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Nonmonogamy Through the Ages: A Cultural History of Polygamy, Polyamory, and Alternative Unions

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Introduction

Nonmonogamy Through the Ages asks a deceptively simple question: how have human communities organized love, sex, care, and inheritance when those bonds involve more than two adults? From royal polygamy to neighborhood concubinage, from clandestine mistresses to kitchen-table polycules, plural romantic arrangements have appeared wherever people have sought to secure labor, forge alliances, pursue desire, or build resilient households. Yet the public conversation about these practices is often narrowed by stereotype and stigma. This book widens the lens. It maps historical practices of polygamy, open unions, and concubinage alongside contemporary polyamory movements, examining the motivations that sustain them, the rules that govern them, and the controversies that surround them.

Terminology matters. “Polygamy” is an umbrella that includes polygyny (one man, multiple wives) and polyandry (one woman, multiple husbands). “Concubinage” historically refers to recognized unions outside formal marriage—sometimes consensual, sometimes coercive—whose legal standing depended on status, class, and law. “Open unions” and “polyamory” are modern categories, generally emphasizing negotiated consent, transparency, and the possibility of multiple loving bonds. These terms are not interchangeable; they carry distinct histories and ethical implications. Throughout the book, I use them carefully and contextually, noting when a concept travels poorly across languages and legal regimes, and where translation risks flattening lived experience.

The approach is comparative and interdisciplinary. I draw on legal codes and court records, religious texts and commentaries, travelers’ accounts and colonial archives, ethnography and demography, memoirs and community handbooks, as well as interviews and survey research where available. Equally important are the silences: voices of enslaved people in concubinage systems, of secondary wives without contract rights, of queer and trans partners erased by law or custom. Reading against the grain, I attend to how power—of gender, class, caste, race, and religion—shapes both the possibilities of plural intimacy and the stories later told about it.

Motivations for nonmonogamy are as diverse as the societies that practice it. Plural unions can secure heirs or redistribute labor; they can spread economic risk, bind families into alliances, or provide care across life stages. They may also express pleasure, love, and sexual curiosity. Governance, therefore, is central: Who decides when to add a partner? How are resources, bedrooms, and calendars allocated? What are the rules for jealousy, privacy, and disclosure? Communities codify answers in dowry contracts, household hierarchies, shared calendars, vetoes, and rituals of inclusion. Where rules exist, so do sanctions—ranging from gossip to exile, from fines

to criminal penalties—revealing how communities negotiate the boundary between private choice and public order.

Stigma and regulation travel together. Religious authorities have alternately endorsed, tolerated, or condemned plural unions, often in dialogue with state-building projects. Colonial regimes policed marriage to remake subjects into citizens, frequently targeting polygamy as a mark of “backwardness” while overlooking elite concubinage in their own ranks. Modern states have criminalized or administratively marginalized certain arrangements even as they quietly accommodate others through inheritance practices, tax policy, or selective enforcement. Public debates about nonmonogamy are rarely just about sex; they are proxies for arguments about gender equality, property, sovereignty, and the moral foundations of the nation.

The contemporary landscape adds new layers. Polyamory communities have developed vocabularies—metamour, compersion, kitchen-table and parallel models—to describe forms of care and distance; they have experimented with governance tools such as relationship agreements, check-ins, and explicit consent practices. Digital platforms expedite meeting, disclosure, and community formation, while also amplifying inequities and conflict. Employers, insurers, schools, and courts confront questions of benefits, housing, custody, and recognition that existing policies were not designed to answer. Intersectional realities—race, immigration status, disability, class—shape who can practice openly and who bears the greatest risks.

This book is not an endorsement of any particular arrangement. It is an invitation to understand diversity in romantic organization with empathy and analytical rigor. Across the chapters that follow, we move from antiquity to the present, across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, tracing how plural unions have been made, unmade, defended, and reimaged. Along the way, we examine the ethical debates that animate contemporary conversations: consent versus coercion, equality versus hierarchy, transparency versus privacy, and the distribution of labor and care within households of more than two.

Readers will encounter both continuities and ruptures. Some problems are perennial—jealousy, fairness, inheritance. Others are distinctly modern—digital disclosure, workplace benefits, and the puzzle of fitting multiplex bonds into binary legal forms. By placing historical practices of polygamy and concubinage alongside today’s polyamory and open unions, the book offers tools to parse moral claims, evaluate policy proposals, and recognize the difference between governance that protects the vulnerable and governance that entrenches inequality. The goal is a nuanced map: not a single path forward, but a clearer view of the terrain on which people have long negotiated love, loyalty, and law.

Chapter One: Deep Time of Desire: Early Human Mating Systems and Social Variability

To understand the varied tapestry of human romantic and familial arrangements, we must first journey into the deep past, examining the evolutionary and anthropological evidence for early human mating systems. For much of our species' history, the concept of "marriage" as a singular, lifelong bond between two individuals would have been a foreign one, if it existed at all. Instead, our ancestors navigated a landscape of diverse social structures, where practical considerations often dictated the shape of intimate relationships.

The prevailing myth of a monolithic, monogamous past often overshadows the complex realities of early human societies. Anthropological studies of contemporary hunter-gatherer groups, along with paleoanthropological insights, suggest a far more fluid and adaptable approach to partnership. Our hominin ancestors, facing immense environmental pressures and the need for collective survival, likely experimented with a range of social and sexual strategies. The idea that humans are "naturally" monogamous is a relatively recent cultural construct, one that often ignores the biological and behavioral flexibility inherent in our species.

One of the foundational challenges for early humans was the sheer energy cost of raising offspring. Human babies are born remarkably altricial, meaning they are utterly dependent on caregivers for an extended period. This prolonged dependency necessitated robust social structures to ensure the survival and successful rearing of children. A single mother, foraging and protecting herself and her infant, would have faced daunting odds. This is where the concept of alloparenting, or cooperative breeding, comes into play. In many primate species, and certainly among early humans, individuals other than the biological parents—grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, and even unrelated group members—played crucial roles in childcare. This shared burden of raising the young could have naturally led to more expansive social arrangements beyond a strict pair-bond.

The "grandmother hypothesis," for instance, posits that the extended post-menopausal lifespan of human females evolved precisely because older women, no longer reproductively active themselves, could contribute significantly to the care and provisioning of their grandchildren, thereby increasing the survival rates of their kin. This cooperative breeding strategy would have freed up younger mothers to forage more effectively, and it implies a social structure where multiple adults were invested in the well-being of the next generation, regardless of strict biological parentage. Such a system naturally lends itself to diverse mating strategies, as the focus shifts from

exclusive pair-bonding to the collective success of the group.

Beyond childcare, resource acquisition and defense also played a significant role in shaping early human relationships. In environments where resources were scarce or unpredictable, cooperation among a larger group was paramount. This might involve communal hunting, gathering, or sharing of spoils. Within such a cooperative framework, exclusive sexual access might have been less important than maintaining social cohesion and reciprocal relationships that ensured mutual support. For instance, in some foraging societies, "food sharing is central to subsistence and can be seen as a form of social currency, building alliances and obligations that extend beyond immediate kin." These extensive social networks, built on mutual aid and shared resources, could easily accommodate and even benefit from more fluid sexual and romantic partnerships.

Sexual dimorphism, the difference in size and appearance between males and females, also offers clues about our evolutionary past. In species with pronounced sexual dimorphism, particularly in body size, it often correlates with intense male-male competition for mates and polygynous mating systems. Gorillas, for example, exhibit significant sexual dimorphism, and a single dominant silverback typically monopolizes a harem of females. Humans, while exhibiting some sexual dimorphism, are less dimorphic than many highly polygynous primates. This suggests that while male-male competition for mates certainly existed, it might not have been as intense or as exclusively focused on monopolization as in some other species. The relatively moderate sexual dimorphism in humans is often interpreted as evidence for a mating system that, while not strictly monogamous, also wasn't characterized by extreme polygyny.

Genetic evidence, though often complex and subject to varying interpretations, also provides insights into ancient mating patterns. Studies looking at genetic diversity on the Y-chromosome (passed down through the male line) and mitochondrial DNA (passed down through the female line) in various populations can sometimes reveal historical patterns of male and female reproductive success. While these studies often show higher variance in male reproductive success (meaning some males had many offspring, others few or none), indicating some degree of polygyny, they don't necessarily point to exclusive or widespread monogamy as the sole ancestral pattern. Rather, they often suggest a mixed strategy, with different patterns prevailing in different times and places, depending on ecological and social factors.

The archaeological record, though notoriously difficult to interpret when it comes to intimate relationships, can sometimes offer indirect evidence. The organization of living spaces, the distribution of tools and grave goods, and even artistic representations can provide hints about social structures. For instance, the presence of communal dwellings or evidence of shared resources might suggest a more communal approach to living and, by extension, to relationships, where individual pair-

bonds might have been less emphasized than group cohesion. However, these interpretations are speculative and must be approached with caution, as the material remains of human societies rarely speak directly to the nuances of romantic and sexual arrangements.

One critical aspect of early human sociality that challenges the notion of ubiquitous monogamy is the concept of "pair-bonding" itself. While humans certainly form pair-bonds, these bonds are not always exclusive or lifelong. Many species exhibit social monogamy (living with one partner) without necessarily practicing sexual monogamy. Among humans, the formation of strong, affectionate bonds between individuals is a hallmark of our species, but the extent to which these bonds were historically exclusive has been a subject of much debate. It's plausible that in early human groups, pair-bonds served specific functions, such as cooperative childcare and resource sharing, but these bonds might have coexisted with other, more fluid sexual and romantic connections within the broader social group.

The very concept of "marriage" as a legally or religiously sanctioned institution is a relatively late development in human history. For much of our past, relationships were likely more informal, guided by custom and practical necessity rather than codified laws. The emphasis would have been on the social recognition of relationships that contributed to the well-being of the group, whether through child-rearing, labor, or alliance formation. The idea of "possessing" a partner or partners in an exclusive sense may have emerged more strongly with the development of agriculture, sedentary lifestyles, and the accumulation of private property, where inheritance and the clear lineage of offspring became increasingly important.

The diversity of mating systems observed in contemporary primate species, our closest relatives, further underscores the likelihood of varied ancestral human patterns. While some primates are largely monogamous, others are polygynous, and some exhibit multi-male, multi-female systems. This spectrum of primate mating strategies suggests that there is no single "natural" primate pattern, and by extension, no single "natural" human pattern. Our evolutionary heritage is one of adaptability and behavioral flexibility, traits that would have allowed early humans to thrive in a wide range of ecological niches.

Ultimately, the deep time of desire suggests a human past far richer and more varied than often assumed. Early humans were not bound by rigid social contracts or the dictates of a singular mating system. Instead, they navigated their intimate lives with pragmatism and adaptability, shaping relationships to meet the demands of survival, child-rearing, and social cohesion. The flexibility embedded in our evolutionary history laid the groundwork for the astonishing diversity of romantic and familial arrangements that would emerge across different cultures and throughout the ages, a diversity we will explore in the subsequent chapters. Understanding this deep history helps us to appreciate that the desire for connection, care, and partnership has always

been present, but its expression has taken myriad forms, far beyond the narrow confines of any single ideal.

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