

***How unique is the Western European Marriage Pattern?  
A Comparison of Nuptiality in Historical Europe and the  
Contemporary Arab World***

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Paper presented at the conference on  
**Marriage Patterns, Household Formation and Economic Development**  
Utrecht, October 7-9, 2010

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*How unique is the Western European Marriage Pattern?  
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World*

Theo Engelen<sup>1</sup> and Paul Puschmann<sup>2</sup>

Historical demographers do their research in a constantly changing scholarly setting. One of the few certainties has been the existence of a particular marriage pattern in Europe, west of the imaginary line between St. Petersburg and Triest. This geographic positioning was provided by J. Hajnal<sup>3</sup>, but the basic idea was formulated already at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Marriage in this part of the world ("The civilised states of modern Europe," as Malthus called them) was regulated through 'prudential restraints', that is high ages at marriage and a considerable part of the population that never married at all. When inviting historians to reflect on this marriage pattern, however, the simple description appears to be inadequate. This is what Theo Engelen and Arthur Wolf found out in their volume *Marriage and the family in Eurasia. Perspectives on the Hajnal hypothesis*. Some of the contributors considered the European marriage pattern simply as a statement of facts about age at marriage and proportion permanent celibates. Others included the causes for the specific behavior: the system of neolocality for newly-weds in Europe resulted in later and fewer marriages than systems where the young couple was included in larger households. Finding a 'niche' was the prerequisite for marriage in Europe. A third approach even considered the marriage pattern as an equilibrating tool to match the number of inhabitants and the resources necessary to feed them.<sup>5</sup>

No wonder, then, that Ruth Dixon already in 1971 was surprised to find that "we know very little about the conditions in different societies or among different sub-groups

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<sup>3</sup> John Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', in *Population in History*, eds. D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley (London: Arnold 1965), 101-143.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, As It Affects the Future Improvement of Society* (1798) (New York: Random House, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Theo Engelen & Arthur Wolf, 'Introduction: Marriage and the Family in Eurasia. Perspectives on the Hajnal hypothesis. In: Theo Engelen & Arthur Wolf (Eds.) *Marriage and the Family in Eurasia* (Amsterdam: Aksant 2005) 15-36.

that lead some populations to delay marriage longer than others, and some to contribute much higher proportions than others of bachelors and spinsters who pass through their prime reproductive years without marrying at all”.<sup>6</sup> The findings of Hajnal are interesting, but they do not explain why “some non-European populations have shown a recent trend toward delaying marriage and in a very few cases toward increased celibacy as well”.<sup>7</sup> In this way Dixon already raises the question mentioned in the title of this paper: how unique is the Western European marriage pattern?<sup>8</sup> The question was not on everyone’s mind. Goode, for instance, still argued “that Western family systems for the past 1,000 years have been different from those in China, India, Japan and the Arab countries in their greater emphasis on individual responsibility and in the absence of clan or lineage systems and ancestor worship”.<sup>9</sup>

This may have been true for the past, but Dixon concludes that a convergence of marriage patterns is visible. Since 1945, in most Western countries there has been a pronounced trend toward earlier and more universal marriages, she writes in 1971, whereas in parts of the Middle East and Asia marriages at higher ages became the rule: “In some developing nations in the non-Western world constraints on marriage that did not exist formerly are now making an appearance: shortages of land, underemployment in rural areas, crowding and unemployment in cities, and so on. (...) Thus, it may well be that marriage patterns will converge and populations will become more homogeneous across regions in their average age at first marriage and in the proportions who never marry.”<sup>10</sup>

Since this hypothesis was made, 40 years have passed and it is time to assess whether or not Dixon was right. We will focus particularly on the Arab world. How do the countries in that part of the world fit in the predicted process of convergence?

#### *Development of fertility and nuptiality in Arab countries since 1970*

In a 1992 article, Carla Makhoul Obermeyer uses the World Fertility Survey of the 1970s to characterize the Arab nuptiality pattern. Marriage in that decade, she writes, was quasi-

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth B. Dixon, ‘Explaining cross-cultural variations in age at marriage and proportion never marrying’, *Population Studies* 25 (1971) 215-233, especially 215.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, 216.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, 220.

<sup>9</sup> Cited by idem, 225.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, 230.

universal, childbearing began early and continued throughout the reproductive years and contraceptive use was low. From 1970 on, however, a decline of fertility started. Regional weighted average declined from a total fertility rate (TFR) of 7.0 to 5.6 in the period 1985-1990. In her conclusions Obermeyer predicts that reductions in total fertility will be moderate in Arab countries and not uniform. In her view, the pace of decline will be heavily influenced by the degree of economic development, the persistence of tension between Islam and the West, and the power of religious tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Graph 1 shows that Obermeyer's prediction has only partly come true. An impressive change in fertility occurred throughout the Arab World. During the latter part of the twentieth century everywhere a decline in the TFR started. Although the timing and pace of the fertility decline indeed show important national differences, a clear structural decline is observable in all Arab countries. Except for Yemen, total fertility rates have declined everywhere from 6 to beneath 5. National differences are striking. While in the period 2000-2005 fertility levels in Tunisia, Lebanon and Kuwait were already around the replacement level, in Yemen, Mauretania, Djibouti, Iraq and Sudan total fertility rates had not yet fallen below 4.5. However, even in Yemen, where the TFR still amounted to 5.9 an important drop in fertility has taken place, since still in the 1980's the total fertility rate in this country was far above 8. A simple comparison may illustrate the revolutionary character of the reproductive change in the Arab world. In the 1970's an average Moroccan woman still gave birth to about six children. In 2004 this number had already fallen to 2,4. In France the same change in reproduction took some two hundred years.<sup>12</sup>

Next to the variance between nations, important regional differences in fertility decline *within* these nations are observable, especially between the urban and the rural parts. Indeed, according to Phillipe Fargue, one of the specialists in the demography of the Maghreb and the Middle East, one of the two general lessons to be learned from the research on fertility decline in the Arab World is the fact that fertility in the city is always lower than in the (adjacent) countryside.<sup>13</sup>

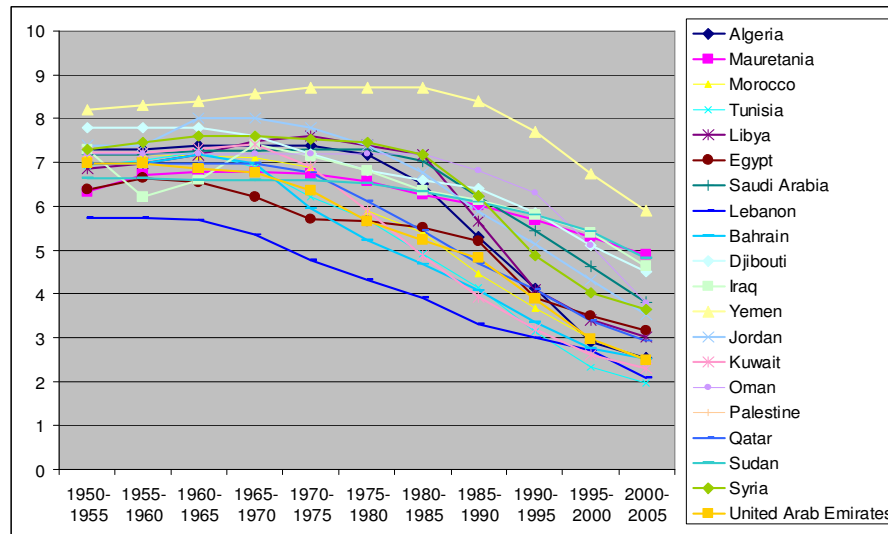
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<sup>11</sup> Carla Makhoul Obermeyer, 'Islam, women, and politics: the demography of Arab countries', *Population and Development Review* 18 (1992) 33-60, especially 35, 39 and 53.

<sup>12</sup> Zahia Ouadah-Bedidi and Jaques Vallin, 'Maghreb: la chute irrésistible de la fécondité', *Population et Sociétés, bulletin mensuel d'information de l'institut national d'études démographiques* 359 (2000) 1.

<sup>13</sup> Philippe. Fargues, "La baisse de la fécondité arabe", in: L. Bouziane, e.a., *Huit questions de population* (Tunis 1991) 67.

**Graph 1: The Development of the Total Fertility Rate in the Arab World**



Source: United Nations Population Database

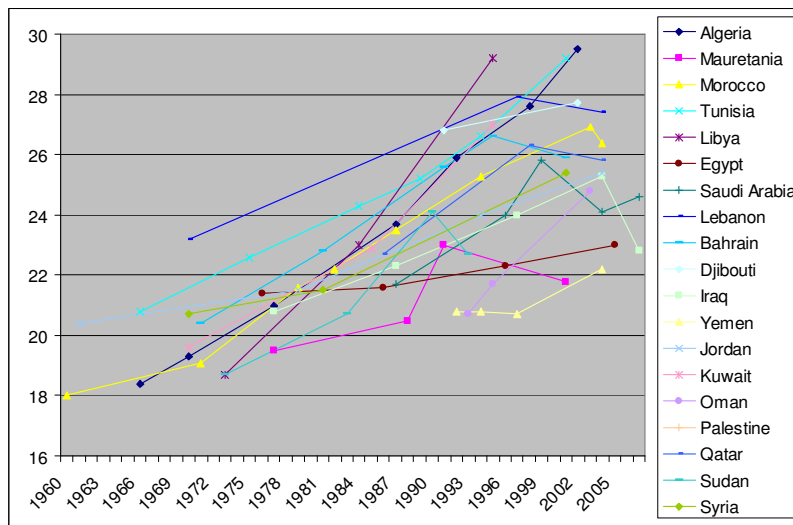
In this paper, the focus is not on fertility, but on marriage regimes. So, what happened to nuptiality after 1970? From the European past we know that there is a clearcut relationship between fertility and nuptiality. Is this also the case in the Arab world? Scholars like Hoda Rashad and Magued Osman write about a 'nuptiality transition' in the Arab world. According to Tabutin et al. nuptiality has changed so much during the past decades that one could even speak of a marriage *revolution*.<sup>14</sup> First of all, an increase of ages at first marriage is visible. Between the 1960s and the 1990s female age at marriage rose with approximately 5 years. This phenomenon especially shows in Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Morocco where women in 2005 married at an age close to 30 years, one of the highest ages of the world (see Graph 2). For men too, age at marriage rose, be it at a slower pace (see Graph 3). Again the Maghreb countries lead the way. As a result the age difference between spouses declined from 6 to 3 years.<sup>15</sup> When we take Morocco as an example, we find a rise of male mean age at first marriage between 1960 and 2003 from 24.1 to 31.1. For women the respective figures are 18.0 and 26.9.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Hoda Rashad & Magued Osman, 'Nuptiality in Arab Countries: Changes and Implications', in: Nicolas Hopkins (Edt.) *The New Arab Family* (Cairo/ New York 2003) 20-44. Dominique Tabutin et al., 'The demography of the Arab World and the Middle East from the 1950s to the 2000s. A survey of changes and a statistical assessment', *Population (English Edition)* 60 (2005) 505-591 and 593-615.

<sup>15</sup> Tabutin et al., 'The demography of the Arab World, 524-525.

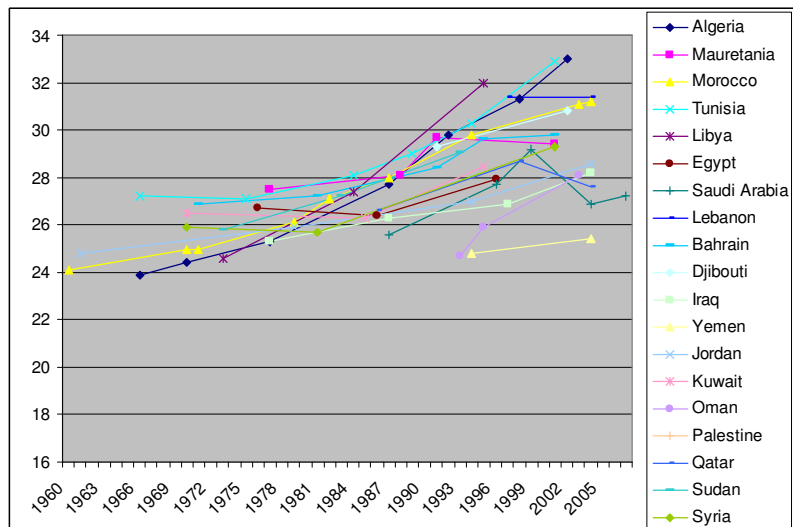
<sup>16</sup> Idem, 597.

**Graph2: The Mean Age at Marriage of Women in the Arab World, 1960-2007**



Source: World Marriage Data 2008

**Graph 3: The Mean Age at Marriage of Men in the Arab World, 1960-2007**

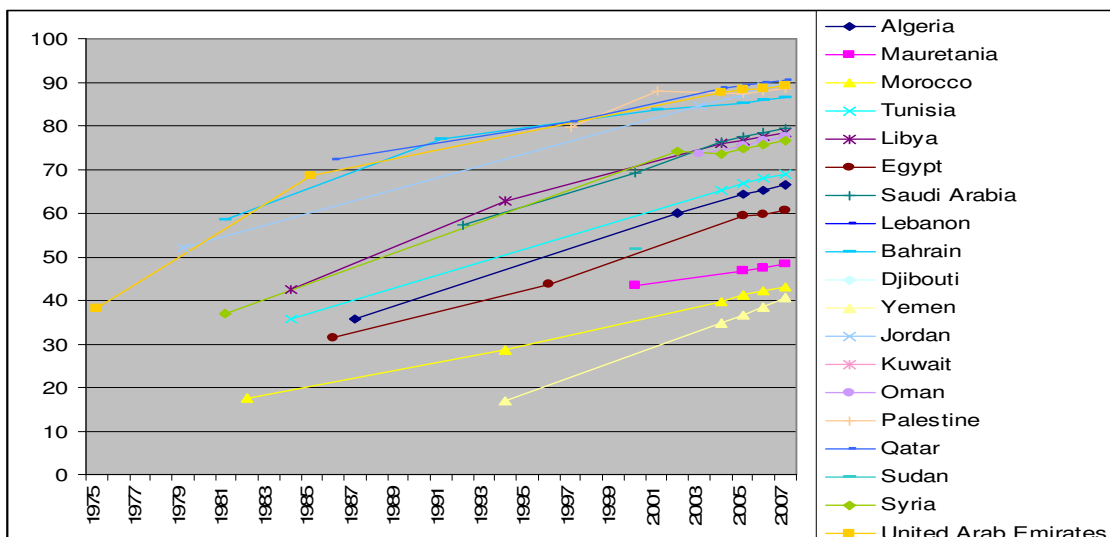


Source: United Nations; World Marriage Data 2008

Tabutin et al. emphasize the effects of this revolution for the life-courses of the inhabitants of these countries. "This represents a major and novel change for women in particular. The general shift away from a female life cycle dedicated to marriage and childbearing from the end of adolescence, to a cycle that begins with a more or less

extended period of single life, as was already partly the case for men.”<sup>17</sup> The unprecedented change in the marriage regime is the result of the longer time spent in education and other socio-cultural changes related to the new role of women in Arab society. Indeed ever since the 1970’s the proportion of females which is able to read and write is rising spectacularly, as is indicated by graph 4. In the United Arab Emirates, for instance, the percentage of literate females aged fifteen and older, rose from 38% in 1975 to almost 90% in 2007. Increased schooling among females, the rise in the mean age at first marriage and the decline in fertility seem to be closely interrelated. Indeed according to Philip Fargues the second general lesson to be learned about fertility decline in the Arab world is the fact that educated women give birth to a smaller number of children than uneducated females.<sup>18</sup>

**Graph 4: Percentage of Females (15+) able to read and write**



Source: United Nations

The longer time spent at school results in a postponement of marriage and consequently in a decrease in fertility as the fertile period spend within marriage is shortened. Indeed first age at marriage is strongly correlated with the onset of the reproductive period since marriage is the only legal social institution in which Arab women are allowed to procreate. In a cultural context in which extramarital sex is believed to create

<sup>17</sup> Tabutin et al, "The demography of the Arab World, 526.

<sup>18</sup> Philippe. Fargues, "La baisse de la fécondité arabe", in: L. Bouziāne, e.a., *Huit questions de population* (Tunis 1991) 67.

*fitna* (chaos), the number of births out of wedlock is highly limited.<sup>19</sup> Parents indeed undertake everything within their power to preserve the virginity of their daughters till their wedding night in order to preserve the honor of the family.<sup>20</sup>

The postponement of marriage is almost everywhere coupled with an increase in female participation at the labor market. This is not true for Mauretania and Sudan, as their female participation was high and stayed at almost the same level. Both their geographic location and their situation at the labor market suggest that the social-economic situation of these countries conform rather to Sub-Saharan countries when it comes to gender-issues. In all other countries the proportion of females which are active at the labour market increased significantly. In Bahrain, for instance, the percentage of active women rose from 11% in 1980 to 22,5% in 2006. Algeria is currently with 35% of its female population at the labour market a distinctive trendsetter. Again this finding brings to mind the European situation, where, according to Hajnal, going into service of young adults was the logical result of late ages at marriage

Nowadays, the economic crisis also contributes through unemployment among young people and housing shortage to the postponement of marriage. And thus: "(...) In all probability the near future will see the end of universal marriage and the appearance, as in other continents, of a 'structural' never-married population." To be sure, notwithstanding the long-term development several nuptiality regimes co-exist today in the same country in social and geographic sub-populations. As a result, fertility measures also vary.<sup>21</sup> In this way, nuptiality decline explains to a considerable degree the decrease in fertility in Arab countries.<sup>22</sup> In this sense it is possible to view the nuptiality transition in the Arab World as a way of restoring the balance between population growth and resources by reducing the access to the marriage market, like it has been the case for centuries in Western-Europe.

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<sup>19</sup> Eltigani E. Eltigani, 'Childbearing in Five Arab Countries', *Studies in Family Planning* 32:1 (2001) 17-24; Bernard Venema & Jogien Bakker, 'A permissive Zone for Prostitution in the Middle Atlas of Morocco', *Ethnology* 43:1 (Winter 2004) 51.

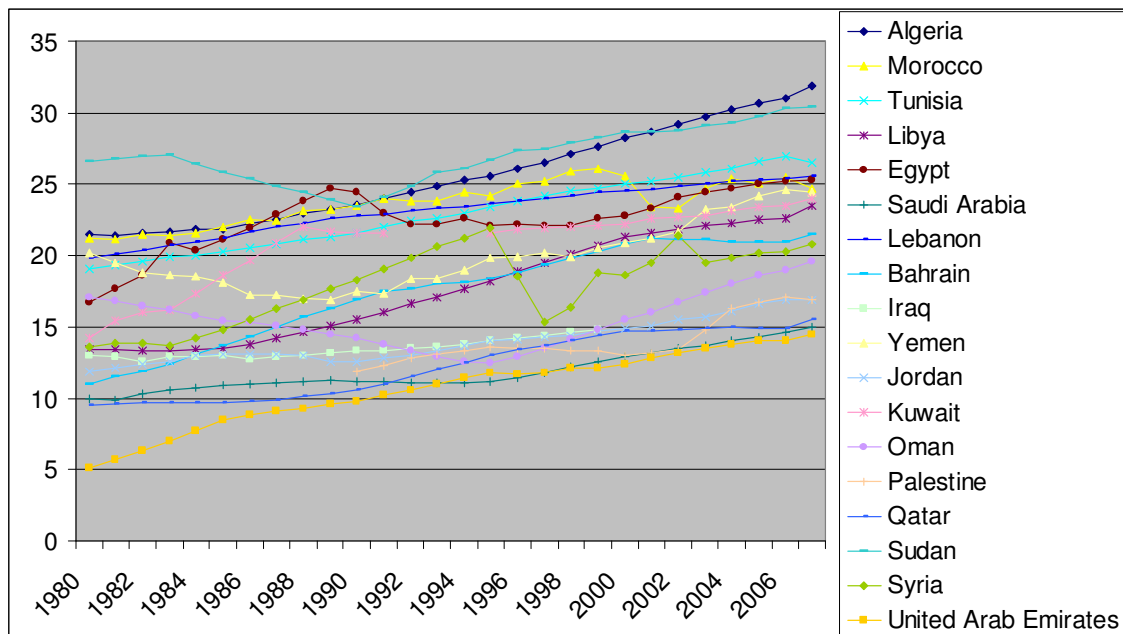
<sup>20</sup> Soumaya Naamane-Guessous, *Achter de schermen van de schaamte. De vrouwelijke seksualiteit in Marokko* (Amsterdam 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Tabutin et al, 'The demography of the Arab World, 527.

<sup>22</sup> Y. Courbage, 'Demographic Change in the Arab World: The Impact of Migration, Education and Taxes in Egypt and Morocco; E. Crognier, H. Amor, A. Baali, M. Cherkaoui, M.-K. Hilali & M. Loukid, 'Fertility Change in Rural Moroccan Berbers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**Graph 5: Percentage females of the Working Population**



Source: SESRIC BASEIND

*How unique is the European marriage pattern?*

All this information results in a surprising conclusion. At the beginning of the 21st century, the marriage pattern of the Arab world is very much alike the pattern that according to Hajnal was typically Western European. In the remainder of this paper we will try to establish the similarities and dissimilarities of the demographic characteristics of contemporary Arab and historical European societies. We focus on whether or not the ages at marriage and the proportion of celibates is alike, but we also try to find out whether similarities, if any, have the same origin. We will organize our findings according to the three definitions of the European marriage pattern as defined by Engelen and Wolf. The first definition just describes a situation characterized by high ages at marriage and by a considerable number of permanent celibates. When finding a niche is mentioned as a prerequisite for marriage a new element is added and this constitutes the second definition. In the most far reaching definition marriage restriction is considered to be a equilibrating tool to balance population and resources.

The empirical evidence shows that ages at marriage and the proportion of permanent celibates in contemporary Arab countries is approximately the same as in 18<sup>th</sup>

and 19<sup>th</sup> century European societies. One does find variations within historical European societies and within contemporary Arab nations, but these are fluctuations within a structure of restriction. This provides a clear indication for marriage restriction and thus the question on the uniqueness of the European marriage pattern can be answered negatively. Obviously the way nuptiality was organized in Western-Europe before birth control was no prerogative of this part of the world.

The next question is whether the mechanism behind marriage restriction is comparable to the pre-industrial European case. According to Hajnal, and many others after him, the quintessential dichotomy of the world is that between societies with coresidential households and those with nuclear families.<sup>23</sup> The neolocality rule for newly-weds was especially demanding for young Western European couples before the onset of modern fertility control. Since both urbanization and industrialization in the Arab world promote the living together of a single couple with its children under one roof, an ever rising number of youngsters have to postpone their marriage until they have earned the means to start and support a new family.<sup>24</sup> On top of that, the costs involved in the marriage ceremony have risen considerably in the past decades.<sup>25</sup>

In 2009, John Casterline found that “nuptiality change in the (Arab) region appears to be driven by the (perceived) unaffordability of marriage, itself a function of heightened expectations about the material resources one must bring to marriage simultaneous with declines in economic opportunities for young adults”.<sup>26</sup> Rising costs at marriage seems to be chiefly the result of an ongoing shift from complex family structures to nuclear households in combination with rising costs at marriage.<sup>27</sup> Marriage has indeed become the highest single debit item in the life course of Egyptian families and the situation does not seem to be much different in other Arab countries.<sup>28</sup> Years of collective saving are required in order to meet

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<sup>23</sup> J. Hajnal, ‘Two kinds of pre-industrial household formation system’, in *Family forms in historic Europe*, eds. Richard Wall, Jean Robin and Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 65-104.

<sup>24</sup> Hoda Rashad, Magued Osman and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, ‘Marriage in the Arab World’, *Population Reference Bureau* (September 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Diana Singerman & Barbara Ibrahim, ‘The costs of Marriage in Egypt: A Hidden Variable in the New Arab Demography’ in: Nicholas Hopkins (Edt), *The New Arab Family* (Cairo and New York 2003) 80-117.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/EGM-Fertility2009/Casterline.pdf> (July 9, 2010)

<sup>27</sup> Although there is quite some discussion whether in the past nuclear or extended families dominated Arab countries, nobody seems to doubt that the latter are in decline. See for an overview of the old discussion about the dominant family structure in the past: Fahed T. Al-Thakeb, ‘The Arab Family and Modernity: Evidence from Kuwait.’ *Current Anthropology* 26 (5) 1985, 575-580

<sup>28</sup> Diana Singerman & Barbara Ibrahim, ‘The costs of Marriage in Egypt: A Hidden Variable in the New Arab Demography’ in: Nicholas Hopkins (Edt), *The New Arab Family* (Cairo and New York 2003) 80-117.

the high costs involved in marriage. As a consequence males and females in the Arab world are spending more and more time as single. In this sense there is a striking similarity between the contemporary marriage pattern in the Arab world and the historical Western European marriage pattern: in both societies -how different they may have been with respect to culture, religion, politics, technical advancement, etc – nuptiality acted as the prime regulator of fertility. Finding a niche for the new family was necessary in historical Europe and is necessary nowadays in Arab societies. In this way we again find that the Hajnalian marriage pattern in Western Europe was not unique.

By way of a sidestep, we point at another resemblance of Arab and past European nuptiality. Although little is known about the roots of the Western-European marriage pattern, it obviously is no coincidence that marriage restriction in this part of the world arose when the legal and social position of women improved markedly.<sup>29</sup> In the Arab world, the rise of marriage restriction was equally coupled with an improvement in the position of women. The rise in age-homogamy, the gradual decline of extended families, the increase in schooling and the increase in female labour participation in combination with recent legal improvements in the position of women – restrictions on polygamie, greater possibilities for females to divorce, etc. - all have fostered the bargaining power of females in the Arab world.

The third definition of the European marriage pattern is the most far reaching one. It presumes that the restriction has a very rational macro economic goal: avoiding population pressure and thus preventing Malthusian disasters. If at all, this is the characteristic that may make the European marriage pattern unique. Until the introduction of birth control within marriage, the only limit on fertility was the number of years fecund women lived in matrimony. Since then the world has changed drastically. Susan Watkins called this ‘a popular revolution, one that has touched the majority of the world’s population in one of the most intimate aspects of their lives’: birth control.<sup>30</sup> The advent of modern family planning marks indeed the end of the Western European marriage pattern. Everywhere in Europe the decline of fertility was accompanied by an increase in nuptiality. As a result of the introduction of modern family planning it was for the first time in the history of Western

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<sup>29</sup> Tine de Moor en Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Vrouwen en de geboorte van het kapitalisme in West-Europa* (Amsterdam 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Susan Cotts Watkins, ‘The Feritlity Transition: Europe and the Third world Compared, *Sociological Forum* 2:4 Special Issue: Demography as an Interdiscipline (autumn, 1987) 646.

Europe possible to regulate fertility *within* marriage. This important achievement made the delay of marriage to some degree redundant, as important costs related to family-building could be reduced by birth control.<sup>31</sup>

Nowadays, family planning is possible in the whole world. A delay of marriage with the aim to reduce the size of the offspring, therefore, is not necessary anymore. In Morocco, for example, the proportion of fertile women, that practiced modern ways of birth control, has increased from only 19% in 1980 to more than 50% in 1995<sup>32</sup>. By now, the overwhelming majority of all women has access to affordable and reliable contraception. This explains why the fertility transition in the Arab world develops so many times faster than was the case in Europe: fertility is reduced by both a reduction in nuptiality and the introduction of family planning. At this point the Western European marriage pattern may be called unique. With an almost audible sigh of relief young European couples could marry knowing that the number and timing of births could be controlled. Importantly, this 'quiet revolution'<sup>33</sup> coincided with an expansion of modern industry, rising living standards and the start of a social security system, all of which protected the new family from the traditional Malthusian positive checks, and thus fostered early marriages.

### *Conclusion*

Most often, the economic, social and cultural differences between several parts of the world are so pervasive and overwhelming, that they hide similarities that exist too. We know from Western European populations of the period between the Middle Ages and the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that a sexual relationship was the prerogative of married couples. This still is a very strict rule in contemporary Arab societies. In both societies, therefore, fertility was almost synonymous to marital fertility. The conclusions one drew from this fact were very different. In Europe, access to marriage was restricted and thus structural overpopulation was prevented. Arab societies fostered young and universal marriage despite the possible consequences. By the time marriage restriction was introduced in the Arab world, there was,

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<sup>31</sup> Theo Engelen, *Fertiliteit, arbeid, mentaliteit – De vruchtbaarheidsdaling in Nederlands-Limburg 1850-1960* (S.N. 1987).

<sup>32</sup> Direction de la statistique, Morocco.

<sup>33</sup> J.R. Gillis, L.A. Tilly and D. Levine (eds.), *The European experience of declining fertility: the quiet revolution* (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford 1992).

by European standards, no reason to do so anymore, since birth control within marriage was at hand.

Only when we define the European marriage pattern in this way, it can be called unique. Marrying at an advanced age as such is not specifically European, as the data from contemporary Arab societies show. Nor is the custom of remaining single. When neolocality after marriage is the rule, the access to marriage is dependent on the economic opportunities of the couples-to-be, whether they live in historical Europe or in the contemporary Arab world.

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