



# GILĀN XIII. KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

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## GILĀN

### xiii. Kinship and Marriage

Kinship in Gilān displays several remarkable characteristics: an exceptionally low level of intermarriage between consanguineous kin (a far cry from a “republic of cousins” in which intra-lineage marriages are encouraged); marriage “strategies” whose objectives are not to reinforce, as for the rural communities of the plateau, the cohesion of lineages or of groups of lineages, but to diversify, through the marriage alliance, the network of relations in towns and cities; a very low birth rate over the past twenty years, foreshadowing the actual trends in Iranian society; and the reduced size of households rarely containing more than two generations. Furthermore, lineal descent is patrilineal as it is in the rest of the country; a pre-inheritance is distributed at the time of marriage in a manner similar to Jack Goody’s concept of a “diverging devolution” of patrimony between boys and girls. The family institution remains here as elsewhere the cornerstone of social organization, a paradigm for personal relationships (close friends are referred to in terms of family relationships, as, for instance, *‘amu*, or paternal uncle), a principal subject of discussion, a source of disagreement and the principal means of acceding to a profession. Marriage, characterized by a multitude of gifts (see GIFT GIVING) and counter-gifts between allied families, can be



distinguished by several specific qualities unique to the Gilāni folklore.

*Exogamous alliances.* According to a 1991 sample survey (see Sāzmān), in Iran, the plain of Gilān has the lowest proportion of marriages whether with paternal or maternal cousins or with a near or distant (non-consanguineous) relation. For the whole country, where the average rate of endogamous marriages (including all degrees of kinship) is 29 percent, it is only 4.2 percent in the district of Āstāna, 5.1 percent in Langarud, 6.2 percent in Şowma‘a-sarā, and 11.6 percent in Rašt. Only in the mountainous regions (sub-province of Rudbār) or in marginal areas such as the district of Āstārā is the rate of endogamous marriage on the same level as in the rest of the country. Several research monographs on the region have noted this exogamous tendency among the Gilāni peasantry. Paul Vieille (1972, p. 361) notes that “consanguineous relations are less important than those acquired by affinity.” Toshio Suzuki (p. 241) concludes after his investigation at Jānakbar (Kučeşfahān sub-province), where 16 percent of married couples bear some family relationship, that “kinship endogamy is not the norm in marriage.” A recent enquiry conducted by the author in the district of Āstāna revealed that, over three generations, only 10 percent of marriages were endogamous, which figure is inflated by a tradition of consanguineous marriages among some affluent families.

The rarity of endogamous marriages is related to the special conditions and economic organization for land management in the Caspian region. Here, there is no common property (with the exception of the reservoirs: *sal* and *estakr* which serve for irrigation), few cooperative tasks (other than the maintenance of the irrigation canals at the beginning of the rice season, or the common defense of the fields against the damages of predators), no collective work organization (like the *bona* of the villages of the Iranian interior). The cultivated land has been cleared by individual concessions attributed to nuclear family units by the large landholders, and not in any cooperative mode by a community of parents. In short, the characteristics generally associated with structured society and patrilineal endogamous lineages are lacking. Commercial agriculture and the development of relations between the cities are consistent with the vision and practice of exogamy. With respect to marriage practices as well as the activities of daily life, the Gilāni peasantry is “extrovert” and not “introvert,” unlike that of the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau, concerned as they traditionally are with collective rights and the stability of the lineages.



Peasants willingly marry off their daughters outside of their villages and if possible in the neighboring villages, in the regional capital or in Tehran. Thus, in 2000, in a village of the Gilān plain, exogamous marriages with an urban spouse represented 35 percent of all marriages for the generation born between 1960 and 1970. Endogamy, in the context of this same locality (*maḥal*), was characteristic of 41 percent of marriages, of which 31 percent were between members of the same hamlet (*maḥalla*), and only 10 percent from the neighboring hamlets with whom relations are typically tense. The remainder of marriages was concluded with neighboring villages within the same precinct (for comparable data showing an even greater level of intra-regional endogamy, see Suzuki, p. 246). Such exogamy, whether near or far, creates and maintains social networks that facilitate, at a regional or state level, the social acceptance of family members driven to travel or migration. With the help of sons-in-law living in the city, one finds employment opportunities and lodging for the sons of families too large to be supported through subsistence from the narrow confines of their holdings (on the Gilān plain, the average holding is no larger than one *jarib*, a surface measurement roughly equivalent to one hectare, or 2.5 acres in the central part of the plain; see Bazin and Bromberger, map 30). Thus, in an urban setting one finds professional dynasties and neighborhood groups formed around a family member who benefited from a favorable alliance. Such links with the urban world can be reinforced by the marriage of a son who remained in the countryside with a patrilineal cross cousin (the daughter of his father's sister) whose mother married into town. The marriage with a matrilineal cousin, very uncommon, is not quite as efficient in a society where one privileges the father's side of the family (one is *garm* "warm" to one's paternal side, and *sard* "cooler" to one's maternal side). In order to reinforce links between related families, one willingly exchanges sisters (Rašti *fedā fegir*, Lāhijāni *ada agir*, lit. "give and take"), a formula which presents the distinct advantage of reducing wedding spending (see below) to zero. In a more general way, one takes advantage of all of one's possible relations (*rawābeṭ*) created by alliance, as for example those with one's *bājenāq*, the husband(s) of the sister(s) of one's wife. A system that promotes non-consanguineous relations (*sababi*) makes the woman the pivot in relations between family lineages (*dudamān*).

The only limits to this exogamous tendency concern the origins of the spouses: even if one lives outside of Gilān, one marries by preference a girl of one's region. In the villages, such regional preferences do not exclude marriages with immigrants (*mohājer*), particularly with *Ḳalkāli*-s from Azarbaijan,



especially if the family lacks a son to assume the shareholding. In such cases the groom will live with his in-law family as a “son-in-law” (*kān-dāmādi*), an unenviable situation, but one that is not so difficult to accept here as in the rest of the country. In northwest Gilān, among the Tāleshis, there is a significant Sunnite minority although the different religious affiliation does not exclude matrimonial alliances; marriages between Sunnites and Shiites are not exceptional. In this case, traditionally the sons receive their religious affiliation from their father, the daughters from their mother (see Bromberger, 2009). On the other hand, marriages between the Gilak Shiites and Kurdish Ahl-e ḥaqq (q.v.), who reside in the same villages, are extremely rare, the latter being considered heretics. Isogamous relations (i.e., where there is a socio-economic equality between the marriage partners) are the rule, with a slight preference for hypergamy (where men marry women of slightly inferior status). The only exceptions are cases of “son-in-law” marriages, as discussed above, and cases where an unattractive daughter is unable to find a spouse and her father resigns himself to accept a son of lesser status.

*Domestic group structure, inheritance and marriage payments.* The domestic group (*kānavār*) generally consists in a nuclear family: this was so in 82 percent of cases observed in Jānakbar in 1978, according to Suzuki (p. 241); in 81 percent of cases observed in Kalārdašt, according to Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1989); and in 86 percent of province households, according to the 1976 national census. The high incidence of nuclear family households in Gilān society underscores the precursory nature of Gilāni society with regard to the general Iranian population (nuclear family households represented 79.2 percent of Iranian households in 1986 and 82.3 percent in 1996 (see Ladier-Fouladi, p. 85). The average size of these households (3.5 persons in a village on the Caspian Plain in 1996, compared with 6.1 persons in 1972) is testament not so much to the break-up of the extended family, but of significantly decreased birth rates (2.1 children per woman today). Such statistics may convey the false impression of the break-up of local society into isolated units—not so. On the one hand, a significant number of households (14 percent in 1976) comprise more than one married family; such multiple-family households include frequently a married son who will eventually inherit the family home. Such households may occasionally include two married brothers, each occupying, with his family, a floor of the house: the eldest on the ground floor, the younger on the second floor. Such households may also contain an aged single parent (Bromberger, 1989, pp. 33-34). On the other hand, and most importantly, the devolution of family assets is accomplished in



such a way as to ensure that family members and the family holdings remain in the family; this is achieved through a process which is worth considering as it relates to institutions and practices.

Before the Land Reform Act of 1962, a holding was not divided at the death of the holder, but transferred in its entirety to one of his sons. “The death of a holder”, says Cyrus Sahami (p. 46), “does not generally raise any complication; the contract is immediately renewed by his successors, although it is usually the landowner who chooses among the heirs the most solvent” (see also Ehlers, p. 294). The other children were forced to immigrate, to take up a minor profession in village society, or to obtain permission for the landowner (*arbāb*) to clear and farm other lands. Peasant access to landownership has been accompanied by a return to Islamic law regarding the transfer of property. According to Islamic law, the sons receive twice as much as the daughters. In practice, the behavior is much more complex. At the time of marriage sons receive from their father a parcel of rice field and a plot of land suitable for building, close to the family compound. Such gifts constitute a sort of pre-inheritance and are more often equal, although a father may favor one or another of his sons, often the youngest or the most docile (Vieille, 1975, p. 69) who might be called to help and eventually to replace him. It is this son who will be the last to leave the household, who will care for his parents in their old age, and who will inherit the family home. One can readily see the effects of such a system; brothers remain neighbors occupying with their families a portion of the fragmented compound (FIGURE 1) and working the adjacent lands.

As for daughters, with only a few exceptions, they will go live in or near their in-laws’ compound. Eventually they will receive from their fathers several *darz* of garden (a *darz* is a land measure equivalent to 10 m<sup>2</sup>; see Bazin and Bromberger, p. 54) and in every case, a dowry (*jahāz*), consisting generally of household utensils which are hers and which were identified and evaluated at the pre-nuptial meeting (*k̄vāstegāri* which includes a formal *ṣurat hagiri* “nuptial agreement”) signed by the elders and important members (*bozorghā*) of both families. The means by which the dowry is negotiated calls attention to the specific way in which marriage gift-giving is contracted in Gilān, and more generally in Iran, where one finds two combined formulas which are not usually associated (Goody and Tambiah, *passim*; Goody, pp. 349-69): the system of bride-wealth (*širbahā* “price of milk,” Ṭāl[eši] *daram*) and the dowry. The “price of milk,” “poured out” by the father of the groom to the father of the



bride in the form of gold coins or, more rarely, in the form of rice holdings, allow the bride's family to assemble the daughter's dowry. One may thus speak, with Goody, of an "indirect dowry." Wedding gift exchanges, however, do not end there, as the entire marriage process is regulated by gifts and counter-gifts, most at the expense of the father of the groom. The marriage contract (*'aqd*) specifies the amount of *mehriya* (*sar mahr* in Gilaki), a term dower (Linant de Bellefonds, II, p. 217) estimated in *sekka* "gold coins," which the groom must pay to the bride in the event of repudiation, or whenever she may require it (this is a *šamšir-e tiz* "sharp sword", notes a commentator). The father of the bride willingly gives his son-in-law a section of a rice field (*bijār-a kalle*); the father of the groom eventually offers his daughter-in-law a property of a similar kind to be worked by her husband. The groom's family purchases the bride's gown and inversely, the bride's family purchases the groom's clothes. During ceremonies held in the home of the bride (*'arus*), and following, in the home of the groom (*dāmād*), the groom's parents present gifts of money (*šābāš*) to the bride, and the bride's parents to the groom. The greater part of giving (*šadāq*), however, most notably the gift of gold coins and jewelry, the cost of the ceremony (the make up of the tablecloth (*sofra*) spread before the couple, the meal, etc.), is born by the father of the groom. The combination of the "price of milk" and of the dowry, the "term" dower, the multitude of gifts which form the basis of conjugal wealth, signal the originality of Gilak and Iranian weddings. The *širbahā* confirms the subordination of one generation (that of the children) to the other (that of the parents), the predominance of the patrilineal descent and recognition of the couple as being of the husband's lineage; the dowry and the gifts ensure a fair independence to the married couple while the dower and her own belongings guarantee to the woman—at least theoretically—a protected status.

In the course of life, a father may favor one or more of his married children with additional gifts of land or money. Upon the parents' death, after the deduction of funeral expenses and the cost of commemorative services (*sevvom*, *haftom*, *čehellom*, *sāl*—the third, seventh, fortieth and anniversary days of mourning), the remaining estate is divided among the male and female heirs according to Shiite Law. The sons who have remained in the village reassemble the property as they can, purchasing parcels from their brothers and sisters, or by share-cropping (*monāšefa*). Relations among brothers are thus entirely regulated by money, although sales and leases are kept within the family lineage, as if there existed an unspoken right of family pre-emption.



*Family values.* The unequal distribution of goods, quarrels about the boundaries between gardens, and infringement of courtesy (*adab*) are causes for jealousy (*ḥasudi*) and can lead to splits within lineages. A head of household who feels offended can go as far as to change his family name and break with his blood relatives. Daughters-in-law, when they reside with their parents-in-law, never fail to protest against the extra load of work in the fields required by their mothers-in-law as *yāvar* “co-operation,” and say that they are treated like unpaid labor (*kārgar-e majjāni*). An atmosphere of both solidarity and tension thus weighs on family relations. Disputes are arbitrated, more or less successfully, by influential and older members (*bozorghā*) of the family. A marriage with a cousin may, as a last resort, reconcile conflicting branches. The family values that shape daily life have substantially evolved in the past thirty years: with the demographic change came a greater appreciation of children (birthday celebrations, practically unknown until recently, have become one of the most important family rites); a father’s authority, including over married sons, remains strong though it has declined somewhat (sons are not required to contribute to family chores as often as in the past); intimacy and a sense of privacy are somewhat developing but remain secondary to family and social obligations, which mark the passing of time. *Nāmus*, or honor, based as it is on the purity of girls, remains the unassailable foundation of integrity. In recent years, the fear of the unknown in a changing society and the increase in the number of divorces have caused a new wave of endogamy, and a considerable and dissuasive increase in the size of dowers.

*The rites of marriage.* While it concretizes alliances between lineages, marriage in Gilān shows some remarkable characteristics. As elsewhere in Iran, unions are generally arranged by a member, even by a friend, of the family who acts as an intermediary (*dallāl*). But the choices, though always subject to family approval, may be more personal; wedding celebrations, and picnics at the time of *sizda bedar* (the thirteenth day of the Nowruz), for example, are privileged occasions for meetings; the first vows are furtively exchanged behind the *telebār* (rice barn or silkworm nursery) or behind a thicket, and are followed by letters discreetly exchanged with the help of close relatives. Families then worry about the health, morals and courtesy of the future spouse. Traditionally, the boy’s (*rikā*) female relatives ask the *dallāk* (masseuse at the *ḥammām*) or the *ruvigir* (woman in charge of unwanted hair removal)—both of whom frequently play the part of go-betweens—if the girl’s (*lāku*) body shows any imperfections. At the time of the marriage proposal



(*zanḡāzi*; Ṭāl. *jena kāzi*), they kiss the fiancée to make sure that she does not have bad breath, they ask her to remove her scarf (*dastmāl*) to make sure that she is not bald (*ayā lāku sar kal neye*), and they ask her for drinks to check her talent as a hostess (see Pāyanda Langarudi, p. 51). At the same time, the girl's family inquires about the boy's piety, morals, and temper. After the usual subtle inquiries, the leading men of both families meet at the fiancée's house to determine and put in writing before witnesses the amount of the *širbahā* and of the *mehriya*, the contents of the dowry, the gifts (particularly gold jewelry or, in Ṭāleš, a cow or a sheep), and the preparations which the family of the groom will have to make for the ceremony. After this engagement-sealing agreement, both families visit and offer gifts to one another. The groom is responsible for the purchase of his future wife's wedding dress as well as for the decoration of the wedding ceremony tablecloth (*'aqd-e suri sofra*). These objects are exhibited at the groom's house at first, and then carried in a ceremonious procession, led by a dervish, to the bride's house. Before the ceremony, depilation, particularly eyebrow plucking (known as *ruvigiri*), symbolizes the transformation of the girl's body into a woman's body.

The contract (*'aqd*) is made official and vows, subject to parental approval, are exchanged at the bride's house in the presence of a cleric. The *'arus*, with her head covered, and the *dāmād* kneel in front of a tablecloth covered with sweet foods to ensure a harmonious union (honey, sugared almonds, cakes, candied sugar); a copy of the Qur'ān; eggs to protect against the evil eye; a mirror—which the bride must stare at to avoid crossing eyes with someone else; two candles, the image of a luminous life; a needle; a hairpin; a pair of scissors to untie the knots (i.e., the difficulties of life, possibly the curse of a former suitor to make the groom impotent); the ring and jewels given to the bride, etc. (see While the cleric reads the marriage contract and hears the couple's consent, two women thought to be lucky (*sefidbakt*) crush sugar over the canopy protecting the couple, and play with a needle pretending to sew the groom's mother's mouth closed (*šū mār-a zuban dabustim* “we bind the groom's mother's tongue”) or, according to other interpretations, to seal “love and affection.” Although a gold coin has been placed under her tongue (*zirzabuni*) by the groom's mother or sister, so that she says “yes” as quickly as possible, the bride takes her time before giving her consent as she awaits a gift from her father-in-law. At the end of the religious ceremony, the bride uncovers her face (*runamā*) and is adorned with jewels. The bride and groom soak their finger in honey and introduce it into each other's mouths, cut the



cake together and drink successively from a cup containing a “two-colored” tea (*čāy do-rang*, where melted sugar and tea are superimposed), thus sealing a union placed under the sign of sweetness (*širini*). Then, they extinguish the candles and the oil lamp (lit at the beginning of the ceremony) with their shoes, adorned with money by the guests, or with a flower. Dances (PLATE IIa, PLATE IIb), gifts and cash donations given by family, friends and neighbors fill the ensuing hours. In the evening, still at the bride’s residence but this time under the responsibility of her family, it is customary to engage in a *hanābandon* “applying the henna”: one or two women, who are themselves deemed to have had good marriages, apply henna to the palms of each spouse and glue them together (see PLATE III).

Once the dowry is delivered, the young spouse goes to her father-in-law’s house. The “carrying of the bride” (*arus buron*, Ṭāl. *geša bari*) is traditionally done by foot or on horseback, but never on a mule, because it is an infertile animal. Preceded by members of her family carrying the mirror and a lit lamp, and escorted by a dervish and by old women chanting wishes for a newborn boy (*elāhi to pesar bezā’i*! “May God give you a baby boy”), the bride is welcomed by her husband who comes to meet her. At the gate of the house, she stops before entering and waits for her parents-in-law to promise her a gift (a cow, a garden patch, etc.; see Pāyanda Langarudi, p. 75). Sometimes, the bride’s younger brother stands in the way and refuses to move until he receives a gift from the parents-in-law (this custom, called *damaras*, *barasari*, is mentioned, about Ṭāleš, by Rafie Jirdehi, I, p. 65). When the *arus* finally enters the yard, people in the *ayvān* (q.v.; the balcony) throw her rice, coins (*šābāš*), sweets, oranges (these gifts are generally referred to as *nāranj-zani*, “throwing of oranges”), and a cooked chicken, then she and the groom are invited to walk three or seven times (lucky numbers) around the well and throwing coins therein—all gestures which are meant to bring protection. An animal (a cow, a sheep) is sacrificed at their feet to place their union and their entrance into the house under the most favorable auspices. The bride brings from her father’s house a fruit tree that she will plant, with her husband, in her father-in-law’s garden. The festivities are traditionally followed by wrestling demonstrations (*košti gil-a-mardi*) and the winner receives a *baram*, a branch decorated with fabric, a pair of socks, or a shirt. Sometimes, a *lāfandbāz* “tightrope walker” also comes to give a show and add fun to the wedding celebration through his acrobatics and tricks.

The day after the wedding night, the sheet (*zafāf*) soiled with blood, proof of



the bride's virginity, is presented to the bride's mother by the *dallāk*, or during a small ceremony (called *pā-ye taḳt*, literally "at the foot of the bed") exclusively for women. The groom then thanks his mother-in-law for keeping her daughter pure and receives from her hot food to reinforce his male ardor. Then comes the *'arus tamāšā* (the "bride's visit"): the newlyweds sitting side by side in the *ayvān* of the groom's house, welcome their neighbors, from whom they receive congratulations and gifts.

The traditional marriage scenario is subject to a few variations depending on place, the couple's social background, and the urban or rural context. In the mountains where Gālešis reside, the bride would wear a strip of cloth (*yašmāḡ*) on her mouth from the time the contract (*'aqd*) is signed until her entrance into her father-in-law's house (Pāyanda Langarudi, pp. 75-76), symbolizing the fact that she was no longer under the sole authority of her father and not yet under that of her husband. In order to seal the union between families, close relatives of the groom would steal an object from the bride's house which they would bring to the groom's house (*idem*, p. 68). Upon leaving her father's house, the bride would take a little boy in her arms to symbolize the birth of a son (Rafie Jirdehi, I, p. 65-66). In addition, precautions are taken to prevent "hostile hands" (for example, of a woman related to a former suitor) from tying the knot on the bride's scarf (*taške-zan*; Pāyanda Langarudi, p. 83). Such a gesture would likely cause the groom to become impotent and would require the help of the *čellebori* (a rite to ward off ill fortune). Finally, however rigid the rules of marriage and the choice of the spouse, a boy and a girl sometimes marry against their parents' wishes. In such cases, the girl finds refuge with the leader of the village or with a close relative and, after some time, the parents usually grant their consent.

Among the rural middle class today, a preference is made towards wedding celebrations in the city, in salons (*sālon*, *tālār*), where men and women are separated, rather than celebrations in farmyards where behavior is less restricted (see Plate II, a and b). Whatever the setting, wedding celebrations generally take place at the time of the new year, and are characterized by intensive gift giving, numerous visits, and by submitting to propitiatory practices, e.g. to protect herself from the evil eye, the bride must wear a pin (*šanjāq*) on her lapel for forty days following the ceremony. These are also privileged moments of prodigality and ostentation (they are carefully filmed nowadays, certain phases of the ceremony are even edited to be better set to film).



*A descriptive terminology of kinship.* As far as the terminology of kinship is concerned, it is, as elsewhere in Iran, descriptive: when referring to someone or, more generally, when addressing someone, kinship relations are expressed by a combination of terms: *mār* “mother,” *per* “father,” *barār* “brother,” *kaḡur* (Ṭāl. *kā*) “sister,” *‘amu* “paternal uncle,” *‘ame* (Ṭāl. *bibi*) “paternal aunt,” *dā’i* (Ṭāl. *kālu*) “maternal uncle,” *kāle*, (Ṭāl. *marḡā*) “maternal aunt,” *šu*, *mard* “husband,” *zan*, (Ṭāl. *jen*) “wife,” *zāk* “child,” *rikā*, *pesar*, *za*, (Ṭāl. *zoa*) “son,” *lāku*, *kor*, *datar*, (Ṭāl. *kila*) “daughter”; *mār-e mār* “mother’s mother,” *zan mār* “wife’s mother,” *šu mār* “husband’s mother,” *mard-a per* “husband’s father,” *barār za* “brother’s son,” etc. (In Gilaki the determinant precedes the determined word: *zan mār* = Pers. *mādar-zan*; see GILĀN x. Languages). The Gilaki adjective *pil* “big” is sometimes used to designate the grandparents; *pil-e per* “grandfather” is used indifferently for the *per-e per* “father’s father” and *mār-e per* “mother’s father.” To address an older relative, one generally uses a term from the kinship vocabulary, often in a hypocoristic form to speak to a father (*bābā*), a mother (*māmān*), or grandparents (*bābā* for the grandfather, *nana* for the grandmother); a husband addresses his wife as *kānom* “Madam” or simply by her first name; a woman calls her husband *āqā* “Sir.” Terms of kinship can be classificatory when one addresses a friend or an older relative: *‘amu* “paternal uncle” or *dā’i*, *kālu* “maternal uncle,” *mār* “mother,” etc. Furthermore, while first names are seldom transmitted from one generation to another, the siblings’ unity is often expressed by the identity of the initial of the first names given to the children (e.g., Kāmbiz, Keyvān, Kāmran, Kiumart). Each person is given two first names (one, personal and for daily use, found in an open list, the other with a religious meaning). Personal names are somewhat influent: one will readily change a sick child’s name to place him under more favorable auspices.

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