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Mustafa El Amir

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MONOGAMY, POLYGAMY, ENDOGAMY AND CONSANGUINITY IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MARRIAGE

BY
MUSTAFA EL-AMIR

A. — *Monogamy and Polygamy.*

At the present state of our knowledge of Demotic, it is very difficult to determine whether monogamy or polygamy prevailed in Ancient Egypt. Edgerton⁽¹⁾, however, offered a tentative hypothesis that outside the Royal family, polygamy was not practised in Ancient Egypt. But the references which I am presenting here, suggest a controversial conclusion. It is unfortunate that this scanty evidence does not allow to offer more than another hypothesis.

1. Edgerton based his argument on the translation and interpretation of the usual clause in these marriage settlements «if I abandon thee as wife and hate thee and love another woman than thee I will pay to thee etc.». He takes the preposition «a» =  = $\epsilon\pi\theta$ as «than» of comparison whereas this preposition, in all these marriage settlements, is not the simple «a» but the compound «a hr» =   = $\epsilon\pi\theta\alpha\tau$, *hr* here is more likely that of addition meaning «upon» or «beside»⁽²⁾. It is suggestive here, perhaps, to consider the arabic equivalent of «a hr» i.e. على. In the example NN married X على Z; على here refers to the fact that NN married X beside Z without divorcing the latter. Therefore, we can translate the last statement in the above clause as «. . . . and love another woman upon (or beside or in addition to) thee».

2. The meaning of the Demotic word *hnt*⁽³⁾, usually translated as «love», should be reconsidered at this point.

⁽¹⁾ A clause in marriage settlements in *Ä.Z.* 64/59.

⁽²⁾ See GARDINER *Gram.* § 165, 5.

⁽³⁾ Cf. coptic $\theta\omega\text{NT}$ = approach — CRUM, *Dict.* p. 687 and also Hierog.   = Harem *Wb.*, III, 301.

The Demotic text is as follows :

- (a) Lonsd. I : *mte-y 'r n-y kt shmt n hmt a hr-t.*
 (b) Cairo 30601 : *e-y hms erme kt shmt a hr-t.*
 (c) Passim : *mte-y hnt kt shmt a hr-t.*

These are translated as follows :

- (a) ... and make for myself another woman as wife beside thee
 (b) ... and marry (Lit. sit with) another woman beside thee
 (c) ... and *hnt* another woman beside thee.

This equation leads us to think that this word *hnt* does not mean « to love » but rather « to make love » or to marry. It may also be suggestive here to consider the classical arabic term نكح *an* نكاح which means « marry » and « marriage » respectively. And it is tempting perhaps to say that the colloquial arabic word ختن meaning « to make love » is the same as the Demotic. The determinative —⁽¹⁾, written sometimes in Demotic, agrees with the meaning and supports the suggestion.

The translation of the last statement in that clause is therefore « ... and marry another woman beside thee ».

This assumption implies polygamy. There is no indication that the second marriage could not take place without divorcing the existing one as Edgerton took the meaning by implication.

3. The wording of the Law of year 21 may support our assumption. It runs as follows ⁽²⁾ : « if a man marry a woman and he write for her an endowment, and he have a son by her, and he put her away and he marry another woman ... etc. ». The Demotic words for « put her away » is given as : *ty wy-s* ; an expression which means to remove her or to separate from her but not to divorce her, since, we know, that the Demotic expression for the latter is always *h^c*. The interpretation of the wording of this law may be « if a man marry a woman . . and separate from her (or desert her) and marry another woman ... etc. » ; the first woman is implicitly still considered as his wife No. 1. If this interpretation is right, Polygamy is here implied.

4. This implication may be supported by the frequent statement concerning the woman's Paraphernalia. The husband saith to his wife ; « When thou art in, thou art

⁽¹⁾ See *Ryl.* III, 254, note 11. ⁽²⁾ See THOMPSON, *Siut* p. 13.

in with them; when thou art out, thou art out with them». Then follows a separate clause for the penalty in case of Divorce. This suggests the interpretation; if thou art living with me in my house, thy Paraphernalia will be there with thee but if, however, we are separated, thou wilt take them with thee; thou art their user, I am their trustee. The wife of a man, therefore, lives either with him or separately but she is still his wife.

5. The husband takes upon himself the payment of an alimony to his wife per day, per month and per year, this alimony is described as «food and clothing»⁽¹⁾. The wife is empowered to coerse for the arrears of her alimony that shall be owing from her husband within a year and the husband will give them to her in the place that she wishes. Why should a man takes upon himself the payment of a prescribed alimony if the woman is the only one living with him as wife? This statement, I think, gives the impression that the man has more than one wife.

6. In *Pap. Ryl. IX, 9/20* there is reference to a certain Peteesi «*erme ne-f hmt.w*»; i.e. «and his wives». Griffith, however, commented that this does not imply a plurality of wives but a man's household including his mother, aunts, sisters and so on. But the word *hmt* in Demotic stands only for wife. A woman is always designated as *shmt*. Besides if a man's household are referred to in Demotic, they are mentioned as «*ne-f rm.w*» = his people or family. The implication of *hmt.w*, I think, refers to plurality of wives.

7. A clear case of Polygamy is recorded in the 20th Dynasty in the text relating to the Tomb robberies⁽²⁾. It runs as follows: The citizeness Hrr the wife of the watchman NN of the Treasury of Pharaoh. The citizeness Ta-Nfrrt, *te-f kt hmt mh 2* = his other wife making two. There is no reason here to attribute a mistake to the scribe and interpret the text otherwise⁽³⁾.

8. The case of Pa-rt⁽⁴⁾, who married three woman may suggest Polygamy. We assume that two wives were living at the same time without any indication to divorce. The first died, the second deserted and the third probably was living with him at his death. The second, even after his death had the right to inherit property.

⁽¹⁾ Cf. arabic مونة وكسوة .

⁽²⁾ See PEET, *Pap. Mayer 13-C-5*.

⁽³⁾ Cf. EDGERTON, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁽⁴⁾ See EL-AMIR, *A Family Archive from Thebes*, part II, p. 30.

9. In the story of Setna, we have seen that Tababue asked him to kill his children in order to secure the property to her own ; but she did not ask him to divorce his wife ; a fact which may imply that a man could have more than one.

10. A few cases of Polygamy in the Pharaonic period have been pointed out by scholars. Erman referred to a case of bigamy when a certain NN (18th Dyn.) had married his niece called NN and another woman called NN. The two wives were friends.

In studying Pap. B.M. 10027 and Louvre 2442, Revillout pointed out a case of bigamy where a man married two women, who were also sisters.

In concluding this rather discursive evidence can we assume that the lack of a direct and strong evidence to Polygamy in these Demotic Marriage Contracts is due to the fact that priests only, according to Diodorus, had to live in monogamy while others could marry as many wives as they liked. And, we know, nearly all these documents belong to a family of priests.

B. — *Endogamy and Consanguinity in Egyptian Marriage :*

Endogamy was not uncommon in the Pharaonic Royal families. In the Ptolemaic period, the Ptolemies, following the Egyptian custom, married their sisters though the Greeks abhorred endogamous marriage.

Unfortunately, we did not come across a clear case of endogamy among the people of our documents. Does this connote that no contracts were needed in cases of marriage between brothers and sisters. The case of Naneferkaptah and Ahure in the story of Setna, perhaps, supports the assumption, if endogamy had ever been practised outside the Royal family.

However, there is ample evidence that marriage had always been within the family group ; bride and groom being, in most of the cases, of kindred family units. Definitely, the Egyptians were not exogamous. Marriage of nieces and cousins (paternal and maternal) was common in these families. To-day, in modern Egypt, the first kind of marriage is considered incest ; the other is recognised and sometimes preferred. The cousin (particularly the paternal) has the first claim on the daughter of his uncle ; unless for one reason or another one of the parties is not acceptable to the other ; and even in such a case marriage with another near relation is preferred.

C. — *Concubinage and Temporary Marriage :*

It seems that concubinage was practised outside the Royal family. An interesting reference to that, was made by the Vizier who asked the children of Amen h'ww

about their father's arrangements which he had made with his second wife. And when they approved the case, the Vizier added « Even if she had not been his wife but a Syrian or a Nubian whom he loved and to whom he gave property of his . . . etc. ».

In discussing Ostrakon Strassburg D. 1845, Edgerton has pointed out that the man and the woman agreed to marry for a certain period of time. This can be supported by the last statement in Turin Quadro B.V. This statement (in a Divorce) runs as follows : «Thou hast satisfied me of thy marriage contract with the children whom thou hast born to me». In such a temporary marriage, the man merely wanted children but not a wife ; he possibly had already one who might have been barren.