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A Woman's Marriage to the Quran

An Anthropological Perspective from Pakistan

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Abstract. – This article analyzes the "marriage" of women to the Quran as is found in some parts of Pakistan. Against the commonly held utilitarian views of such marriages being devised to deny women their rights of inheritance, it is proposed that the issue should be conceived as a particular aspect of general affinal values which are overshadowed by the cultural prescription of hypergamy. Whereas marriage to the Quran is disapproved by "textual Islam," the regionally "practiced Islam" may even add a religious coverage to the extent that the brides of the holy book attain a sacred status. The cultural logic of "Quran marriage" is not unique to the limited world of Muslims in South Asia, since comparable arrangements, such as the "wedding" celebrated between a Catholic novice and Jesus Christ, are known from other regions and religions. *[Pakistan, Quran, regional forms of Islam, marriage, affinity]*

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Introduction

Marriage to the Quran, called *haq bakhshi*, is sometimes practiced in the provinces Sindh and Punjab of Pakistan. In the presence of her close family members, like her mother, her father, or her brothers and sisters, a woman will be placing her hand onto the book to dedicate her life to the service and recital of the Holy Quran rather than ever marrying a human being. Such unions mostly take place among the Syed, assumed to be the descendents of the Holy Prophet's family through Fatima, His daughter. At times, other *biradaries* (i.e., caste, clan, or tribal groupings) of relatively high socioeconomic status follow this lead. Thus the *Friday Times* of Pakistan wrote in a report titled "Married to the Quran":

…, a large number of feudals in Sindh had married their daughters to the Quran. The ceremony took place after the girl of the family was asked to take a bath, after which a Quran was put before her as the men folk apologised to her for the ritual which would condemn the girl never to get married but to read the Quran every day. In Sindh, MPA[1] Shabbir Shah's sister, ex-minister Murad Shah's sister and two daughters, three daughters of Mir[2] Awwal Shah of Matiari, daughters and sisters of Sardar[3] Dadan and Nur Khan of the Lund tribe, nieces of Sardar Ghulam of Mahar tribe, and the daughters of the Pir[4] of Bharchundi Sharif, were all married to the Quran … (Mazhar 2003).[5]

Significantly, all Quran marriages mentioned are either those of Syed families carrying the title "Shah," or of regionally prominent families of a high status by birth. *Asharq Alawsat*, a leading Arabic international newspaper, writes on Quran marriages that "[a]ccording to independent sources in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, approximately 10,000 girls are

1 An MPA is a "Member of the Provincial Assembly."
2 A *mir* is a feudal leader in Sindh.
3 A *sardar* is a tribal leader of Baloch or Sindhi people.
4 A *pir* is a Muslim saint in South Asia.
5 See there for more.

married to the Quran in the Sindh province" (Al Shafey 2007). The same article of the daily, *Asharq Alawsat*, also reports a very interesting case:

> In Karachi, the capital of the Sindh province, it was reported that a girl was married to the Quran; however, she later fell pregnant and gave birth to a child. … She claimed that she did not know what had happened. In the eyes of the locals, she was similar to the Virgin Mary and people would visit the newborn for blessings, treatment, and to be closer to God (Al Shafey 2007).

Perhaps the newspaper has exaggerated the numbers of such marriages and probably dramatized the weddings and related details. However, marriages to the Quran do exist empirically, though reliable data on them are hard to obtain, because they constitute a sensitive subject. The questions addressed by this article relate to the content of such a marriage, being the result of a social decision, and to the reasons leading to such alternatives. Are these marriages arranged out of greed, as is often perceived or interpreted by the media and the educated urban public, or should they rather be seen as an outcome of the sociocultural system in this part of the world? Related to the answer will be the observation of the sacred character that is subsequently attributed to the women who have been married to the Quran.

In common opinion, a woman's marital link to the holy book is the result of a family's miserliness, i.e., the intention to save the real estate and other property from being transferred to outsiders. Such materialistic arguments, however, are based upon insufficient reasoning, since they fail to explain, why a brother or a father, endowed with the final responsibility for such a marriage, would suddenly become a hardened materialist towards his female relative. In this kinship-based society, the very cornerstone of any family is the cordial and extremely close relationship between a sister and her brother. An aspect of this self-understood proximity is the fact that sisters or daughters would usually not claim their inheritance of any immobile property. Accordingly, the argument based upon a policy of avoiding such a loss does not make sense.

In fact, marrying the Quran is a possible sociocultural alternative in order to cope with a regular side effect of the kinship system, as it is practiced in Punjab and Sindh. The people of these two Pakistani provinces prefer to marry within their respective *biradaries* (i.e., caste, clan, or tribal groupings) and, at the same time, they conceive a hypergamous relationship between the two sides involved. In combination, these two value ideas imply that women are either given to men of equal status, for which only those of the own *biradary*[6] can possibly qualify, or else to men of a *biradary* assumed to be of a relatively higher status. As in most other regions of South Asia, a woman must never marry a man whose status by birth is lower than her own. If the norm was broken, all families involved in such deviant marriages would lose their honour within their own brotherhood and among other neighbours and acquaintances. Any two individuals who, as higher-status bride and as lower-status groom, would dare to contract such a marriage on their own, were bound to be killed by relatives of the bride for the sake of her honour. Every year many of such so-called "honour killings" are witnessed in Pakistan. They indicate a failure of regular proceedings. A marriage to the Quran is another possible way out of such a systemic crisis, because an ordinary marriage of the bride is avoided altogether. The phrase applied, *haque bakhshi*, may be translated as a woman's "withdrawal from the right to marry." The very same inefficiency of the established system may lead to other alternatives, such as marital unions between two partners whose age discrepancy is all too obvious, being contracted after a suitable bridegroom could not be found within the own or a higher *biradary*. By comparison, a woman's wedding to the Quran is a more honourable alternative. The status of her family will be maintained, since others tend to accept the explanation of the woman's refusal to marry any man at all or of her overwhelming desire to serve God by such outstanding dedication.

Marriages to the Quran cannot be understood in isolation. They must be seen as one aspect of a comprehensive sociocultural complex that includes features which Europeans would attribute to the domains of law, house-holding, social security, physical security, and religion in its form as "practiced" Islam. The concept of affinity should thus be understood within the particular set of socioculturals values of Punjabis and Sindhis. At the same time, my argument should not be misunderstood as a justification or a condemnation, as approval or as disapproval, but rather as an exercise in sociocultural analysis, irrespective of any moral considerations by outsiders.

Since such Quran weddings constitute a highly sensitive subject, no direct interviews of the concerned women or their family members could be conducted. However, I have talked at length to female and male Syeds of whom some were my students at the university. Most of the other data come from my fieldwork in a Punjabi village which I

6 *Biradary* may be literally translated as brotherhood or an association of brothers.

have named Misalpur and visited regularly since the 1990s. Extensive debates on the subject also involved colleagues, friends, and the general public of urban and rural Pakistan as well as neighbours in my own village, situated in central Punjab.

Greed! The Common Utilitarian Explanation

As mentioned above, Quran marriages are commonly seen as being "devised to deny women their rights of inheritance and out of fear of property being passed on to outsiders through the daughters or sisters [to their spouses or children]" (Al-Shafey 2007). Another highly critical comment comes from Aftab Hassan Khan who was born, raised, and educated in Sindh but now lives in the Netherlands. He writes about Sindhi women:

> However primitive it may sound – however primitive it is – it is very easy for a Sindhi to declare his sister, daughter or wife as shameful, and thus opt to kill her … when ever there is a monetary, land, property related or other petty dispute, many unscrupulous persons use their sisters, wives, mothers or even daughters as a tools to have upper hand in settlement of the dispute. …
>
> It is also a common practice in Sindh to marry one's daughter to inanimate and holy objects, like the Quran, or even a tree, for example. … The main purpose behind this inhuman act is to avoid the transfer of land property out of family hands at the time of marriage of their daughter or sister (Khan 2009).

This second reference in particular is an example of the widespread views which I criticize. The author portrays Sindhi males as inhumane and greedy, ever ready to kill their sisters, mothers, and daughters for money or land. His undifferentiated interpretation raises the question of plausibility. If Sindhi and Punjabi men were, as he describes them to be, they could facilitate procedures by killing their daughters and sisters at birth or even before the girls were born? In reality, the kinship-based Punjabi and Sindhi societies conceive the sister–brother bond as the central or nuclear relationship of their entire social system (see Chaudhary 2008: 137–156). A Quran marriage for the sake of wealth, or to prevent immobile property from being transferred to another family, may go well with the callousness of commonsensical reasoning, but fails to explain why and under what circumstances the family involved would be ready to sacrifice a sister, i.e., what – to a man – is the dearest person in the world.

As it has been established by various authors (Ali 1997: 220; Chaudhary 2008: 137–156) daughters or sisters in the two eastern provinces of Pakistan do not claim their immobile inheritance in any case, so a male interest in their property, leading to their Quran marriages, must be ruled out. In Misalpur, inhabited by more than nine thousand people, only two sisters of two different men actually claimed their inherited share of land. The situation is not different in other villages or regions of Pakistan, as far as I could find out from my respondents. From 1947 onwards, as Shaheen S. Ali discovered, very few women in the whole country approached the superior courts for the protection of their inheritance rights in spite of the fact that they "met with a very positive response" (Ali 1997: 220) from the courts. The particular reasons for women not to claim their immobile patrimony are discussed in another article by Chaudhary (2010).

If empirical data are to be the basis of an argument, the fact that in most cases only one or very few among all women of a family are married to the Quran should also be a relevant point because then the question arises why such marriages are singular. Why are the other women of a family not threatening to take the property of their male relatives, i.e., those married in the ordinary manner? According to the same line of reasoning, another standard argument relates to the common practice of cousin marriage, also said to exclude disputes over land inheritance. The absurdity of the latter view becomes obvious when one considers the fact that most property conflicts in the Punjab are those between cousins and other close relatives (Chaudhary 1999: 41–84). Both observations, singular marriages and cousin conflicts, similarly exclude utilitarian motives on behalf of those responsible for marrying their daughter or sister to the Quran, just as they rule out any other assumed "cause" in isolation. The issue must be approached by a more comprehensive debate on affinal relations in Pakistan.

Marriage

Though marriage appears to be a human universal, a good number of anthropological efforts have tried to define the institution, of which just two will be mentioned as an introduction. The brief one conceives "the union of man and woman such that the children born from the woman are recognized as legitimate" (Zonabend 1996: 350), whereas the extended definition refers to

> a culturally approved relationship of one man and one woman (monogamy); or of one man and two or more women (polygyny/polygamy), in which sexual inter-

course is usually endorsed between the opposite sex partners, and there is generally an expectation that children will be born of the union and enjoy the full birth status rights of their society (Oppong 1989: 488).

However, such definitions will hardly suffice, since several types of marriages, as practiced nowadays, remain beyond their scope, such as lesbian or the gay marriages in several Western countries, or the little-known ghost marriage, as is contracted by the widow of a Nuer man without heir or by a sister on behalf of her deceased brother if he has no progeny (Evans-Pritchard 1951 quoted in Zonabend 1996: 351). Modern reproductive technology has also developed new dimensions within the institution. Important aspects and functions, like the reproductive one, are not covered by the above definitions. We hear, for example, about widows being impregnated by the preserved semen of their late husband, or of women allowing their womb to be utilized by others who are unable to survive or carry out a pregnancy. Discussions over marriages to the Quran, in fact, refer to just one of numerous legitimate alternatives to the standard union of a woman and a man who may become socially recognized parents of children.

The point to emphasize is the obvious fact that the universal includes an uncountable number of formal variations. Marriage norms – and their legitimate alternatives – differ greatly from one society to the other, as has been shown in the major researches of the discipline's earlier phases. Anthropologists[7] focused their inquiries on incest, exogamy, endogamy, polygyny, monogamy, and the exchange of goods and services in the course of a marriage. For Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]) the marital exchange of women created alliances between men as the very heart of the kinship system and indeed of society as such. Exogamy and the incest rules were the most dynamic aspects of making humanity social. Such an "out-marriage" is based on the principle of reciprocity. Men exchange women for women, be it directly or indirectly, circular or delayed. Most frequently, the "gift" of a woman is not donated by an individual but rather presented by a collective "side" consisting of both women and men. In technical terms such "sides" are referred to as "wife givers" and "wife takers" and their status too differs greatly from one society to the next, just as the kind of valuables and services transferred in the course of a marriage, and the direction of their flow, is varied in many different ways. A man may also change his residence to live where his new wife was born, or shift regularly to and fro, unless he stays where he was born or, together with his wife, founds a new home.

Keeping in mind this general focus on the variations of marital exchange, we need to remember that the ideas concerning marriage in most parts of Pakistan emphasize "in-marriage" rather than exogamy or "marrying out." The limits to such rules of endogamy are only set by the Mosaic Laws of all Abrahamic religions which strictly exclude sexual contacts with a person's sibling and with any close relative of an adjoining generation. While honouring such incest prohibitions, the general principle of Pakistanis seems to be a clear preference for "close" marriages. The nearer a relative, the more suitable he or she will be for a marriage. Accordingly, a person's union with a child of any one of his or her parents' siblings is generally preferred in Pakistan, though such a preference does not exclude other considerations. Issues of the economy and the personal relations with the relative concerned, or the individual preferences of the principals may be taken into account. If no match is found in the most preferred category, the next ring of relatives is considered and such a perspective is further maintained. As far as gifts and services are concerned, i.e., "prestations" in anthropological jargon, the Pakistanis of Punjab and Sindh transfer a dowry, whereas those of Balochistan and the former North-West Frontier Province pay a bride-price. A very elaborate system of gift exchange, called *vartan bhanja*, is a normative feature of any Punjabi marriage, just as the principle of hypergamy marks the status of wife givers as lower than that of the wife receivers.

Such regularities in Pakistan's eastern provinces add to the vast variety of marriage types found around the globe. The customs of one society may be exotic and strange to the members of the other groups, though some usages may be more common, and hence less exotic, than others. Customs that are mutually "exotic" must not necessarily belong to relatively remote and distant cultures, they may equally be found among neighbouring peoples. Pakistani Punjabis, for example, find the idea of a bride-price and or a bride service, as is practiced by Pakistani Pushtoons, to be rather incomprehensible. Similarly, I remember the marriage customs that involve sending certain types of invitations, receiving guests, or exchanging prestations as varying significantly between the different *biradaries* of Rajput, Arain, Jat, and Gujar who would all inhabit the same Punjabi village. The members of one *biradary* ridiculed the customs of the other groupings and all were speechless, when I told them about lesbian or gay marriages, prolonged cohabitation without

7 E.g., Morgan (1871); Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]); Evans-Pritchard (1951); Radcliffe-Brown (1952); and Leach (1955).

marriage, widows impregnated by their dead husbands, or women who, unable to be pregnant, use the wombs of others to beget children. Under roughly comparable conditions, a marriage to the Quran may initially appear to be exotic. I support the view that:

…, all of these marriage institutions cannot be reduced to rational causes. In each case the particular form of the institution is an essential element of the social system to which it belongs. And, taken in their entirety, they are "the illustration of a series of logical possibilities derived from the application of very simple conceptual principles that appear to us as strange because we have not been able to imagine them for ourselves" (Zonabend 1996: 351).

In my view, a marriage to the Quran is primarily the outcome of the marriage system in the region. The Muslim religious practices have provided a cover for, or have at least tolerated, the establishment or continuation of this custom. Though the Quran marriage may have its economic implications, it has not been designed on account of economic motives. Before offering the detailed argument, some case data may illustrate the general preconditions.

The Relevant Case Data from the Field

Prologue: Though none of the cases involves a marriage to the Quran, they may explain social norms leading to it. The first case will illustrate different factors and strategies, the second coping with the inability of finding a spouse by acquiring a reputation of holiness. The third case introduces the special aspects of the Syed status, the fourth a settlement called Dari where women are married to the Quran.

a) Marriages in Khadam's Family

Summary: Khadam has a brother and four sisters. He is married to his FBD of the paternal side or *dadke*, his younger brother to his MBD of the maternal *nanke*. While one of his sisters is the spouse of his MZS, the other three are married to more distant relatives of his own *biradary*. The two brothers, though of a village background, work as shopkeepers in a city. Their joint family includes the married and unmarried children, three sons of each brother and two daughters of Khadam, but only one of Ashak, the younger brother. The latter married two of his sons to Khadam's two daughters, but no closer relative was available for the third one. Reciprocally, Ashaq's daughter is the wife of one of Khadam's sons, the other being married to an MZD and the third as yet unmarried.

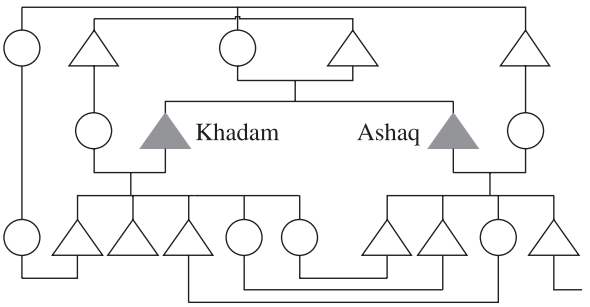

Fig. 1: Marriages in Khadam's family.

Khadam's Explanations

In extended conversations on property transfer, endogamy, genetically caused disorder in marriages among close relatives and on Quran marriages, Khadam confessed his ignorance about any genetic defects caused by cousin marriages, though had he known about them, he would have all the same arranged the marriages between his own and his brother's children. He presented his alternatives between organizing miserable lives for his and his brother's daughters, whom he equated in speech, and, on the other hand, a good life for these daughters that involved the risk of genetic disorders among their children. He opted for the latter and is happy with his choice.

As his major reason for the cousin marriages, Khadam related the bad experiences with the marriages between his sisters and outsiders who were not close relatives. His three sisters live in misery, he said. Their husbands would beat them and fail to give them money for clothes, food, and the necessities of life. In tears he recalled, how one sister had very recently came to him with a diagnosis of suffering from cancer. Her husband had been unwilling to spend any money on her treatment. Accordingly, Khadam and his brother financed the best possible medical tests for their sister and, with due thanks to God, Khadam explained that tuberculosis, not cancer, had been the real illness. While being treated, this sister stayed with him. All of his sisters receive money from him just to meet their day-to-day expenses. After his sisters too had witnessed this experience, the youngest was married to her mother's sister's son who was first trained in the business and then helped in establishing his own shop. Only this sister is leading a normal and happy life, Khadam explained.

His and his brother's daughters' marriages within the very close family were arranged for the same reasons. Khadam mentioned that they were far from beautiful and, as far as he knew about the standards of a modern youth, their chances of finding reasonable husbands were slight beyond the circle of near relatives. The sons, however, and again he meant both his brother's and his own, were good-looking, strong and economically well-off. Had the two brothers not mutually exchanged their daughters in marriage, the two men would definitely not have found equally acceptable sons-in-law.

As his children grew up to reach a marriageable age, he had once calculated the total expenditure for the four marriages that were due at that time, and estimated that the cost would have amounted to half of their business. His younger brother agreed to his suggestions and the two quietly organized the betrothal ceremonies of the concerned children. Khadam explained that these decisions had been far from easy. His own and his brother's wife proved to be the main source of complications. The two belonged to mutually antagonistic categories among their husbands' kinsmen. Khadam's wife was from his paternal family while his brother's wife belonged to their mother's side. Each one of the two wives wanted to retain the close link to the respective stem family at the cost of the husband's equivalent. Khadam's sister-in-law was said to be the biggest barrier. She intensively induced her sons to stage a revolt against the betrothals as planned by their fathers, but failed, because of Khadam's extremely close ties to his nephews. They had seen how fair and caring he had treated them, apparently, loving them more than his own sons and they were wise enough to conceive the consequences of possible refusals. Subsequently, all of these marriages he had arranged were said to be happy which meant that the business prospered.

As to questions of property, all of Khadam's sisters had withdrawn their claims in favour of their brothers whose shops had already been transferred to the sons' names. Daughters, he said, should not get any share. Marriage to the Quran was, as far as Khadam was concerned, a solution of rich people to save the landed property from being transferred through their daughters to other families. Later he confessed that, considering his sisters' fate, he would rather have married his daughters to the Quran than given them to unrelated bridegrooms.

b) The Case of Skina

Skina[8] belonged to a rich farmer *biradary* in Misalpur. Her family, initially a bit choosy, had earlier rejected some proposals and was later unable to find a bridegroom for her in the same *biradary* before she was too old to marry, since she was not very attractive. Under these circumstances, her family declared Skina not to be interested in *dunyari*, i.e., worldly affairs, and thus not wanting to marry at all. Significantly, her status gradually rose to that of a saintly person who provided amulets and advice on fertility related issues to the village women. She was held in great esteem and addressed as Bibi Ji by male and female villagers which is a respectable way of addressing a woman and normally reserved for those of Syed families.

c) Proposals and Marriages Regarding Syed Woman and Non-Syeds

A male relative of my host family in Misalpur fell in love with one of the Syed women in the village. However, the youngster was thoroughly snubbed by his own people, when expressing his desire to marry her: The two families were neighbours and on very good terms. Accordingly, he was told: "How dare you even think of marrying a Bibi or a Syed zadi?"

In another case, an unmarried young Syed woman went along with a non-Syed female friend to visit the latter's family and the host's brother was greatly attracted to her Syed friend, a condition which caused his family to call on the Syed's for a formal proposal. The man wanted to become the husband of his sister's girlfriend. On hearing this message, the latter's brother drew out his gun and threatened to kill his sister before their father and other family members pacified the young man, convincing him to bury the unbelievable proposal as a family secret.

In a third case of a Syed *biradary*, a female law graduate named Naveed fell in love with a Pushtoon colleague. Her Syed family and *biradary* refused to let the two marry, but the couple opted for what is known as a "court marriage" in Pakistan. Later the bride's family decided to accept these facts and arranged the "decent" marriage ritual, though only a very few Syed relatives came to attend the wedding. It is important to mention that the bride's family was without any male members, since the father had died earlier and she had five younger sisters but no brother.

8 This is a fictive name.

d) Dari. A Godly Settlement!

Two students of the Anthropology Department in Islamabad (Quaid-i-Azam University), when involved in fieldwork under my supervision, reported on a rather unusual settlement called Dari in southern Punjab.[9] It had been established by an esteemed Syed who lived in a rather small settlement that was encompassed by a boundary wall. The inhabitants deliberately maintained only minimal contacts with the world beyond. Outsiders who belong to the same religious denomination go there to attend shrines or to take part in certain rituals. Significantly, these visitors of Dari are solicited to donate their children – particularly their daughters – as *khums* or the "5th portion" of one's wealth to be provided as religious alms. These "donated" women are called hurries and they devote themselves to perform certain religious rituals. None of them would ever marry a man. However, most of them are married to the Holy Quran. There were rumors that some would also beget children. The word *dari* may be translated as "the door to paradise." Many shrines have such doors that are also known as *bahishti darwaza*.[10]

Some Comments of Other Respondents

One female Syed respondent mentioned that as an average, at least one woman of every Syed family would not marry. All Syed girls would learn about their fate in the course of their early upbringing, just as they would be introduced to their very strict rules of seclusion (*purdah*), while being aware of their parent's relentless efforts to find husbands for them. If none can be found, they adopt their parents' strategy of declaring not to be interested in marriage. One of the reasons, why Syed women are only married within the closest family circle and not to non-Syeds is said to be *purdah* which implies that they rarely leave their homes and cover themselves strictly while going out. All of this is not done by most of the non-Syed women, so an intermarriage would mean that the entire Syed family violated the *purdah* rules. A number of female students at Quaid-i-Azam University mentioned Quran marriages or non-marriages[11] of women from their areas or villages. The unmarried ones were called Bibi Pak Daman, or "ladies of pure character," Bibi Musala, i.e., "woman of the prayer carpet" and often simply Bibi Ji which implicitly refers to the wives of the Holy Prophet. Like my own data from the village, the students reported weddings of Syed women with much older Syed men or, in some cases, with males many years younger than their respective brides.

Epilogue: Embedding the Cases

The first case study may illustrate normal Muslim Punjabi marriage arrangements. Khadam, grieved over the misery of his sisters and also financially in demand, avoids similar circumstances for the next generation by skillfully orchestrating multiple cousin marriages between his own and his brother's children. The question of a daughter's legal inheritance, or of exorbitantly expensive dowries and wedding celebrations, which might otherwise be decisive, will not even be raised in their unions.

The second case may be explained as an exception, because very few Punjabi women remain unmarried. Its significant aspect is the saintly character which the single woman could acquire on account of the concept of holiness, to be explained later. In the third case, three very brief accounts relate to exceptional but empirically given events. In the first case, society at large including the concerned Syed family remain uninformed about the illicit desire of a non-Syed youngster to marry a woman, assumed to be a descendent of the Holy Prophet. The young man's family is able to prevent any manifestation of the scandalous intent. In the second story, however, the Syed woman's family is openly approached, the insult leading to a very grave reaction. The homicide threat must be removed by a major effort. In the third account the law of the state – for the first time – carries some weight, because the Syed bride and her non-Syed bridegroom are educated legal experts and do not face a father or a brother of the woman to take action. The wedding of the obviously deviating partnership may be boycotted by the other Syed families, but they can do no more.

The fourth case may be unique but once again reflects the close interconnection between affinal values and local religious convictions. People of Dari dedicate daughters to worship intensely and, when grown up, to become the brides of the Quran. In the many other shrines of Pakistan, sons are known to be dedicated to serve the saint or, in some cases, to the permanent study of holy Quran.

How are all of these cases related to Quran marriages? In fact, such unions fit into to the general

9 This case study has also been used in another publication (Chaudhary 2010).

10 My student was not allowed to conduct her fieldwork in that settlement in spite of the fact that she belonged to the same religious denomination.

11 I assume that marriage to Quran and non-marriage are interrelated phenomenon. This will be elaborated further down.

logic of the marital relationships of the eastern provinces and must be interpreted in the local cultural context, as expressed by the saying: "*Jis ka nikah nahee hoa us ka janaza naheen hota*." The message, i.e., "an unmarried person cannot be buried in proper religious style," clearly makes marriage a religious duty. At the same time, not any kind of marriage is demanded but only socially accepted ones such as hypergamous unions or those within the *biradary*.

The first case shows that sisters and daughters are at the core of kinship system. Well-being and honour of a man result from his ability to provide well-being and honour for his sisters and daughters. The father–daughter and the brother–sister relationship contain multiple perspectives. A man will always be worried about the fate of his daughter or his sister. Khadam openly cried when relating the misery of his sisters. For a Punjabi man, the objective in life is to provide the kind of husbands for his sisters and daughters with whom the women can live in peace. In Khadam's case the multiple marriages of first cousins had this effect and any potential genetic defects as their result could not possibly be as bad as the miserable fate the women would otherwise expect. However, his business interests were not altogether unimportant, since the inexpensive cousin marriages left the agricultural land without mortgages and the urban business without reductions. Such relative prosperity offered a safe haven for the daughters and, beyond that, a comfortable future for the aging parents, since Khadam, like any ordinary Pakistani, could not even dream of any other kind of old age insurance.

Quran Marriage: Comparable Cases

If a woman is not married to a man but rather to a sacred object, the exoticism of the case has its limits, because fairly similar conventions are known from other regions and religions. The closest resemblance I could find is the case of becoming a nun in Catholic Christianity. Van Gennep offers a detailed account:

> The virgins are brought in dressed in the novice's habit "without veils, robes, or hoods" … and each one comes and promises him to consecrate herself to virginity. He asks them if they are willing "to be blessed, consecrated, and united as spouses to Our Lord Jesus Christ," and they reply, "We wish it." The bishop … then recites … saying: "Receive the sacred veil as proof that you have renounced the world and that … you have become … the spouse of Jesus Christ." When all are veiled, he reminds them, "Come to celebrate your wedding, etc.," and he places the ring on the third finger of the right hand, saying, "I unite you, etc." (1960: 98 f.).

A similar ceremony was conducted by the Hindu Kaikolan musician caste of Coimbatore in southern India, when they attached one of their daughters to the temple as a dancer and musician. Van Gennep writes:

> The first series of ceremonies she undergoes is the equivalent of the betrothal; the second series, of marriage. The tali (equivalent of our wedding ring) is tied around her neck by a Brahman, as for a betrothal and marriage. Then the maternal uncle attaches a gold band around her forehead and places her on a board in front of the people. … In short, the ceremonies of consecration to the deity differ only in small details from ordinary wedding ceremonies … (1960: 100).

Similarly the case of a woman who is married to the Quran – or abandons the idea of marriage for the sake of religion – is getting pregnant and gives birth to a child. She or the child receive special adoration, this again is a worldwide phenomenon. Edmund Leach has discussed this problem in "Virgin Birth" (1966), which started a lengthy discussion in the anthropological literature. Regarding to the similarities and differences of the cases, the Christian novice vows to renounce the world, become the wife of Jesus Christ, and not to marry any other man. In the Quran marriage, the woman dedicates her life to the service of the Quran rather than marrying a human being. In both cases the virgins commit themselves to a life-long religious service as the alternative to the marital bond. As a difference, the Quran marriage is a family affair, not based upon the decision of the directly concerned individual, as the promise of a Catholic novice may be. However, almost all Pakistani marriages are arranged by the concerned families rather than by individuals, so the difference is of a very general kind. Related to this collective decision-making process is the given social cause. Whereas a novice may have her personal reasons to become a nun, a Punjabi or Sindhi virgin is expected to follow the family's decisions, and if the latter cannot find a suitable human husband, the Quran marriage is a socially acceptable way to solve the problem. In former phases of history, Christian families may have been guided by similar ideas.

General Norms Leading to Quran Marriages

Beyond the concerns of any of the involved families, the hypergamous milieu in general may be the

cause, or at least the encompassing spirit, of *biradary* endogamy. It may also be the reason for the occasional inability to find a husband. Marriageable women must be kept within the *biradary*, or "given" to a higher but never to a lower one. An in-marriage is the only way to annihilate the status difference as such. In the two provinces, all of the different *biradaries* and ethnic groups are organised hierarchically with members being very sensitive about their respective social rank. Though opinions may differ over questions of relative status, the dimension of hierarchy as such is absolutely undisputed and the status of some groups is clearly beyond any debate while, regarding others, it may be contested. Nobody would challenge sacred preeminence of the Syeds or dispute the low status of the artisan groups and, even more so, of hereditary menials.[12] Members of other *biradaries*, like those of the landowning Jat, Rajput, or Arain, may argue over rank with regional differences posing as further complications.

Among the very few authors on Punjabi society, Pfeffer (2007) relates the kinship system in Pakistan to the North Indian type. The latter consists of empirically numerous agnatic groups, i.e., regional clans and their specifically named and locally inclusive lineages, all of which are lacking a single and homogeneous segmentary framework under a founding ancestor. To this day, the same clan names are found in the two neighbouring Punjab provinces of Pakistan and India, but the clans of non-Muslims are exogamous and rule out any direct marital exchange between families or any repetition of intermarriage within four generations. For a family the norms imply that no bride can be "taken" from any clan that has "received" or "taken" a sister in the past four generations. Technically, a bride must not belong to the clans of her bridegroom's four grandparents. At the same time, both non-Muslim and Muslim Punjabis look up to their bride takers and pay dowries when "giving" their daughters into marriage.

Given these commonalities and differences, Pfeffer (2007) argues that Muslim Punjabis must have, after Islamization, lifted several basic prohibitions, especially those on the direct exchange of brides and those on the repetition of intermarriage. For this author, the Mosaic Laws in scriptural Islam terminated the most relevant Punjabi marriage taboos for Muslims, thus turning exogamous *biradaries* into mostly endogamous units with members frequently practicing cousin marriages. At the same time, many of the pre-Islamic Punjabi usages have survived in Pakistan to this day, including the dowry demands along with the flow and the directions of the other prestations, the hypergamous milieu and the antagonistic spirit between relatives by marriage. For Pfeffer, this major but partial alteration of the North Indian system reveals the latter's submerged but undeniable structure, the fraternal desire not to give away the own sisters. This drive had earlier been outlawed radically by the rules of multiple clan exogamy, but could, after Islamisation, become manifest in the form of unrestricted repetitions of any type of cousin marriages.

How do all these details relate to Quran marriages? A wedding with the sacred book is in fact practiced by the top ranking *biradaries*, like those of Syeds and others of highest status in the region who must not "give" their women "down," though their men may "take" brides from lower *biradaries*. So the elite may have a surplus of women. Marriage to the holy Quran offers a way out, where parents fail to find a human husband.

The complex of hypergamy involves several sanctions. Along with the daughter, the whole family will be polluted, if she marries below status, which means that the fate of her sisters is equally involved. Lower-ranking husbands would also lose their honour and be discriminated as so-called *ghar jawaie*, i.e., a son-in-law moving into the house of his father-in-law. The term is only applied as an insult. A bridegroom of lower status would, in fact, be associated with the bride giver category and, by implication, with that of a wife to be impregnated.

The pervasive concept of hypergamy is rarely, and only in individual cases, overcome in the course of modern educational efforts. On the contrary: these standards of being educated have been subjected to the affinal reasoning of traditional Punjabi peasants. Brides must have a lower educational qualification than their future husbands. A man with an MA degree, for example, should ideally marry a woman who has a BA degree at the most. He may, under certain pressures, accept a woman who is also Master of Arts, but would have to avoid a woman with PhD under all circumstances. The common observation that many of the highly educated women in Pakistan remain unmarried is even interpreted in analogy to Quran marriages: some of these single university professors will explain their dedication to science as the universally honoured decision to marry their profession rather than a human male.

Marrying the Quran is, in cultural terms, the option of non-marriage in a society that insists upon the universality of marriage. Arranging marriages between spouses of a drastic and unbridgeable age

12 Pfeffer (1970) has described the extremely low sweeper caste.

difference is another way to solve the dilemma of the unavailable bridegroom. In both cases the family has fulfilled the obligation to "give away" the bride without the usual consequences of a marriage. This primary parental responsibility to find spouses for their children, especially their daughters, is called *sadder* in Punjabi. Under the ethical code of Punjabi villagers, parents can claim the privilege of becoming old only after they have fulfilled this responsibility, failing in life as such, if they fail to marry their children. To avoid such a major source of grief and dishonor, many parents are willing to borrow enormous amounts of money to do a "proper" job, i.e., to find a good spouse for their child. Cases of direct exchange would rule out such excesses, and yet the economic motive is not necessarily the decisive one, marriage being a "question of honour," and the failure to provide a husband for their daughter is the standard nightmare of Punjabi parents. The concern for the marriageable woman rather than that for property will cause her family to opt for an honourable alternative such as the impeccable marriage to the sacred book of Islam.

Marriage and Religion: The Cultural Context

At least in "folk Islam" a marriage to the Quran is a religious dedication. While the representatives of textual religion, i.e., the religious scholars (*ulema*) and the institutions of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan deny any such connection, it is self-understood for the peasants. In fact, the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) forwarded a recommendation to the government of Pakistan to award life imprisonment to those who married their sisters and daughters to the Holy Quran. According to the members' viewpoint, such a practice is equivalent to defiling the sacred book as well as desecrating the Islamic institution of marriage. The council also took the view that it withholds the legitimate inheritance to the woman and denies her right to choose a life partner. For once, the *ulema* and Western liberals seem to maintain a common view on an issue of gender. The explicit point of the former is the following:

> Defiling of and marriage with Holy Quran; whosoever … directly or indirectly allows the Holy Quran to be used for purpose of its marriage with a female or fraudulently [does this] or dishonestly induces any person to swear on the Holy Quran never to marry any one in her life time or knowingly uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life (Iqbal 2009).

The marriage to the Quran is a case of the many ways people practice Islam and regard parental duties. As a non-marriage, especially among the Syed, it is the result of a particular interpretation and understanding of a Quranic text and saying of the Holy Prophet. The connection between folk Islam and this alternative to an ordinary marriage becomes evident in the observation that those women who do not marry, or are married to the Quran, are assumed to have a sacred character.

During the interviews, some informants related the rule that Syed females should not marry non-Syed males to Allah's commandment in the Holy Quran: "And it is not lawful for you that ye should cause annoyance to the apostle of Allah, nor that ye should ever marry his wives after him; verily that in the sight of Allah shall be an enormity" (Al-Quran 1957: 417; Surah XXXIII: 53).

Likewise people often said, "Syeds are our *pirs*. We cannot marry them or their daughters."[13] For many villagers Syeds represent their complete religion; whatever Syeds eat or wear, how they sleep, or perform other routine activities, all is equivalent to religion. Such followers consider Syeds alone as the source of their *nijat* (salvation). The prohibition for Syed women, not men, to marry anyone but another Syed, is also reported in historical sources. Eaton, for instance, mentions the case of an heir of Baba Farid:

> What bound the clans to the shrine even more powerfully than economic and political ties were the ties of kinship and intermarriage established between dependent Jat and Rajput groups and the *diwan*'s family. The significant point here is that the latter groups gave their daughters to the *diwans* and their immediate family, whereas Chishti daughters were evidently kept within the caste (Eaton 1984: 350).

As three of the above mentioned cases also illustrate, unions between Syed females and non-Syed males are strongly resisted. Consequently an informant pointed out that, "on the average, one female Syed remains unmarried in every Syed family," just as, "it is not uncommon to arrange a marriage between a mature woman and a 12 year-old boy, or a young girl and an old man" (Khan 2009).

Introducing the Quran into social rituals is not restricted to marriages. Irrespective of the findings of formal Islam, the tribal Bugtis of Balochistan hold the Holy Quran in hands while prepar-

13 Whether these views are Islamic, logical, or acceptable is not my point. I simply record the fact that many Syeds and non-Syeds support the practice.

ing a fire for an accused on which he is asked to walk in the course of disputes between rival parties (Ahmed 1996: 63). According to the Quran, the woman married to the sacred book is to assume a holy nature. Other Pakistanis dedicate their children to a shrine, or a saint, or to saintly persons. Certain families commit one of their children to religion which in practice means that the child will learn the content of the sacred book by heart. At Dari, known from case 4, families offer female children to the organizer of this settlement for religious services. The girls will do anything else but *izzadari*, or wail for the martyr Hussain, the younger son of the Ali, which prevent them from leading the usual profane life. Like the Sufi path to renounce this world, such decisions may be prohibited by formal religion, and yet they belong to religion in practice. The bride of the Holy Quran and her parents are assumed to have achieved paradise. Pakistani parents in any case are to decide for their children and do so according to their understanding of the world which may be faulty but is seen as their best intentions. They do not marry a daughter to the Quran because they are selfish, brutal, or callous, but out of love for their children.

In another turn of thought, a single women may also assume the sacred role of an ascetic. As mentioned above, such saintly status qualified a person to provide amulets against illnesses and against infertility in particular. Among the many deficiencies of anthropological research in Punjabi society, the lack of any systematic inquiries on the concept of holiness is perhaps the most blatant one, because sacred attributes appear in a diversity of contexts, including that of mentally disturbed men (*majzubs*) in their "divine madness" (Frembgen 1998), but also animals, plants, or certain girls (Chaudhary 1999: 110–120). Perhaps single women become holy because they openly abandon sexuality. Sex is always polluting – *ganda kam* – in Punjabi ethics, and anyone giving it up becomes *pak* (pure), a quality of holiness. Such asceticism could then contain the capacity of providing access to what has been abandoned.

A comparable case is that of Punjabi *khusree* (transvestites) who are understood to give or, more importantly, to remove the sex of male children (for details see Pfeffer 1995). *Khusree* are, by their own definition, males endowed with female spirits. Being castrated, they wear women's clothes and dance on celebrations, particularly on marriages and when a son has been born. In fact, a *khusra* has the social license to enter the household of a newly born male and dance to receive money as *wadai*. Families fear the curse of the *khusree* since the latter are said to make male children impotent, if this *wadai* money is withheld. The idea is obvious: *khusree* gave up their male sexuality, thereby achieving the power to provide the gift of manliness and, through that quality, guarantee the power of procreation or the eventual continuation of a family. Similarly, the women who are giving up their sexuality, i.e., the quality to reproduce, by marrying the Quran acquire the power of providing the gift of reproductive powers to others. An overall cultural logic in Punjab offers the honourable alternative of a marriage to the Quran and "practiced" Islam provides its religious cover.

Conclusion

The proposed view includes marriages to the Quran within the general folk rationality of Pakistan's eastern provinces. *Biradary* endogamy, together with hypergamous ambitions, creates a surplus of marriageable elite women where marrying off one's daughters is a universal norm and the primary duty of parents. In drastic peasant language it is *hagia pathna*, or "making cakes of one's own excrements" in the sense of disposing them.[14] People say that the main difference between humans and animals is that the latter lack this ability. Non-marriage of a person is, accordingly, the parents' failure as humans. The relevant aspect is not the marriage as such but its proper social performance. Apart from the loss of honour, a "wrong" marriage of a daughter would also be unfair to her, because she would have to live with less than what she had been used to. When marrying the Quran, women declare, or are made to declare, their refusal to follow the ordinary path. The exceptional one is chosen as a guarantee of a proper Muslim burial, irrespective of the economic implications. Religion thus offers a high status for the woman who had faced the threat of a shameful existence.

Followers of universal human rights or of feminist positions would probably criticize a marriage to Quran, because the woman's consent is irrelevant and her fate is determined by others. However, irrespective of these exceptional cases, the Pakistani families generally decide all questions relating to the marriages of their respective male and female members. People believe that arranged marriages are better, or at least more stable, than those of individual spouse selection and under the given conditions the concerned women are unlikely to have different views. Thus a good number of highly ed-

14 Punjabi peasants bake cattle excrements into dried cakes that make excellent burning material for the domestic hearth.

ucated women in Pakistan, including professors of social sciences, remain unmarried since they face the same dilemma that may be experienced by an uneducated Syed woman, the impediment of a high status. They do not find husbands, because a marriageable male would worry about his manliness in such a union while his wife would be concerned about her status. The real issue is not really the Quran marriage, or other methods to evade the obvious dilemma, the real issue is the cultural prescription of hypergamy.

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