

From an ethnographic perspective, marriage is about rights and responsibilities rather than love and romance.

In Australia, the definition of marriage is “the union of two people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life”.

But this isn't universally valid.

First, in many societies, marriage unites more than two spouses. Here we speak of plural marriages when a man weds two (or more) women, or a woman marries a group of brothers— an arrangement called fraternal polyandry, characteristic of certain Himalayan cultures. Second, some societies (even traditional ones) recognise various kinds of same-sex marriages. In South Sudan, for example, a Nuer woman could take a wife if her father had no sons, who were necessary for the survival of his patrilineage. That father could ask his daughter to stand as a fictive son to take a bride. This daughter would become the socially recognised husband of another woman (her wife). This was a symbolic and social relationship rather than a sexual one.

The “wife” had sex with a man or men (whom her female “husband” approved) until she became pregnant. The children born to the wife were accepted as the offspring of both the female husband and the wife.

In the highlands of PNG, Women work hard growing and processing subsistence crops, raising and tending pigs (the main domesticated animal and favourite food), and doing domestic cooking. Still, they are isolated from the public domain, which men control. Men grow and distribute prestige crops, prepare food for feasts, and arrange marriages. Male–female avoidance is associated with intense pressure on resources (Lindenbaum 1972). Men fear all female contact, including sexual acts. They think that sexual contact with women will weaken them. Indeed, men see everything female as dangerous and polluting. They segregate themselves in men's houses and hide their precious ritual objects from women. They delay marriage, and some never marry.

Similarly, traditional Nayar marriage was barely more than a formality in southern India— a coming-of-age ritual. A young woman would go through a marriage ceremony with a man, after which they might spend a few days together at her tarawad. A tarawad is a residential complex with several buildings, its own temple, granary, well, orchards, gardens, and landholdings. Headed by a senior woman, assisted by her brother, the tarawad housed her siblings, her children, her sister's children and other matrilineal-matrilineal relatives. Then the man returns home. The woman may have many sexual partners.

The Moso in China are matrilineal and prefer to live in matrilineal extended family households. Although marriage exists and is practised in some parts of the ***Moso territory, the dominant form of sexual and reproductive union is a visiting system called tise***, which means “walking back and forth” between the households of the lovers. Tise relationships are neither binding nor exclusive; all children produced by such a union belong to their mother’s household.

Whether or not they are cemented by passion, marriages in nonindustrial societies remain the concern of social groups rather than individuals. The scope of marriage extends from the social to the political— alliance formation. Strategic marriages are tried-and-true ways of establishing alliances between groups.

Love and romance appear more explicitly identified in Westernised society through mass media.