

Sometimes Marriage and Childbirth Customs Have Serious Consequences.
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Anthropologists have been telling us for the past century that traditions and cultures have survival value for their people. We have been carefully taught not to criticize another culture because there is no single way to be human. Today, however, we see cultural practices around the world utterly disconnected from survival value. People persist in certain behaviors because they believe they are sacrosanct parts of either their religion or traditions.

Africa. One is hard pressed to find survival value in mutilating female genitalia (FGM), a cherished custom from Egypt through Black Africa. The survival value, they say, is that when women are deprived of sexual pleasure, they are less likely to stray and men will know that their offspring are really theirs. However, what kind of survival value is that for women, for whom this practice kills many even before puberty and maims others during childbirth?

India and China. The cultural preference for boys (and disdain for girls) in Asia has produced a cultural practice of either aborting girl fetuses or murdering female infants. This was done even before the now readily-available gender-identifying ultrasound for pregnant women. Midwives destroy unwanted fetuses, while medical neglect of girl children and their mothers works to the same end. Add to that (in India) the widespread practice of bride burning (get rid of the current wife so that another bride and her dowry can be acquired), which, together with ultrasound and neglect, have disappeared millions of women out of proportion to men. Brides are now at a premium so that only the well-off can afford them. What kind of survival value is it to have a population of young males with no possibility of marriage?

Inbreeding. We know from animal biology that when the breeding population is too close, offspring have poor survivability. Humans have often inbred animals in the mistaken notion that purebreds are somehow superior to mongrels. Those purebreds (horses and dogs) have all sorts of genetic problems-from fragile bones to nervous dispositions. What happens when human beings themselves have such a small breeding population that they have more anomalies-often mental ones-than larger populations?

We have a perfect example of this in the marriage practices everywhere until the past century or so. Village people inbred with consequences easy to see: stunted size, slow wits, and birth defects. (Not all, of course, but enough to be noted.) Inbred ruling families have problems too-such as Queen Victoria's descendants.

Today the worst cases of inbreeding with serious consequences come out of the Muslim world. The Koran specifies which marriages are forbidden (immediate inter-family incest), but encourages first-cousin marriages, specifically with cousins from the father's side.

Nobody has looked at the outcomes of such mating until recently, when we have real numbers on birth defects. For example, among Pakistani citizens in Great Britain, according to the BBC, 55% of Pakistani-Britons are married to a first cousin and their children comprise one-third of genetic illnesses, although Pakistanis are only 3% of the population. This is not only horrifying, but also accounts for the terrible stresses on the British health care system.

In the rest of the Arab world (Reproductive Health Journal), the percentage of first cousin marriages ranges from a high of 60% in the most backward regions (Nubia and South Egypt), but averages in the 40s for UAE, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Mauretania, and Libya; and those more secular or advanced countries from 12 to the 20s (Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Egypt). The higher the number, the worse the outcome.

Child Brides. Another horrible marriage custom usually combines first cousin marriages with woefully underage brides. The June National Geographic has a horrifying study on underage and incestuous marriages and their consequences. The two worst offenders are Yemen, where enforced child marriages (as young as 5) are legal, and village India, where such marriages are illegal but defiantly practiced. The consequences are horrific birthrate (children begin breeding at puberty) and small and young brides bleeding to death on their wedding night. Furthermore, these

underage brides are also stunted and frequently anemic.

Tradition is not always the benefit that anthropologists have told us. Bad traditions harm us all.

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