*, may be used as a substitute for "divorce", while the latter is rarely translated in local languages. The Russian term *razvod* is usually used to describe civil divorce but, once again, in certain contexts people use it to describe *de facto* separation (for example, when a migrant man stays in Russia and cuts all links with his spouse and family). In the same manner, it may be difficult to tell the cost of marriage or its starting point, since all sorts of exchange and sociability punctuate the period between betrothal and the birth of the first child. Marriage is constantly enmeshed is other celebrations and daily activities, which make the delineation of marriage itself difficult to pin down.

While some scholarship on marriage in Central Asia has examined demographic aspects of marriage and fertility (Agadjanian, 1999; Agadjanian and Makarova, 2003; Dommaraju and Agadjanian, 2008; Clifford, Falkingham and Hinde, 2010; Agadjanian, Dommaraju and Nedoluzhko, 2013; Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian, 2015), the majority of the literature produced in the post-Soviet period[2] has largely followed two trends — those which examine state ideology, economic changes and national politics and those that investigate individual and familial marriage strategies. Abashin has, for example, explored how Soviet-style rituals were reinterpreted locally (Abashin, 2015) and the role of marriage expenses in creating bonds of mutual indebtedness (Abashin, 1999). Roche and Hohmann (2011) have examined marriage rituals in Tajikistan to explore people's endeavours to maintain marriage practices viewed as a performance of one's identity and belonging to one's community, despite state law and ideology. Trevisani (2016) approached marriage in Uzbekistan as a site for exploring growing contentions between socioeconomic differentiations and community solidarity in the context of authoritarian regime and market economy. Meanwhile, work by Werner (1998, 2000) has looked variously at economic exchange in marriage in Kazakhstan and at the role of state-level patriarchal discourses in the rise of incidences of bride abduction in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

2 For a review of the ways Soviet ethnography approached family and marriage, see the volume edited by T. Dragadze (1984), as well as the introduction by S. Roche to the edited volume *Family in Central Asia. New perspectives* (2017) and the contribution of S. Abashin (2017) in the same volume.

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Others have focused on marriage strategies at the family and individual levels: Cleuziou (2016, 2017, 2019) has argued that marriage in Tajikistan is both a constraining institution in the realm of gender norms and a possibly enabling practice for women who want to achieve socioeconomic integration, through the performance of socially expected gender roles and economic transfers. Ismailbekova (2015, 2019) has analysed marriage strategies among Uzbeks in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) as substitutes for state institutions when the latter fail to ensure people's protection and security in times of conflicts. Yet, she shows that in a patriarchal context where preserving honour may be more important than physical protection, women's *actual* security in marriage was not the main goal; marriage served to reshape ethnic and national barriers. In a recent contribution, Roche, Torno and Kazemi (2020) demonstrate that early marriages reflect conscious strategies to "repair" families in times of conflict and secure the continuity of lineages. All authors see marriage strategies as crucial sites to understand kinship patterns, gender norms and social change more broadly.

Marriage in Central Asia thus comes into being through these tangled webs of relations making it a rather elusive object. It is a recurring political topic, discussed by the government, debated in parliaments, talked about by different political parties, and contested by varied publics. It is likewise an intimate social practice, a way of making kin, a means of economic support and exchange, and a source of sanctioned social arrangements of sex, cohabitation and child-rearing. In short, it frames very different forms of relatedness, family models and social positions. It is legitimated by different regimes of power — Islam, the state, or local social network — and is claimed differently in different situations.

Therefore, rather than taking marriage as an objectifiable entity, we approach marriage in ways that acknowledge this diversity and the contextuality of its understanding and stakes, and that explore the complex networks of relations, which contribute to making it happen in specific contexts. Just as recent kinship studies have done, we focus on practices rather than ideal types, disconnecting marriage from narrow, often normative, definitions. We suggest that marriage may be the name of many different relations, meanings and practices in Central Asia.

The diversity of relations bundled under the term marriage in Central Asia is revealed exactly at the moment when marriages are contested. Marriage negotiations, for example, often do not aim to contest the marriage itself but to negotiate the other relations which marriage reasserts: young people may try to have the marriage they desire personally as opposed to the arranged order often orchestrated by their parents (Roche, 2014); poorer families may try to

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perform lavish ceremonies like the elite despite their lack of resources in order to gain prestige, even when it means trespassing national laws (Borisova); women may negotiate second marriages as a way of accessing better status *as* women and negotiate more balanced power relations with their husbands and in-laws (Cieśleswka; Cleuziou). These few examples illustrate how Central Asian marriages actualise power relations and implement social stratification between different categories of people, between those married and unmarried, between those who can get married and those who cannot, between those who can chose to marry in a specific way and those who cannot, etc. (Trevisani). However, they also show that marriage can be an enabling practice through which individuals negotiate their gendered, aged, or classed position, for example, vis-a-vis those who assert authority over them. In other words, getting married implies various situated relations and strategies that our aim in this special issue is to interpret. To paraphrase H. Moore (1988), as soon as one considers a sociological phenomenon as a strategy, one has to consider that it is not a strategy accessible to all; therefore, we must attend to the manner in which it creates social stratification.

Thinking Ahead

Marriage in Central Asia thus appears in this volume as a flexible practice, built through a web of relations that extend beyond those between marriage partners and their immediate kin. The following articles explore marriage as it is created through these relations and show that connections with domineering states (Borisova; Steenberg and Uyghur,), the flexible work regimes, circular labour migration, and consumption patterns induced by contemporary capitalism (Cieślewska; Cleuziou; Trevisani), combined with the decline of welfare support (Cleuziou) and political resistance movements (Steenberg and Uyghur) are particularly forceful in impacting the forms and functions that marriage takes in Central Asia today. These connections often place restrictions on, or challenges to, the ways in which marriage as a relational practice between neighbours and kin, prospective bride and groom, and romantic partners might emerge (all papers). We also see novel sets of relations — like those within firms and among co-workers (Trevisani) — impacting the shape of marriages across the region. In at least two of the articles, marriage also overlaps in significant ways with non-marital relations (Cleuziou) and the boundaries between marital and non-marital relations (Cieślewska; Cleuziou) grow unclear. Finally, we see that these quandaries arise, in part as a result of conflicting moral registers and their connected material situations, through

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which actors must navigate (Borisova; Steenberg and Uyghur; Trevisani). Making a choice for a certain kind of marriage, pushing it towards a certain form, or sometimes leaving it ambiguously hanging between both, can be a way to deal with this (Cleuziou).

Yet marriage at the same time is, in many ways, a relational practice like no other in Central Asia. Despite its flexibility in form and function, and its, at times, congruence with non-marriage, marriage paradoxically retains its saliency in the region. The articles in this volume demonstrate this. By focusing on the act of getting married they are able to reveal the quandaries involved in the process and explore exactly how and when actors move to stabilise marriage and pin it down, often choosing one form or function over the other.

In several papers, the state and its interventions in marriage play a dominant role. It is notable for its unwanted absence in some papers (Cieślewska; Cleuziou) when its intervention in social support and marriage regulation were in fact desired. When the state does intervene, however, it often does so to constrain the manner of marriage celebration, limiting the ability to live up to community expectation (Borisova) or thwarting modes of marriage celebration important in practices of (political) belonging (Steenberg and Uyghur). The state's somewhat contradictory relationship to capital in Tajikistan — criticising and restricting its incumbent consumption practices on the one hand while embracing the dismantling of welfare inherent in its neoliberalising tendencies on the other — forces conflict in Tajikistanis' marriage choices (Borisova; Cleuziou).

Capitalism itself is also a powerful force in the papers for the way it influences modes of marriage celebration (Borisova; Steenberg and Uyghur; Trevisani), challenges old ties of solidarity and affect (Trevisani), and, through flexible labour regimes and migration, cultivates new contacts between people which sometimes lead to novel (non)marital relations (Cieślewska; Cleuziou; Trevisani). Interestingly, whereas the effect of capitalism on marriage in the papers is ambiguous — sometimes criticised for its deleterious effects (Cleuziou; Trevisani) while at other times implicitly embraced through grandiose displays of consumption (Borisova; Steenberg and Uyghur; Trevisani) — the state presents it as rather uniformly negative. It is an absent actor at best (Cieślewska; Cleuziou; Trevisani) and a (violently) constraining force at worse (Borisova; Steenberg and Uyghur).

The papers show that when the state in Central Asia attempts to define marriage and the way in which it is concluded, it is often resisted and avoided (Cieślewska; Cleuziou); models which come from kin, neighbours, and community crystalise in these moments of contestation (Borisova; Steenberg and

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Uyghur). The papers also reveal that the extreme uncertainty that characterises many Central Asians' daily lives — brought about by the retreat of the welfare state, the impact of labour migration on families, and the financial hardship of contemporary capitalism — also provokes actors to rely on marriage as a coping mechanism, implicitly forcing a definitional assertion.

Marriage quandaries, and the pressing force towards resolution, arise over material circumstances (Cleuziou; Trevisani) but also over ideational ones, in which Central Asians must choose between, carefully navigate through, or anxiously balance in the tension between conflicting moral registers (Borisova; Cieślewska). It is precisely because marriage emerges as a relational practice between kin, neighbours, the state, global capital, co-workers, religious precepts, political compatriots, or foreigners, to name a few highlighted in these papers — in short because it is a flexible practice moulded by, as it moulds, its socio-political and economic *milieu* — that marriage takes the forms it does in contemporary Central Asia. This volume highlights three of those: marriage in, through and against the state; marriage as coping with uncertainty; and marriage and conflicting moral registers.

Marriage in, though, and against the State

Elena Borisova's paper, which opens this volume, presents Farkhod's dilemma. Farkhod, a Tajik singer, is forced to evaluate and balance the demands of a new state law regarding marriage ceremonies, which renders illegal acts he regards as valuable and essential for maintaining relations with, and his reputation among, his local community. Farkhod is ready to trespass the law to meet community expectations, despite his personal opinion and the risk of severe sanctions. His own profession as a wedding singer is linked to a certain idea of marriage that does not match that which the Tajikistani state puts forward. Borisova explores how the restrictive law on ritual expenses in Tajikistan penetrates narratives and practices of getting married, generating "multiple moral and practical dilemmas." In Farkhod's struggles over what kind of wedding to organise for his daughter, marriage comes into being through a set of sometimes conflicting relations with the state, kin, and wider social networks.

Rune Steenberg and Musapir's[3] piece illustrates an even more violent and imbalanced confrontation between communities' logics and the state, and more precisely between Uyghur people in Xinjiang (China) and the Chinese party-state. The paper discusses the complex linkages between marriage,

3 A pseudonym for an Uyghur scholar.

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commodification, state policy and religious piety in Uyghur society over the past decade. In response to the state-lead marketisation of the economy and the concomitant commodification of marriage ceremonies — parts of the state's broader ambition to "integrate" and Sinicise the Xinjiang province — Uyghur nationalism has encouraged the demonstration of ethnic markers and religious piety during marriage ceremonies. In turn, beginning in 2017, the Chinese state launched an offensive policy of "modernisation" which has included violent attacks against the population, henceforth systematically threatened with imprisonment or detention in labour camps when it does not conform to atheist or Han-type cultural demonstrations. Here, marriage as a site of both capitalist expansion and state intervention becomes a battle ground upon which an ethnic community struggles for survival while it simultaneously remains a ritual act through which individual and familial desires and plans for relatedness are worked out.

Both papers explore situations in which the State tries to enforce its authority through coercive regulation of marriage and wedding celebrations. In both case studies, State policy particularly targets Islamic symbolism on the one hand and the conspicuous expenses on the other, seen as sites of impossible control and political contestations. The two papers also show that people's efforts to meet the expectations of the community at marriage ceremonies often outweigh the risks of the laws — without completely neglecting the latter. Marriage crystalises in these interactions with the state and becomes a source of belonging, a mode or resistance, or primarily about kin and neighbourly relations.

Marriage as Coping with Uncertainty

Other papers show that marriage becomes a means to negotiate uncertain environments. Ismailbekova's work (2015; 2017; 2019) on Kyrgyzstan has demonstrated how post-conflict management also has to do with changing marriage strategies into strengthening ethnic (and assumed as safer) community ties. In this volume, both Tommaso Trevisani's and Juliette Cleuziou's papers address the issue of uncertainty, brought about by the decline of the welfare state, rising poverty, and precarious employment, in different contexts. In his article on marriage among workers in a steel factory, Trevisani explores the meaning and the understanding of marriage and partnership in the context of Kazakhstan's shifting industrial landscape. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, steel workers in Karaganda have faced a new form of labour organisation that emphasises profitability and flexibility and has led to the deterioration of the

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workers' status as well as of their working conditions. These shifts in the steel plant have profoundly affected marriage strategies and their gradual detachment from labour relations to which, prior to 1991, were intrinsically entangled. Now, workers seem to have a narrow choice between full commitments to the shop floor combined with unstable marital lives, or more family-oriented lives that generate obligations of reciprocity — but only outside of the factory and which reassert their work status at the bottom of the scale.

Marriage thus becomes for them a coping strategy. While for corporate workers imbued with Soviet-Russian culture, marriage should be a relatively frugal affair, even a utilitarian celebration, thereby valuing work as a means of accumulating savings and wealth, contract workers of rural origin spend considerable amounts of money on their marriage despite very low wages. In the former case, marriage is an individual arrangement that can bring some relief and support in the workers' daily lives; in the latter, lower class workers see the celebration of marriage as an opportunity to strengthen their ethnic identification and family network. In all marriage has become an actively differentiating practice among workers, whose flexibility seems to reflect and adjust to the flexibility required in places where financial capitalism strongly determines employment opportunities.

Uncertain socioeconomic and political environments may increase the uncertainty of marriage itself and increase the number of separations and divorces. In this context, Cleuziou's paper shows how women may also use marriage flexibility (or even its indeterminacy) as a coping strategy. She presents the case of two women who experienced multiple and diverse situations of marriage in Tajikistan. Through the cases, Cleuziou illustrates the range of motivations and actors involved in marriage processes, but also the various understandings of what being married means to women. Marriage and marriage-like relationships are not always easy to differentiate and people often play on these ambiguities. The diversity of experiences shows that, in the eyes of many women, marriage is primarily a relational practice used to legitimate one's social position in situations where their reputation — if not survival — is at stake. Moreover, this diversity shows that, although marriage is a pivotal element in the reproduction of a patriarchal ideology in Central Asian societies, it is also often a female affair, in which women promote and negotiate coercive gender norms.

In contemporary Tajikistan, uncertainty characterises not only the marital relationship itself, but also a general social environment, which, paradoxically, the practice of multiple marriages aims to navigate. The repetition of marriage over a life course is a strategy to stabilise life in the context of uncertainty, but it also produces and reflects an increased differentiation between women

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who may or may not have access to (re)marriage, depending on the resources (family, economic, educational, etc.) available to them. In the end, despite the variety in form (the way a marriage is concluded) and meaning (what people expect from a marriage), marriage acts as a "label" to authorise specific forms of existence, subjectivity and family while discrediting others. Thereby marriage emerges as a site of resilience, and often as a response to the failure of a (previous) marriage. The increasing instability of marital relationships in the region has encouraged people to experience other forms of intimacy and partnership than canonical marriage, where remarriage may become a (temporary) consequence of a failed (previous) marriage. To a certain extent, this flexibility of marriage as a "solution" to its own uncertainty has encouraged polygynous unions in the region, despite their legal prohibition (see Cleuziou, 2016; Commercio, 2020; Cieślewska, 2020).

Marriage and Conflicting Registers of Morality

Farkhod, the main "character" in Borisova's paper, is torn by moral dilemmas when organising his daughter's wedding. In his eyes, he cannot jeopardise this opportunity to present himself as a thoughtful father and a moral person, even if it is contrary to his will to respect the law. Borisova charts the ways in which getting married and the events organised for its celebration are linked to Farkhod's ideas of modernity, tradition, and being a moral person. Marriage as a place of moral fulfilment also appears in Cleuziou's paper, where women feel the failure of marriage as a denial of their own existence, of their right to be in a family and to find themselves "useful". Their claim to the right to remarry reinforces *and* challenges gender norms that equate femininity with "*kelin*-hood" ("being a daughter-in-law"), motherhood and domesticity. In fact, most women who have experienced separation or who have subsequently worked aspire not only to remarry, but also to lifestyles and even sexuality that are more emancipated from traditional family norms.

In Anna Cieślewska's article, the moral dimension of marriage intersects with the intimacy and cultural variations of what marriage represents. The author describes the emotional and social burden created by multiple partnership across borders in the context of migration. Through examples of assumed transnational polygyny, the author investigates the tensions between an ideal family type (here, defined as the possibility for a Tajik man to marry several women) and the practical reality of emotions and economics of polygyny in the context of international migration. As Cieślewska demonstrates, marriage to a Russian or a Tajik woman is not only experienced differently by the men,

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it also holds different meanings for them, resulting in variant expectations, desires, needs and relationships. This also holds true for the Tajik and Kyrgyz women the author met in Moscow and who were seeking significant improvement in their life through repeated marriage unions. These tensions can lead to moral dilemmas for the partners involved and deeply affect their psychological well-being. Beyond this, the men are confronted with expectations back home. Intimate relationships between Central Asian men and Russian women are topics of concerns for the men's families. They fear that their relative will forget his family, his marital duties, and his obligation to facilitate access to the resources, networks, and income they need to build a more stable life in Tajikistan. If contradictory principles may generate suffering, they also reflect "desires under reform," as C. Osella has termed it (1995). Here, the possibility of experiencing romantic love, often promoted as a superior form of relationship, lays often in stark contrast to socially framed emotions, and the familial expectations that area a large part of migrants' lives.

As stated at the beginning, our intention is not to set a final definition of marriage, neither in Central Asia nor generally. This issue aims to provide detailed and nuanced accounts of what marriage does to people and what people do with it, and how marriage emerges as a relational practice. Marriage in Central Asia emerges not just from relations between two families, but from a whole network of personal, intimate, political, economic and social relations. When it is contested, major societal issues are at stake as important as: the perpetuation of community and resistance to coercive power; resilience in the face of an uncertain environment, which reinforces social distinctions; personal fulfilment and moral achievement in the context of conflicting norms. Marriage is thus central to individual, family and social reproduction, even as, or perhaps because, it remains flexible and hard to pin down.

In this context, we see that "kinning" practices lean towards the expansion and perpetuation of existing (models of) kin relations through marriage and the affinity connections it establishes. These kinship relations, and the particular forms they take, play an important role in the capacity of people to resist, negotiate and adapt to current political and socioeconomic transformation.

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