Endogamy in Iran between Tradition, Religion, and Modernity

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Abstract: The family, which is one of the oldest and most established institutions in human history, has not always just been a reasonable arrangement for achieving biological continuance as well as sexual, emotional, and material support, it has also been one of the basic components for the creation of civilization, culture, and society. There are various types of families, one of which is the endogamous family formed by the custom of consanguineous marriage within a very defined and distinct group. Our article concentrates on the question of how modernity and prosperity have influenced endogamy in modern Iran and whether this will change historical patterns and traditions or, perhaps, only broaden them within Iran’s newly developed and modern society. Our conclusion is that, in Iran’s uncertain environment, tradition may actually be strengthened.

Keywords: endogamy; familyhood; tradition; Persian culture; Shi’a Islam; Islam; Iran

1. Introduction

Before we are able to understand consanguineous marriage as a phenomenon in Iran, and probably in more traditional and orthodox societies as well, we must first understand how the kinship system works in respective societies. Laurent Dousset (2011) claims that in certain societies that have a real kinship system, the tribe/clan and dynasty are hugely significant since these patrilineal tribes consider loyalty to religion and tradition to be the ties that bind their very existence together (Dousset 2011). Robert A. Wilson (2016) utilizes John Locke’s understanding of this to explain bloodline relations as being something that reflects the social skeleton, which is the commitment of the tribe’s members to the bloodline, to the relations between the parts within the clan and as something that is obvious and unconditional (Wilson 2016).

Benjamin Enke (2018) emphasizes this notion by saying that the individual, who is a part of a family unit, develops through being exposed to epistemological and phenomenological conditions that design his/her ways of thinking and influence his/her choices (Enke 2018). Moreover, Anke also claims that people living in patrilineal and religious societies will be more likely to prefer to marry within the group in order to preserve it from change and from the possible loss of power and resources (Enke 2019). Marilyn Strathern (2005) takes this conception further by claiming that the internal group rules of patrilineal societies undergo hardly any change because all members must declare loyalty to their parents. Being part of such a group is not only demonstrated by obeying the rules but also...
by helping other parts of the group to obey and thus maintain group coherence (Strathern 2005; Strathern 2014).

Maurice Godelier (2011) applies Strathern’s formula to the family–kinship system by saying that family relationship systems, like any other form of human relations, are influenced by interests that are more than just family relations and not only create a system of cooperation between all the individuals but also relations of power and control that are only made possible because the individual members obey and submit themselves to the rules of the family–community (Godelier 2011).

Dwight W. Read (2018) references Claude Levi-Straus’s research on reciprocity between groups by saying that, in line with this reciprocity, an individual within a group will marry someone else within this very group in order to ensure the group’s homogeneity and prevent foreign influences. One can, however, also marry someone from another group and vice versa and such cross-marriages are defined by Levi-Straus as elementary constructions that are part of the concept of social phenomenology and are thus basic and natural ways of life (Read 2018).

Traditionally, marriage is more than a union between a man and a woman, since it also creates a bond between at least two families. In the old world, when planning a marriage, love was much less of a consideration because families were more practical and mission-directed, rather than inclined to grant the prospective couple much of the emotional satisfactions that may come with marriage (Coontz 2006). The functional approach to marriage was more common than any other approach since marriage was mainly based on the woman’s need for financial support and sustenance. This was especially the case in societies that did not allow their women to work or take part in other outside activities and which saw marriage as the ultimate healthy environment for the raising of children.

Endogamy is multi-dimensional, and can be interpreted differently in different societies since every group, tribe, village, community, race, and people establishes its own system of internal relationships. Some societies, for example, consider humanity to be one big family and let their members marry anyone they wish. In contrast there are other communities that only consider the nuclear family to be the appropriate arrangement in which people can marry one another, like a father marrying his daughter or a brother his sister. Endogamy, in its widest interpretation, is a social or cultural tradition or law, which determines that a man or woman can marry only certain people within a specific community group, tribe, or family (Jackson 2006). Today, the common definition used for endogamy or marriage within the family is marriage between a couple who have at least one ancestor in common, i.e., between descendants of members of the same generation and only if they marry a family member who is no more distant than a third cousin (Givens and Hirschman 1994). As long as the marriage takes place within a specific society there may be many gaps in class and variations, all of which increase the chances for endogamy in this society. In other words, a society that is complex and contains many sub-groups influences its members to choose spouses who are very similar and close to their own families, tribes, societies, culture, and class levels, and this all leads to endogamy (Jackson 2006).

We can also find other reasons why certain societies prefer endogamy to other forms of marriages, like their desire to preserve the family and tribal economic assets. Endogamy also promises the stability of marriage, especially when couples have disputes or are embroiled in conflict. Consanguineous marriages are considered to represent 25 to 30 percent of marriages in the world and are especially prevalent in Middle Eastern (ME) and South-Asian countries. Givens and Hirschman argue that consanguineous marriage in these countries is rooted deeply in the character of the society and that Iran is one such country. (Givens and Hirschman 1994). The common assumption is that ME countries are likely to be more traditional and to have tribal domination and so are likely to adopt consanguineous unions more than any other marriage form (Saadat et al. 2004). Despite this, throughout history, the different forms of marriage have changed in terms of space and time.
The origins of endogamy go far back in history and existed in ancient Egypt, where pharaohs used to marry their own daughters since it was forbidden by law to marry anyone who was not from a consanguineous group in order to keep the bloodline of the pharaohs pure (Egypt Origins n.d.). Endogamy also existed in the Roman Empire, and later among the aristocrats of Europe who only married people of the same class; however, the reason for this was to keep wealth and possessions within the same classes. The desire to preserve the bloodline or the same class level was not only practiced by aristocrats and kings but also by the middle and lower classes and included not only refugees and new immigrants but, during times of exile, ethnic and religious groups wishing to preserve their unique identities and protect groups from external threats to their survival as an entity. Hosseini and Bagi also claim that consanguineous marriages are particularly common among immigrants (not only from the Middle East) as a family framework that protects the community from dissolution (Hosseini and Bagi 2016).

Researchers assume that the source of the practice of endogamy was probably in the Near East (Middle East), where the phenomenon was first discovered by Arab conquerors and later spread along the trail of their conquests (Murphy and Kasdan 1959). Endogamy, it seems, was a common tradition practiced by the Mesopotamians and in the Indo-Persian areas and societies. This special custom also existed during the pre-Islamic era in Persia (Iran) which was then a well-established empire (Aghajanian 2008). For the ancient Persians who followed Zoroastrianism, this tradition was a divine, rather than an earthly, tradition, since the two main divine entities—Ahura-Mazda and Angra-Mainyu—were married to their own daughters. In addition to this, the Achaemenid kings also used to marry their sisters and daughters according to divine rules and practice (Gindin 2011).

The decree governing endogamy or consanguineous marriage within Zoroastrianism was also associated with the traditions of heritage (Macuch 2005), in which consanguineous unions were formed mainly to preserve the family wealth and to avoid dividing the property among the children. Some parents even stipulated as a condition of inheritance that the son marry his own sister, and if he refused, he would have to give up his inheritance or his part of the estate (Gindin 2011).

One of the Zoroastrian’s traditional marriage customs was the incestuous relationship called Khwedodah, better known as Khwetudas, which was a practice involving “next-of-kin marriage”, or more exactly “marriage to one’s sister, mother or daughter” (Spooner 1966, p. 52). This form of marriage, which was practiced during the pre-Islamic period by the Zoroastrian community in the context of polygyny with the next-of-kin, was later not only prohibited by Islamic law, but was carried out in contrast to the principal form of marriage and needed a witness to confirm it. The most interesting thing about this kind of marriage and the period in which it was practiced was that society, especially the upper classes, divided the wives within the institution of marriage into two main categories of the principal wife (zan-i padheshayeha) and the subordinate wife (zan-i chaghareha), both of whom were legally confirmed (Ibid.). The need for two kinds of wives leads us to assume that one of these wives—the subordinate one—was temporary and was married for pleasure. In this regard, it should be mentioned that this kind of polyandry was an acceptable practice during the pre-Islamic era, especially in the region of Mecca and Medina (Montgomery 1976), and this provides us with a place other than the Mesopotamian areas to look for the origins of the Muta'h (which literally means pleasure but refers to temporary marriage, as does Sighe, which is more common in Iran). What we can learn from this, however, is that Zoroastrian society had marriage customs and a legal system that enabled the creation of several varieties of marriage styles and that these marriages were probably the result of cultural and religious needs and were created to preserve the traditional strata of society. These types of marriage existed in many societies in the past and are similar in some ways to today’s Muta’h or Sighe. We can also probably assume that the option of having a subordinate wife (zan-i chaghareha) for the Zoroastrians could have functioned in the same way as the Muta’h did later. Although the Muta’h has its own rules governing legality and functionality, its existence as a secondary option for marriage, even when the
wives involved may be slaves or war captives, still makes its assimilation as another option that men could exploit whether the marriage was temporary or not.

Notwithstanding the above, what existed in Zoroastrian society were two options that served the expectation that men could or should marry and that incestuous and consanguineous marriages were most welcome and promoted by the upper strata. Given the lack of other options, the reason for choosing this option could have been to preserve both their tribal and religious unity, while another possibility was that some of the foreign invaders or royal families might have adopted the local customs of the societies they had conquered in order to reduce the cultural and religious differences that existed between them (Spooner 1966). Regarding the Mutaʿh, especially as practiced in the Persian–Mesopotamian areas, however, one needs to ask the question of who influenced whom? Did the invader influence the local population to change its marriage practices or was it the other way around?

In order to answer these questions, we need to understand the relations that existed between the local tribes and the peasants in the Persian plateau. It is well-known and generally accepted (when it comes to other societies as well) that marriage was used to form alliances between villages and tribes and that these forms of marriage actually formed “a hierarchy of power in an area” (Ibid.: 55).

2. Islam and Endogamy

Islam sees the institution of marriage as a focal and sacred guarantee of human continuity and, like Judaism, Islam forbids certain kinds of sexual relations and marriages. The Quran, (4:23) at the very beginning of Surat al-nisaa’ (the women), stipulates which relatives are prohibited from entering into consanguineous marriages:

“ḥuramat aʿlāykum umhatukum wa banatukum wa ukhwatukum wa aʿmmatukum wa khalatukum wa banatu al-ahshāʾ wā baṭāsuʿatukum wa al-ahshāʾ wa al-imārat” “Prohibited to you [for marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father’s sisters, your mother’s sisters...” (Quran 4:23)

However, since the Quran neither directly prohibits (nor allows) marriage within the second and third circles of families, it became a common tradition for people to marry within those circles (Akrami and Osati 2006; Teebi 1997).

Another important religious source, the Hadith, completed the message of the Quran, which might have been open to interpretation, and referred to the words of Mohammad the Prophet that prohibited marrying cousins since this could physically harm the descendants: “wa la tanakhuluha al-qiraba al-qariba faan al-walad yuhaliq dhawiya”—“Do not marry cousins as the offspring may be disabled at birth” (Akrami 2006, p. 124). To support this, Bassiri, Gohari, and Akrami claim, as noted earlier, that while consanguineous marriages are not religiously prohibited, they are not recommended because they could lead to genetic and physical problems for the children of these marriages (Bassiry et al. 2014). Mohammad Tulay, the head of the Iranian society for genetics, has also stated that the increase in genetic mutations in Iran is due to such consanguineous marriages, which constitute about 45 percent of marriages in Iran and are especially common in the peripheral and traditional sectors of society (ILNA 2016).

Bassiri, Gohari, and Akramim, however, also cite the Quran 33:50 (al-ahzab), which gives a list of relatives that only the Prophet is allowed to marry:

O Prophet, indeed We have made lawful to you your wives to whom you have given their due compensation and those your right hand possesses from what Allah has returned to you [of captives] and the daughters of your paternal uncles and the daughters of your maternal aunts and the daughters of your maternal uncles and the daughters of your maternal aunts who emigrated with you and a believing woman if she gives herself to the Prophet [and] if the Prophet wishes to marry her, [this is] only for you, excluding the [other] believers... ... (Bassiry et al. 2014, p. 529)
While, by citing this passage, Bassiri, Gohari, and Akrami emphasize the fact that what was allowed for the Prophet and later for the Imams was not allowed to anyone else, this still does not explain why God excluded the believers from being able to have these kinds of marriages. When we more closely examine the family circles from which Allah allowed the Prophet to marry, however, we can see that all of them were second cousins. In other words, the Prophet had the sole right to practice endogamy, which is prohibited to the believers by the word of God.

The prohibition in the Quran is not explained as existing for any health reasons, and this will only appear later in the Hadith as a danger of causing inherited disability. Hosseini-Chavoshi, Bittles, and Abbasi Shavazi return us to the genetic problems of heredity that Iranian society is presently suffering from due to consanguineous marriage, when they claim

“From a genetic perspective, the first and possibly most important influence of a shift away from consanguineous marriage would be on the overall incidence of genetic disease(s) in the Iranian population”. (Hosseini-Chavoshi et al. 2014, p. 22)

Bittles concludes

“Although much attention has focused on the role of consanguinity in the prevalence of recessive disorders, it is endogamy which principally governs the spectrum of observed diseases in a community and, as previously noted, a higher overall level of homozygosity is observed in genetically subdivided populations”. (Bittles 2005, p. 19)

The main riddle here is why Muslims still marry within their family circles if the Quran and Hadith dramatically prohibit it. In order to answer this, we need to understand that cultural and functional factors are the main reasons why the Muslim world still allows marriage within family circles. The cultural reason explains consanguineous marriage as desirable in terms of concepts, such as the need for modesty and honor, since the family keeps its members (especially the women) under supervision in order to protect the family’s honor. While the functional reasons are varied, one of them is that consanguineous marriage keeps the family’s property within the family, and the second is that these marriages maintain the solidarity and bonds within the inner group due to the common relationships among its members (Teebi 1997).

There is clearly a problem in the conflicting interaction between religion and science regarding consanguineous marriages, which is expressed in the lack of reasonable bridges between the two disciplines. Discourse between the two disciplines should have begun with the understanding that, although Shiite Muslims can find narratives from the Imams’ history that show the existence of consanguineous marriage, this discovery does not amount to a formal decree that necessarily allows other lesser beings to engage in the same practices (Bassiry et al. 2014). Iranian clerics, however, who are certainly aware of both the Quranic and Hadith decrees and the local Shiite traditions regarding ancient Persian endogamy, rationalize the conflict by saying that consanguineous marriage is allowed, but only within the Imam’s family and not for others.

While tracing the history of endogamy among both early Shiite Moslems and Persians (notably modern Iranians) we found that consanguineous marriage within the Muslim communities, particularly the Shiites in their early stages and generations, was an outcome of and necessary solution for the small number of members in these communities. As a consequence of this they had no other real option than to marry members of their families within their closed circle. Mohammad the Prophet, and later the Imams, had to marry their family members because, being a small and unique community, they were discriminated against and hunted by the majority, later known as Sunnis. Despite this, Mohammad the Prophet prohibited such marriages from being carried out for the general Muslim community in order to prevent the proliferation of defective descendants (Ibid.).
Consanguineous marriage, however, was not an outcome of the creation of the new Islamic community because neither the Prophet nor his family wanted to marry pagans; it was a global trend and tradition that Islam was trying to change. Traditional tribal life, however, was too fragile to risk letting other unknown or strange forces affect the fabric of their lives, and tribes typically wanted to preserve their power, secrets, privacy, borders, materials, and traditions that were passed down from one generation to another through the ages (Ibid.). It was the power of tradition and culture, it seems, that ultimately tipped the scales toward adopting tribal endogamy despite religious prohibition.

To emphasize this point, Voas and Fleischmann also point out that “Endogamy among Muslims in Europe is very high although the pool of preferred partners is restricted by more than just religion” (Voas and Fleischmann 2012, p. 533). In contrast to Hosseini and Bagi, they only relate to endogamy within the communities of Muslims who have immigrated to Europe as a phenomenon of acculturation, while Voas and Fleischmann see endogamy in Muslim communities in Europe as a result of religious influence and not necessarily as a cultural influence (Ibid.: 539).

It seems fairly clear that religious decrees are more influential than cultural traditions, but when Voas and Fleischmann say that exiled Muslims in Europe are more likely to adopt endogamy for religious reasons, it also seems clear that the very reasons for exiled Muslims practicing endogamy amount to tribal–traditional–cultural influences and solutions that contribute to keeping their communities whole as a group.

Bittles and Hamamy, on the other hand, are not decisive about the above question and claim that

“Marriage within tribal boundaries is largely paralleled by religious endogamy. In multi-faith countries such as Lebanon, with three main religious communities, Sunni and Shia Muslims and Maronite Christians, plus the smaller Druze, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Armenian communities, denominational endogamy has historically been the norm and is accompanied by a variable level of genetic differentiation” (Bittles and Hamamy 2010, p. 86)

In other words, while in some communities, cultural reasons for endogamy are given much consideration, in other communities, cultural reasons are considered to be more important than religious reasons. At the same time, in other cases, notably in ME societies, both considerations, i.e., religion and culture, are taken into consideration.

3. Education, Progress, and the Institution of Marriage in Iran

At the end of the 19th century, after centuries of virtual seclusion from the West, the Middle East rose like a sleeping giant from its slumber and rubbed its eyes as the weakened empires of the Ottomans and Persians began to confront the bitter truth about the state they were in relative to the West, and this was especially true in regard to military advances, politics, modernity, and technology. At first, the empires were eager to adopt anything that could improve their situations but later understood that they could not adopt anything that was Western in the area of finances, mainly for cultural reasons. Since their survival as empires was at stake, the Ottomans and the Persians had to become more progressive in order to adapt to the world’s new developments, which would enable them to control the states in their empires.

Between the start of the 20th century and the end of WWII, Iran, led by the last Shah of the Qajar dynasty and especially by the first Shah of the Pahlavis, Reza Shah, experienced intensive and accelerated progress in modernization and Westernization, especially after WWII. From the 1960s onwards, the progress was so intense that, from the people’s point of view, it appeared as if Iran was going through a process of canceling its national identity. The rapid shift away from the traditional way of life in Iran to Westernization subsequently led to an awakening of the Islamic movements, which ultimately fomented the abandonment of Westernization and thrust the Islamic revolution upon Iran (Menashri 1996). Before discussing this, however, we first need to analyze the process of Westernization that Iran
went through and how the new global processes finally influenced the private sectors and traditional groups in Iran.

The historical circumstances that led Iran to adopt Westernization rather than any other option have received tremendous attention and many explanations have been provided in the professional literature. We can only say that the adoption of progress and advanced technology is a fundamental need for virtually every nation on Earth and that this need is composed of both material and psychological factors in which the first serves the second in the process of building a fully independent and progressive nation.

From as far back as the beginning of the 19th century until recently, Iran followed a vague and unclear path that was, however, necessary for its development. The first intellectuals who were sent to the West to gain knowledge in practical fields brought home the understanding that the adoption of Western ideas and technology was necessary for survival. The major and fundamental change that took place was the acknowledgement that Iran not only had to change in any way it could in order to advance but also had to promote itself.

As Iran progressed along the long and frantic path and experienced the Tobacco Protests (1890–1892), the Constitutional Revolution (1905), WWI and WWII, the Mossadeq Crisis (1953), the White Revolution (1963), etc., the Qajar and Pahlavi empires viewed the adoption of modernity as a requirement for becoming part of a coalition of advanced nations, but this time from a strong, rather than a medieval position. While much attention was given to Iran’s public instead of private sphere, the private world of the Iranians could not ignore the fundamental changes that their country was going through. It should also be noted here that while Muslim empires always pursued the selective borrowing and adopting of things from Western powers, they still could not bridge the huge gaps that existed between the two civilizations.

The regimes were unaware, or preferred not to know, that the introduction of Westernization did not only involve the introduction of technology but also of ideas and ideologies. The people upon whom these changes were imposed and who did not see themselves as part of these changes soon realized that the old ways of Islam were all that they knew and that it was through Islam that they wished to renew their role in society (Summitt 2004; Keddie 2003).

One of the changes that affected the social and private lives of the people was the change taking place in the institution of marriage as part of the strong connection that was developing between the increase in education and marriage. This connection could be seen in dramatic findings not only in Iran but also worldwide, where educated people were choosing to delay the age of marriage and the rate of divorce among educated people was increasing (Zimmt 2010). The institution of marriage came under discussion and began changing because when people moved from rural areas to urban areas, they gained more education and thus became more individualistic. The liberalism that developed could be seen in people wishing to be able to freely choose their own spouses, rather than have them chosen by their families, and the more highly educated generation embraced the rejection of the forced matchmaking traditionally valued by their families (Aghajanian and Thompson 2013). The interesting questions that need to be asked are whether these changes and reforms influenced endogamy and whether endogamy, which had survived centuries of global change and turmoil, would survive in modern Iran?

4. Women’s Rights and Status

To the discussion about endogamy and the influence of modernity and advancement in Iran, we must add another component: the rights and status of women in Iran. When one hears the words “Iran”, “women”, and “rights”, one might easily adopt the conditioned response of viewing all three words as being equivalent to women’s suppression and discrimination against them. As is the case with other aspects of life in Iranian society, however, we can also find a more colorful and complex picture here.
Like in any other Middle Eastern or Muslim country, the history of women’s rights in Iran is very brief but it does run parallel to the processes of modernity and progress Iran tried to introduce from the beginning of the 19th century onwards. Women in Iran began to take their place in society step by step and frankly became the most advanced women in the Muslim world. Throughout history, women have always worked in cottage industries in Muslim societies and, due to socio-cultural norms imposed by men, wealthy Iranian women had no choice but to remain at home rather than find their way outside the home into activities that would inspire self-recognition. Amongst the poor, however, the opposite took place when poor, yet religious and traditional, women were forced to go out and join labor forces to participate in growing the country’s economy (Bayat-Phillip 1978; Sedghi 2007). At this stage, any rights that women should be granted by the state were not a matter for discussion.

At the beginning of the 20th century, however, things changed when women joined popular protests against the regime in 1905 during the Constitutional Revolution. Following this revolution, women became more organized and more independent than before, particularly when they discovered that the new constitution was giving them neither public nor private rights and especially the right to vote. Until 1923, most women could not gain an education and those who managed to do so were condemned by traditional sectors who wished to place women back at home behind closed doors (Iran Chamber Society n.d.; Sedghi 2007).

Real change came under the Pahlavis, when the first monarch, Reza Khan (later Reza Shah), who had a very basic understanding of modernity and its influence over people’s lives, recognized that modernity was a fundamental condition for the establishment of a modern Iran and that moving towards secularism was as an inevitable process that the country had to go through since Westernization involved cultural changes. Along with this process, he understood that growing the economy and industry would build the state and advance it into modernity. Together with material processes and changes, the social infrastructure also changed because Reza Shah realized that women could not be dismissed from being part of the national renewal and rebuilding (Menashri 1996; Sedghi 2007; Foundation for Iranian Studies 1975).

As Reza Shah’s wish to secularize Iran was one of the focal points he had to deal with in order to present Iran’s new modern outlook, in 1936, he decided to free women from the traditional dress code, thereby achieving two goals—the first being their emancipation and the second the imposition of his secular ideology upon religious and traditional factions. It is important to mention here that women did not ask for this specific right and, like other sectors in the states with other issues, were forced to obey the Shah’s will. Many chose to stay at home since they saw the traditional dress code of wearing the veil as part of their identities (Menashri 1996; Sedghi 2007). One, however, also needs to bear in mind that Reza Shah helped women advance in areas that benefited the development of the national economy but did nothing to improve women’s legal stature or the causes that were related to their status as women. Imposing Western dress upon women by force was clearly not a manifestation of their emancipation.

Reza Shah’s successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, took his father’s reforms further and for very similar reasons, especially those that were allegedly related to women’s emancipation. The other field the new Shah wished to open up was education, which he did so by dismissing the rule of the clerics over educational frameworks and opening them up for women. The main impact of these reforms could be seen in the 1950s with the developing power of women being manifested in many fields that had once belonged mainly, if not completely, to men (Sedghi 2007). The next stage was the White Revolution (1963), which is considered to be one of the most controversial, yet progressive, social revolutions in Iran, especially in all matters concerning women’s rights and their promotion (Tabari 1980).

From 1963 to 1977, when women in Iran were now involved in social life but not yet in politics, more women’s organizations were established; however, these were controlled by the state. Women in Iran had acquired rights that were not available to them in other
Muslim countries, but these rights, although officially given by the Shah, were part of a very different agenda. While women fought to raise the minimum age for marriage, obtained rights for divorce and legal abortion, gained approval to certify whether their husbands may marry second wives, and more (Foundation for Iranian Studies 1975), these changes and reforms did not apply to all women, and many felt disappointed by the Shah’s reforms. From this point onward, it became much easier for Khomeini and his followers to convince women to join them in their protests and revolution (Givens and Hirschman 1994).

One way or another, these reforms influenced women for both good and bad. When it came to family life, it seems that these reforms did raise the age of marriage since, because women were receiving an education, they were giving birth at a later age. This is supported by a survey from 1977 conducted in Iran that found that modernization (which included becoming educated) and belonging to a higher class would lead to a later age of marriage (Ibid.). On the other hand, poverty and the lack of an education was still influencing women to get married at younger ages (Momeni 1972).

In their much discussed article about the connection between modernity and consanguineous marriage, Hatem Hosseini and Milad Bagi found that, when women are more educated, liberal, cultured, and well-off, they are likely to prefer that their own children marry outside the family rather than within the closed circle of family members (Hosseini and Bagi 2016).

Yet, the Iranian government, with the help of Imam Khomeini’s Aid Committee, supported broken families, 59% of which were women-led families, according to a population sample (ISNA 2023). Other figures claim that there were 1.2 million of these women-led families all over Iran that received this support from Khomeini’s committee (Mehrnews 2023).

All in all, Iran experienced many complex changes and reforms, some of which were successful and some of which were not, but the institution of the family certainly absorbed some fundamental changes that were direct results of modernization and progress. The impacts of urbanization, the media, modernity, and individualism, among other factors, created a new form of family life, which was reflected in the changes in society and the very basis for marriage in traditional and religious states like Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2008). Although all of this was taking place in Iran, the old struggle between tradition and religion and evolving modernity was continuing, and it was still not clear which would gain the upper hand.

5. Endogamy in Iran—A New Phenomenon or Just a Marginal Tradition?

In their article, “Modernization and Consanguineous Marriage in Iran”, Givens and Hirschman challenge William Goode’s theory about modernization and its implications for and influence over kinship systems and consanguineous marriages in Iran. The main hypothesis of Goode’s theory is that “forces of modernization may be slowly eroding the social bases of consanguinity” (Givens and Hirschman 1994, p. 820).

Modern Iran in its early days went through major upheavals, some of which facilitated Westernization and modernity, but the new spirit of modernism and secularism that the Pahlavis promoted stood on shaky ground because the religious circles saw these changes as a full denial of their religion and beliefs. The central issue in this struggle between two stubborn adversaries that were confronting each other was the issue of family values and women’s rights.

During the Pahlavis’ reign—which lasted from 1925 to 1979, when two generations grew up in Iran, and in a surprisingly parallel way to the intensive process of modernization taking place—there was a dramatic increase in consanguineous marriage. Research carried out on these two generations in Tehran and its suburban areas revealed an exponential growth in marriages for the first generation of couples who married before 1948. The hypothesis of the research was that children who had been exposed at home to endogamous marriages were most likely to adopt this form of marriage. In the findings, however, only 8.8 percent were documented as endogamous in the first generation, while in the
second generation, 16.6 percent of couples who married between 1949 and 1978 practiced endogamy (Akrami et al. 2008).

When we take into consideration aspects and circumstances relating to modernity, these numbers are stunning, since one would expect that modernity, with its accompanying urbanization, education, women’s rights, etc., would lead to lower numbers of endogamous marriages. The big surprise is that during the Pahlavi monarchies, especially during Mohammad Reza Shah’s time when modernity was at its highest level, there was an increase in endogamy. The new reality of modernization also increased economic distress, and this ultimately led to social distress for the Iranian people who had to face great disappointment, because what the Shah was presenting as prosperity and modernity was far from what they were encountering in their daily lives. Added to this were the revolutionary groups that were proposing another more familiar way of life to the people—the way of Islam and tradition.

Givens and Hirschman (1994) also conceded that: “... precise knowledge of the prevalence of consanguinity is generally unavailable, but estimates of consanguinity from one-quarter to one-third of all marriages are common in many countries” (p. 821). Givens and Hirschman also reference a number of former studies that were carried out with very small samples, like those of Fischer (1978), who found that 24 to 29 percent of marriages were marriages of consanguinity. Tapper (1979) found that between 27 and 31 percent of marriages were consanguineous, and Bradburd (1984) claimed that 37 percent were consanguineous (p. 822). Saadat et al. (2004) also claimed that “there are no complete data on the prevalence of consanguineous marriage for the whole country [Iran]” (Saadat et al. 2004, p. 263). Despite this, they still found that 27.9 percent of marriages were consanguineous, of which first cousin marriages were the most common, for the 306,343 people that were tested all over Iran. They finally conclude that “Based on the present data (2001–2003) it seems that there has been no decline in the overall prevalence of consanguineous marriage in Iran” (Ibid., 267).

This comprehensive research study conducted by Saadat, Ansari-Lari, and Farhud, which was carried out in 2001 and supported by the National Council for Research on the Islamic Republic, shows an increase in the phenomenon of endogamy in Iran (Saadat et al. 2004) with the most common consanguineous marriages being between cousins (Eetemadi-Fur n.d.). We should, however, be slightly skeptical about these numbers since we do not have any reliable previous surveys that could help us to understand if this represents a rising trend or is simply a case random numbers.

Despite the rising trend that some research shows, the 40 years since the Republic’s establishment also reveal some minor declines in the numbers of these marriages but, the whole picture indicates that the percentage is still high. We can find some differences between cities and peripheral or suburban villages; for example, over 77 percent of consanguineous marriages are registered in the Baluchistan and Gilan districts, which is in contrast to other districts where there has been a consistent decline. Another interesting fact is that, among the Sunni minority in Iran, the number of endogamous marriages is higher than among the Shi’a majority. The reason for this could be that since the Sunnis are a minority, they wish to preserve their identity and assets within the community (Hosseini-Chavoshi et al. 2014).

In their well-documented article, which is based upon the number of traditional marriages whose purpose is to protect ethnic groups from external cultural and political influences, Torabi and Baschieri point out that consanguinity is common within all ethnicities in Iran. They also say that consanguineous marriages occur more often among peripheral ethnic groups like the Baluch and Lur and that “among all marriages in these groups [ethnic], more than half are between relatives” (Torabi and Baschieri 2010, p. 31).

The simple people who live on the periphery in Iran and are dictated by tradition find it preferable to marry consanguinely because of a lack of higher education and the absence of modern liberal attitudes. In traditional societies, the family fulfills many functional and practical needs regarding the protection of well-being, prestige, wealth,
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and security (Hosseini and Bagi 2016). Hosseini and Bagi claim that, although people in Iran have more freedom now to choose their spouses, they still behave according to very clear yet complex traditional patterns that have undergone many shifts in emphasis throughout history. Their primary need has been to survive, often under very fragile circumstances, and so they prefer to place family above all other needs and maintain the practice of consanguineous unions as their preferred form of marriage (Ibid.).

In a recent study entitled “Recent Trends of Marriage in Iran” from 2018, the authors claim that the average rate of marriage in Iran is on the decline and a close reading of the figures reveals that more educated and urban (not peripheral) residents (both men and women) are more likely to avoid marriage or marry at an older age (Aghajanian et al. 2018). The statistics validate Goode’s theory about modernization in Iran (mentioned in the research by Givens and Hirschman 1994) regarding the connection between modernization and the rate of marriage. In this regard, and despite the lack of recent data, it is clear that consanguineous marriage must be included in these figures too (Country Policy and Information Note 2021).

What, then, is the future of endogamy in Iran? Will it increase or decrease? In answer to these questions, we can see indications that this phenomenon will probably either remain stable or slightly decrease. This assessment is supported by the above-mentioned research from 2001, which found that, while 46 percent of the new generation married endogamously, a parallel study shows that this previously stood at 42 percent (Hosseini-Chavoshi et al. 2014). Saadat and Zarghami (2018) strengthened the argument presented in Saadat et al.’s (2004) research about the current high percentage of consanguineous marriage in Iran, but did not show any relevant data (Saadat and Zarghami 2018).

6. Conclusions

After the rise of the Islamic Republic, we might have reasonably assumed that, since Islam prohibited endogamy, the new regime would also prohibit it. Since the numbers show a different trend for this, however, we can also assume that religion might not be the only factor that influences this phenomenon. In developed countries, the advent of modernity led more and an increasing number of people gained an education and were therefore exposed to a different way of life. Members of the younger generation met, studied, and married in this period of flourishing modernity and women began to go out to work, to study and to integrate more equally in these more developed societies. The common assumption made was that as long as the people became more and more modernized, the further away they would step from religion and tradition.

If we consider endogamy in light of this assumption, we might expect to find a dramatic decrease in the phenomenon of endogamy but, contrary to expectations, survey results and research have shown that there has been an exponential increase in endogamy, especially during periods when we would expect a decrease. Surprisingly, the statistics show that religion is not one of the factors that people consider to be important when it comes to marriage and endogamy, and this behavior seems to be more related to cultural characteristics (Saadat 2007). Pre-Islamic Persian culture is deeply rooted in the lives of the Iranian people, and in the tense struggle between Shi’a Islam and Persian culture that is going on, it seems that culture has had the upper hand. The mythological literature of Persia shows that endogamous marriage has always been able to survive and is doing just this even in the lives of the current descendants of ancient Persia (Saadat et al. 2004).

Aside from the cultural reasons for the above, we can assume that there are also other reasons, such as the significant social and economic changes that occurred during Iran’s agrarian reforms in the 1960s. This enabled families to obtain small plots of land, and it is possible that these families also used endogamy to unify their economic resources (Givens and Hirschman 1994). During periods of change and social shifts, people are likely to reunite with previously distanced family members, and we can find evidence of this from the 1980s, when people re-evaluated familyhood because of the revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (Hosseini-Chavoshi et al. 2014).
It is certainly reasonable that the increase in endogamy should be looked at from a traditional–cultural point of view since, as mentioned above, some groups are greatly interested in preserving their unique identities and traditions in order to pass them on to the descendants within their communities (Saadat et al. 2004). The influence of modernization on marriage within families in developed societies is still a subject under dispute. However, new findings show that in certain societies—especially in third world countries in some aspects like family and internal and external family relations, and despite the modernization that has developed such states—families have still remained essentially traditional. In fact, in some places, radical modernization has only strengthened tradition.

When we question certain aspects of modernity in Iran, we can see trends relating to its influence over consanguineous marriage, but it seems that there is no strong correlation between education and modern thinking. Many women apparently continue the traditional and cultural beliefs they acquired in their parents’ homes and do not adopt the new ideas one would think would be a result of their education. Importantly, some studies have found that educated women are less likely to marry men who have had consanguineous marriages (Givens and Hirschman 1994).

Modernization has led to an increase in consanguineous marriage in Iran in spite of the common assumptions about modernization’s influence over traditional marriage patterns. This article presents evidence that suggests a few reasons for the opposite situation in Iran. Some aspects indicate that there is a correlation between education and modernity with regard to women, but the most significant revealed trend is that there are other aspects of modernization in Iran that have not influenced endogamy. While modernization has had a slight influence over endogamy, it seems that culture has been more influential in people’s lives and that the short and intensive processes of modernization that took place during the 1960s–1970s were not able to change inbred, cultural norms that are thousands of years old. There is apparently a real connection between endogamy and culture in people’s lives in Iran and perhaps endogamy will decrease when, and if, Persian culture is less dominant in people’s lives. As of now, however, the situation is that, while there is also an increase in conventional marriages in Iran, there is still no decline in consanguineous marriages (Ee’temadi-Fur n.d.).

Ee’temadi-Fur concludes that, despite the liberty that Iranian youths have in choosing their spouses, many choose consanguineous marriage and the reason for this might be that, since marriage is considered to be a very important step, many people prefer to marry within the well-known, familiar world of the family rather than choosing the romantic option of marrying a beloved stranger (Ibid.).

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