Many historians have argued about what marriage meant for the indigenous people of the Americas. Some have argued that that Spanish strengthened and/or invented the concept of marriage for indigenous people to create order, but others argue that marriage was already a concept that indigenous people practiced. Historians such as Susan Kellogg,Louise M. Burkhart, and Karen V. Powers’ feminist perspectives on the topic of marriage demonstrate the significant roles that women and men played in marriage to create order in their society. In contrast, Susan M. Socolow focuses more on the economic benefits indigenous spouses obtained under the Spanish regime.

In Susan Kellogg’s piece, “The Woman’s Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period,” she focuses on what marriage meant to the indigenous people during the pre-colonial period, and that it was in fact a crucial concept to create balance within society. Both men and women played crucial roles, but Kellogg demonstrates how women were just as important as men. She focuses on how women were in control of some things and were able to hold positions that enabled them to be independent. Women were able to gain wealth in a marriage by working and this enabled the men to have an understanding on the importance of a women’s role within the marriage. For instance, Kellogg states, women “…performed various activities in palaces, temples, markets, schools, and craftworkers’ organizations” (569). By bringing up the many jobs women were able to fulfill, she showcases that both individuals were able to thrive in the Mexica society and create generational wealth for themselves. Also, The Florentine Codex was constantly incorporated in this piece to support her claim that marriage was an essential concept in Mexica society, which was one of the largest indigenous states in pre-colonial times. Kellogg states, “… women’s capacity for labor and hard work was described by Sahagun’s informants in the Florentine Codex as among the traits associated with good women” (570). Thus women’s labor was credited as a good trait as it enabled success to society and to the families of these individuals. Kellogg focuses on how marriage was an institution that gave women power in certain areas that not only benefited the society but their own self.

In her piece “Mexica Women on the Home Front Housework and Religion in Aztec Mexico” Louise M. Burkhart argues that the Mexica concept of marriage was not the same as that of Europeans. In fact, she proves that everyone within a marriage played a role that contributed to society whereas European women who were married didn’t hold that same significance. Therefore, she explores the tasks that women and men did and their outcome. Unlike Kellogg, Burkhart depends more on illustrations from the Florentine Codex to prove that women’s tasks held immense significance. She interprets an illustration of a women holding a broom as “...a weapon: it was the housewife’s defense against invading dirt and disorder, peripheral forces that, like the enemies of the state, threatened the maintenance of order and centrality” (Burkhart 35). The illustration alone provides an insight into one of the many tasks women performed during pre-colonial time, and that they even had access to perform jobs in elite places such as temples. However, her interpretation of the broom discredits the task, as she wants to put more emphasis on the broom, while the women sweeping hold immense power on its own. Burkhart did include other tasks such as weaving that demonstrates women were able to sell their items and gain profit from it. Through these tasks women could be independent individuals, whereas European women had to depend on their husbands. Unlike European women, indigenous women were given power and control over certain roles and were also given tasks when men went to war. This was never the case for European women. Therefore, Burkhart holds a feminist perspective when describing the roles that women and men played in marriage, and that marriage was a meaningful practice during pre-colonial times.

Just like Kellogg and Burkhart, Karen V. Powers had the same stance that marriage was an institution that was already in place that allowed for order and success in indigenous societies. In her piece, “Andeans and Spaniards in the Contact Zone: A Gendered Collusion,” Powers points out that the Spanish regime destroyed the identity and culture of Andeans and enforced a patriarchal system that hurt indigenous women more than men. Andean women were able to perform duties that made them independent, however under the Spanish “…indigenous women lost position as professional weavers and crafts producers – occupations, and even art forms…” (Powers, 533). Therefore, she makes it clear that the Spanish belief system and laws benefited men in both cultures, as men in both cultures still held authority, especially within marriage. Powers holds a feminist perspective, describing how women contributed to the Andean society not only through income but through property. Women were able to own and pass down property to their children regardless of their gender. Therefore, the Spaniards dismantling this practice led Andean communities to favor patriarchal views Powers writes, “…the Spanish colonial regime has lopped off half of the indigenous political system and transformed its organization from gender-parallel to male-centric” (Powers, 521). Thus Powers demonstrates that the Spanish belief system did not create order and progress for the Andean communities but rather imposed patriarchal rules that benefited only men and which stripped the power and authority of Andean women.

In the chapter “Conquest and Colonization”, Socolow focuses more on the economic benefits women were able to obtain under the Spanish regime. She says that integration of Catholicism within marriage was essential for Andean women to succeed in life. Although Socolow acknowledges that women were “…enslaved, bartered, sold into prostitution or concubinage…” (41) during the Conquest, she also complicates this history by stating that women in fact benefited more by providing examples of how some women still held authority and noting that monogamous marriage was better for women as they only had to focus on a smaller family. For instance, she states “…women in nuclear family units probably benefited from increased privacy and clearer direct authority over their children.” (Socolow 51). She believed that economically women benefited from this but fails to point out that women were no longer in charge of money or family; only men were. Also, she only includes how it benefited elite women; she never goes into detail on how it affected the non-elite women. Socolow tries to make a feminist point by stating that women were able to hold power such as men. However she does not discuss at what cost this is accomplished. Women often had to leave their families and were forced to marry men. She writes,“Indian women were whipped, raped, psychically abused, tortured, and killed for resisting unwanted sexual advances as well as other minor infractions” (Socolow 41). Women had to sacrifice a lot to be able to hold power. She also states that it benefited marriages and essentially women as they were able to go to the top. However, this seems to minimize the Andean society and institutions that were already in place. Thus, this piece was coming from an economic perspective as she focuses more on how the Spanish regime gave women opportunities and wealth.

In conclusion, marriage was a concept that some historians believed was practiced before America was colonized. It brought order, wealth and balance to individuals and to the society. Other historians such as Socolow had more of an economic perspective believing that the Spaniards in fact brought new opportunities to the indigenous people and that women were able to thrive because of this. In the end, these historians demonstrated that marriage was an effective and impactful concept that enabled each society to have balance and order.

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