



Filipinos' View of Marriage: Dynamic Yet a Colonial Remnant

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Publication Date

08-12-2023

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Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Dy, E. M. (2021). *Filipinos' View of Marriage: Dynamic Yet a Colonial Remnant* (Version 1). University of Notre Dame. https://doi.org/10.7274/24735639.v1

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Filipinos' View of Marriage: Dynamic Yet a Colonial Remnant¹

"Bakit hindi ka pa nagpakasal, iha?" ("Why haven't you gotten married yet?")

This question is perhaps one of the most commonly asked questions by a Filipino relative or friend during a get-together in the Philippines. A popular definition of marriage is a socially sanctioned union that is regulated by beliefs and laws and prescribes certain rights and duties of the partners (Encyclopedia Britannica).² Hence, marriage is on the minds of many Filipinos, living in constant fear that one would be labeled an outcast by society if one chooses to stay single for 'too long.' This fear stems from the perception that marriage is vital to social fulfillment, such that the Philippines -- besides the Vatican -- is the only country where divorce remains illegal (The Economist). The Filipinos' actions with regard to marriage has distanced itself from the Catholic, more traditional definition, but the Filipinos' view of marriage remains a reflection of the Spanish perspective.

The Spanish provided the Philippines with marriage's first formal definition through the introduction of Catholicism. The Spanish captured Manila in 1571, where they immediately halted the spread of Islam, eventually turning the Philippines into the only predominantly Christian country in Southeast Asia within its 333-year rule (Rigg 22). The Spanish colonization of the Philippines impacted the country economically, politically, and technologically, but arguably the most important, socioculturally. Catholicism holds celibacy and taking holy orders to the highest regard, where marriage is necessary before engaging in sexual intercourse with a partner (Jones 94). Moreover, as Catholicism rapidly spread across the country, marriage became more prevalent, and changes in patterns of fertility occurred as a result. Beyond

¹ For conciseness purposes, "Filipino" is interchangeable with "Filipina."

² This paper will assume this definition throughout.

religion, the expansion of cities and the introduction of new economic activities also contributed to couples marrying far earlier and bearing more children. Similarly, the expansion of settled agriculture also provided couples with the opportunity and security to raise large families, encouraging Filipinos to get married (Rigg 28). The Spanish influence of Catholicism on the country shaped the perception of marriage as a holy sacrament and sacred institution; although it also had other implications.

Marriage was also viewed as a determinant of one's social standing during the Spanish Colonial Period. Hence, the Spanish of Manila opted to marry Spanish women because of the potential for economic or social advancement. The Spanish women in Manila were typically betrothed at a young age, and the married woman had to take on a subservient role to her husband. For instance, strict fidelity was expected from a wife, but a husband could legally murder both his wife and her lover if they were caught in a "flagrante delicto" (Doran 272). In essence, Spanish wives were expected to stay loyal to their husbands, who may or may not be committing adultery. The Spanish regime also resulted in Filipina women being left with children to support, as Spanish men would frequent sexual relations while they were in the country, but would proceed to leave the child and the woman. These children who were left behind by their Spanish fathers were referred to as "mestizos": a mix of European and Asian ancestry (Doran 274). However, the greater "whiteness of skin" enabled the Spanish achieve a higher social status compared to their mestizo counterparts (Doran 274). Marriage carried great power in the social hierarchy as a whole due to the plethora of opportunities such a union introduced.

Today, marriage remains an avenue for greater social or economic opportunities, yet the role of race has loosened since the Spanish colonization. The world is more connected than ever before, with the United States and Japan being the most desired destinations for Filipina marriage-immigration (Lauser 86). The favored views toward these countries can be explained by their colonization of the Philippines in the past and have created the stereotype of Filipina women marrying western men. Women from the Philippines are perceived to be in search of "modern husbands" in hopes of better opportunities overseas, while western men search for "traditional" Filipina wives who they expect to be more "conservative" and "less demanding" (Lauser 85). The typical mindset of an individual from the Philippines today places great importance on improving one's family's livelihood, compelling many young adults in the Philippines to consider entry into the global labor force. This cultural norm is driven by the Filipino value of utang na loob, directly translating to "debt of the inside" or figuratively, "debt of gratitude" (Alipio 218). Such an utang na loob is a manifestation of honoring the aforementioned filial piety and reciprocating one's family's hard work. Filipina women are thus faced with the clash between seeking a modern outlook (like moving overseas for a man they truly love) and their more traditional values of giving back to their families, in fear of being labeled a matandang dalaga ("old maid" in English) (Lauser 88). This mindset explains the increase in interracial marriages, alongside the commonly-held colonial mentality that still holds true in the Philippines. In fact, Mestizos comprise approximately 30% of the Philippine population to date (Quora)³. These cultural debts largely impact a Filipina woman's decision to marry a foreigner, emphasizing the expanded boundaries of who one can marry. This

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³ This statistic is an approximation, as the Philippine Statistics Authority has not published a value for this.

phenomena is one of several actions of Filipinos that reveal their moving away from the Catholic definition of marriage.

The proliferation of internationalism has contributed to the shifting of the Philippines' previously more conservative values. This value shift is reflected in the rising rate of premarital sex amongst the Filipino youth, pulling away from chastity before marriage. In 1997, Lacson et al. conducted a study on sexual abstinence among urban university students in the Philippines. They found that 83% were sexually abstinent and that Filipino females were four times as likely as males to be sexually abstinent (Lacson et al. 168). The researchers concluded that their findings support initial research that Filipino females value their virginities more than their male counterparts (Lacson et. al 171). Yet, fast forward to the 21st century, this statistic has doubled for both males and females. Within 50 years, over a third of Filipinos aged 15 to 24 have engaged in premarital sex (PCHRD). Furthermore the increased prevalence of premarital sex has taken away a previously crucial aspect of the Filipinos' definition of marriage: chastity.

Along with this internationalism is a rise in cohabitation amongst the youth, driven by its economic benefits. In Kabamalan's "New Path to Marriage," she discusses two phenomena that link to the rise in cohabitation: the postponement of marriage and cohabitation becoming a stage in the marital process altogether (120). Such a decision to cohabit is typically driven by economic reasons such as the societal expectation that weddings must be grand; especially among lower-class people who would not be able to afford a grand wedding nor the legal process of separation (if need be). A young Filipino was quoted saying, "It's a shame to have a wedding without a reception, a celebration" (Kabamalan 121). The importance of adequate finances in marriage formation is becoming a point of consideration in many countries:

cohabitation is more common among couples with fewer financial assets and a lower level of education compared to more well-off counterparts (Williams 2).

Even if cohabitation is common in the actions of Filipinos, marriage remains the ultimate goal. While 70% of Filipino youth began their first union through cohabitation, marriage still stands to be the ultimate goal for individuals who choose to cohabitate (Kabamalan 126). This emphasis on marriage's crucial role in social fulfillment is also supported by YAFS (Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study) data, which indicates that only 18.5% of the sample believe that it is acceptable to cohabit with no plans of future marriage (Williams 15). Cohabitation's economic benefits appeal to Filipino youth, yet the majority of Filipinos believe that the goal of relationships should still be marriage.

Marriage remains a high priority because Philippine society views an unmarried woman as "incomplete," closely linked to greater Southeast Asia's shared desire of forming a happy family (Lauser 88). Compared to other forms of unions, the one thing that makes marriage distinct is its aspects of public approval and recognition, as Philippine couples take pride in their elaborate marriages (Kabamalan 111). With that said, the Spanish influence of Catholicism is undoubtedly present -- with over 80% of the Philippine population remaining Catholic -- shaping the definition of marriage in Philippine society. To date, both the Philippine state and the Philippine Catholic Church also prohibit divorce by law. The Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines subsequently makes it difficult for the typical Filipino/a to obtain legal separation or annulment due to its high financial burden and prolonged time frame. There have been discussions of a potential divorce bill in the future, but the chances of passage are estimated to be 50-50. Even if the bill was passed by the Senate, the Philippine President would still have to

approve it, and the majority of Filipinos are still resistant to the divorce bill. Moreover, such a clash between the Church and the State in a predominantly Catholic country makes it unlikely for such a bill to be passed anytime soon (Sullivan). Spanish colonization positioned marriage to be held in high regard through the State and the Church, and these two institutions are what anchor the Filipinos' view of marriage.

While the superiority of marriage in the minds of Filipinos is still present, a growing portion of the Philippine population is moving away from marriage as a practice. The global "flight from marriage" phenomenon can be best attributed to the growing independence of women and rising educational attainment levels (Jones 95). In many cases, individuals prioritize their careers and choose to postpone — or even forego — marriage. Nonetheless, even if marriage is still perceived as the 'ideal' in the minds of Filipinos, marriage is no longer as popular in practice, especially amongst Filipino youth. Thus, the character of the union itself is changing: unions are made even if they don't choose to marry. In the country's latest population census, the number of Single Filipinos rose between 2010 and 2015, from 31.3 million to 34.8 million (Philippine Daily Inquirer). While not solely attributable to the consequences of marriage, the fact that an increasing number of Filipinos are choosing to remain single reflects the decline of the said practice in greater Southeast Asia.

While new trends have emerged in recent years like interracial marriages, engaging in premarital sex, and cohabitation, the inherited value of conservativeness from Spanish colonization is still present in the Philippines. The colonization of the Spanish shaped the structure of Philippine society and the inherent values that continue to be passed on from parent to child. The definition of marriage in itself is dynamic, varies from one culture to

another, and of course, from one person to another. However, while the Filipinos' definition of marriage may have shifted since the 1800s, the role of marriage in social fulfilment -- dictating the emphasis one may place on the practice -- is a remnant of Spanish colonization.

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