

BITTER HONEY

Film Guide





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Bitter Honey and Contemporary Balinese Polygamy

The practice of a man taking multiple wives has deep roots in Balinese culture and history and, while always practiced by a small minority of families, has persisted up to the present day. Balinese polygamy, known locally in formal Indonesian as *poligami* or more colloquially as *madu*, has functioned as a way to build family alliances and establish political power, display personal potency, and accommodate male sexual appetites.

It continues to be acceptable under customary Balinese and Indonesian state law, with the overarching proviso being that husbands are able to take care of all of their wives and treat them fairly and equally. In fact, some leaders and average Indonesians defend polygamy as good for women, by pointing out that through the arrangement they are able to share significant household and ritual duties and in certain circumstances secure social status and domestic stability as an additional wife.

But what is the lived experience of this marriage structure? In other words, what are the multiple effects of polygamy on husbands, wives, and children? What are the culturally specific perceptions, beliefs, and ideologies underlying the practice of contemporary Balinese polygamy and how are these utilized to make sense of it? How does being in a polygamous marriage impact a husband or wife's understanding of self and influence the behavioral patterns and affective textures of domestic life?

The film *Bitter Honey* provides an experience-near account of polygamy in Bali, illustrating how kinship organization, gendered systems of power, social norms, and spiritual beliefs infuse and inform the romantic relationships and domestic affairs of three families. Capturing Balinese polygamy across multiple families and multiple generations over a seven-year period, the film documents the unique marital stresses and strengths of polygamy during an era of significant social change impacting the legal rights, domestic arrangements, and intimate relationships of many women.



Its longitudinal ethnographic lens reveals a complex and ambivalent picture. Husbands and some wives report loving relationships, nestled into large bustling families, based on a sense of mutual attraction and responsibility. Yet men who take more than one wife may face anxiety with the mounting economic pressure and logistical challenges of caring for multiple wives and children.

Women may also contend with economic instability, experience personal unhappiness and dissatisfaction, and even suffer psychological manipulation and physical abuse at the hands of their husbands. These negative outcomes are so prevalent that some Balinese activists advocate for an end to the practice in order to better protect and empower Indonesian women and better align with the goal of gender equality befitting a modern democracy.

“Polygamy is,
by its very nature,
a gender issue.”
—Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen

Meanwhile, the questions the film raises are provocative and widely relevant: What makes a “good marriage”? How do women and men cope with changing cultural expectations surrounding family, gender and romantic love? What emotional and social resources do people draw upon to survive experiences of suffering—and even violence—within intimate relationships? And what happens when new expectations about women’s rights and long-standing cultural patterns collide?



Three Families and Their Stories

Bitter Honey captures the lives of three polygamous Balinese families, each with their own unique configurations and histories with regards to courtship and entry into marriage; relationships between husband and wives and amongst co-wives and children; shared duties and economic configurations; and the difficulties unique to this kinship form within the Balinese cultural context.

The individual accounts and perspectives of each family member illuminate the personal, situational, and social factors that influence the reasons for and evaluations of polygamous marriage, which can be quite different for different people depending on individual expectations, circumstances and adaptation. At the same time, taken together as a group, the three husbands and seventeen wives illustrate the variation within contemporary polygamous marriages in Bali and trace its impact on families.

Tuaji is an aging patriarch with “royal blood.” His large family—with ten wives, including a pair of biological sisters (when this occurs, it is known as “sororal polygyny”)—conforms to the familiar cultural model of polygamy wherein an affluent and powerful man takes many wives to satisfy his desires, demonstrate his potency, grow his network of power, and distribute his wealth.

Sadra is in many ways Tuaji’s opposite, economically strained and struggling to provide even the bare minimum of financial stability or personal satisfaction to his two wives.

Darma’s family falls somewhere in the middle; his wives admit being drawn to his hyper-masculine charisma, and yet each falls along a continuum between personal satisfaction and stability, and dissatisfaction and roiling discord.

The following section provides further details about the members of each household, providing case studies of each of their polygamous marriages.

Sang Putu Tuaji

“Maybe I was fated to be with many wives. Or maybe it is due to a supernatural force. Maybe in a past life, I helped a lot of people.”

–Sang Putu Tuaji



Sang Putu Tuaji is a Balinese man in his eighties who has had ten wives, five of whom are still living. Closely related to a Balinese royal family, Tuaji was well known in his younger days as being a powerful man whom few people in his village dared to cross. During the 1960s, when Bali was rocked by political turmoil that ended in the massacre of over 100,000 alleged communists, Tuaji was known to be a leader of a local anti-communist militia who directed the killings in his neighborhood. He went on to become a village moneylender, earning both the allegiance and fear of those who used his services.

Today, his wives and neighbors say that it was all those factors—royal status, wealth, and a reputation for violence—that helped him to attract his wives. While some women sought him out for the high standard of living he promised, most of his wives felt that once he chose them, they had no choice but to comply.

Indeed, his seventh wife, Manis, recalls knowing she would marry him when he told her not that he loved her but that he would attack any other man who came close to her.

To outsiders in the village, Tuaji’s family appears to be a model of harmony. His wives are known for rarely arguing, and for supporting each other in illness and with ritual responsibilities. They acknowledge, however, that Tuaji’s fiery reputation helps to keep order in his household. Today, none of Tuaji’s many children practice polygamy. Several of his sons have high-ranking positions in the military and feel they must keep their father’s marriages secret for fear of being marked with the stigma of coming from a “morally inappropriate” family. While polygamy is legal in Indonesia, it has been forbidden to state employees, known in Indonesian as *pegawai negeri*, since the Marriage Act of 1974 (see more in the [“History of Polygamy in Bali”](#) section below).



Two of Tuaji's surviving wives, Manis and Giriastiti, his seventh and tenth wives, are sisters. When co-wives are sisters, this is referred to as sororal polygyny. Most polygynous societies do not prefer sororal polygyny, and may even forbid it, but in Indonesia, aristocratic co-wives are often sisters. This is believed to promote friendlier relations between co-wives, with fewer objections to the taking on of another wife due to their common background (Zeitzen, 2008, p. 32).

"We all get along.
I have never been
jealous."

—Gati, 5th wife



"It was what I wanted...
It was my fate."

—Lanus, 9th wife

Tuaji's Wives



While Tuaji's wives acknowledge that during their marriages there have been petty disagreements and jealousies among the wives, they say that Tuaji has treated them fairly, and has provided them with a comfortable life. Neighboring villagers note approvingly that Tuaji has in fact provided each of his wives with land and homes of their own. When new wives came into the family, the older wives have been responsible for helping to prepare the wedding ritual; Manis even went to her own family, as her husband's representative, to ask her sister to marry him.



Wayan Sadra

The eldest son of a polygamous rice farmer, Sadra is in his mid-forties with two wives and eight children. He currently works for a fair trade foundation, making handicrafts for export. With a decent job and a house that he inherited from his father, Sadra belongs to the middle class; still, the expenses of his polygamous family put him in a state of constant economic worry.

Sadra married his first wife, Ketut, when they were both in their teens, eloping against her family's wishes. He describes their marriage as having been a good one until they had their first child and his wife quit her job, straining the family's finances. He began beating both his wife and his mother, including one episode in which he hit Ketut in the head with a pair of heavy iron scissors. Sadra expects Ketut to serve him around the house, and he gets especially angry with her when she is late bringing him food or coffee.

Sadra met his second wife, Murni, through a mutual friend. He began seeing her, keeping the affair secret from his wife and also lying to Murni, who believed he was unmarried. After Murni became pregnant, Sadra forced Ketut to consent to a second wife by threatening to send her home to her parents and keep her children if she did not. Sadra's parents advised him against this new marriage, warning that polygamy, in their experience, was a difficult path. Indeed this new marriage was problematic from the start, in part because Sadra worries that Murni's education makes her unwilling to submit to his decisions.

“I am worried...I have been harsh with my wives and children. But it would be hard to stop completely. It's hereditary. Or it might be my karma.”

–Wayan Sadra

Sadra admits to having a problem with aggression, and has consulted with both friends at work and Balinese traditional healers (balian) to try to change his behavior. While some friends have pointed to Sadra's experiences growing up with a polygamous father who beat his own wives, and healers have claimed he is a victim of black magic, Sadra himself tends to view his treatment of women as an effect of his bad karma, earned through his deeds in a past life.

While Sadra does not believe polygamy to be inherently wrong, he admits to having deceived his wives and allowed his desires to outweigh the greater good of his family. He frequently becomes depressed, frustrated and self-loathing, appearing to vacillate between idealizing traditional models of Balinese masculinity in which he would hold absolute power over his wives and recognizing that his wives have strong feelings about the hurts he has caused them.

Sadra also has complicated relationships with his children, who have witnessed his violence towards their mothers and admits to feeling haunted by fears that they will end up like him or that they will turn against him and cast him out in his old age.

Ni Ketut Purniasih

Sadra's First Wife

"I didn't accept him taking another wife, not at all. He is the one who wanted to...My heart is really in pain seeing them together. And I have been beaten black and blue...like a thief."

—Ni Ketut Purniasih



Sadra's first wife, Ketut, is a gentle woman in her early forties. The mother of four children (one son and three daughters) she quickly becomes emotional when talking about her marriage to Sadra. Although her parents were opposed to her dating Sadra, she was convinced to marry him when he came to her house crying and professing his love. Soon after moving into Sadra's family home, however, Ketut began to see another side of Sadra, who would rage against his father and hit his mother when they failed to comply with his wishes.

When Ketut became pregnant with their second child, Sadra became violent towards her as well, punching her in the face, beating her with sticks, kicking her, and threatening her with a knife. On one occasion she left Sadra and returned to her family's home, but her parents convinced her to return.

Ketut recalls being shocked and hysterical when Sadra broke the news that he was planning to marry his pregnant girlfriend. She refused to grant her consent, but Sadra's threat to divorce her and send her back to her parents without her children convinced Ketut that she had no choice but to stay. Ketut recalls feeling heartbroken by the new marriage, and intimidated by Sadra's educated, seemingly self-confident second wife.

When Sadra would bring his wife to the home he shares with Ketut and sleep with her in another room, Ketut would be overwhelmed by jealousy and hurt. While the two women eventually reached an uneasy peace, working together during ceremonial preparations, their relationship has never been close.

Life has become somewhat better for Ketut as the family's economic situation has improved. Ketut now has her own job at the same factory that hired Sadra, and their mutual employer encourages Sadra to treat Ketut well. While Ketut does not imagine that she will ever be able to leave her husband and children, she hopes that such positive outside influences on Sadra can help him to refrain from violence and treat his family better than he has in the past.

Ni Ketut Murni

Sadra's Second Wife



"I took the risk,
and so I had to take
responsibility. I wasn't
angry. I accepted it."

—Ni Ketut Murni Agung

Murni, Sadra's second wife, is a strong-willed woman in her thirties with four children. While she projects a tough-skinned exterior, it was in part her tender-heartedness that drew her to Sadra, whom she felt sorry for, thinking he was "alone in the world" with no father, siblings, spouse or children—none of which was true. More educated than her husband or her co-wife, Murni tends to draw on her knowledge of formal Hindu doctrine and modern popular psychology to determine appropriate expectations for Sadra's behavior and to justify her acceptance of a life she admits is a very difficult one.

Rather than join Sadra's household, Murni chose to live separately from her husband and co-wife, and continue to work to support herself and her growing family. Today, Murni spends most of her time in a town about 30 miles from Sadra's home. She and her sons live together in two small rooms in a boarding house. Murni's job at a hotel requires that she spends much of her time away from her children, and she is often forced to leave them alone in their rooms to take care of themselves. Murni places a high value on education and on teaching her sons moral behavior, and insists they respect their father even when she feels he has abandoned them.

When Murni was first interviewed in 2008, she insisted that her marriage was a good one, despite the challenges of sharing her husband with a co-wife and living on her own far from any structures of extended family support.

A proud woman, she stressed how important it was for her to accept the fate that God had set for her, and to draw on her own inner strengths to rise to the challenges of polygamy. She spoke lovingly of Sadra, whose company she claimed to enjoy, and whom she was still attracted to as a sexual partner. But by 2010, Murni seemed to be struggling with the strains of her life. She admitted that Sadra had been breaking his promises to her and his children and his financial contributions had become increasingly erratic.

The distance and conflict has left Murni deeply troubled: should she stay married to Sadra or not? She realizes that, as a working woman, she could likely get by without him. But she also knows that as a divorced woman she would incur the stigma of society and perhaps even be left without a family to reincarnate into in the afterlife.

Made Darma

Made Darma claims he was destined to be polygamous. His father had four wives, and his mother lived through a series of marriages and divorces. After dropping out of high school, he married his first wife, Kiawati, and moved in to her family compound. They divorced six years later and he moved back to his village. He initially tried to make a living by carving statues for the tourist market, but soon realized he was unhappy with the life of a laborer.



Finally, he found success and prestige in the informal economy, using his size, strength and natural charisma to carve himself a niche as a local tough, known in Indonesian as preman—running gambling games, supervising cockfights, and providing private security services to local political gatherings. Using his gambling proceeds, he built himself a house, where he lives with three of his four current wives and their children.

Now in his late forties, Made Darma has few regrets about his polygamous lifestyle. He runs his large household with a firm hand, rotating his sexual affections among his wives according to a nightly schedule. Each of his wives takes a six-month turn assuming responsibility for the household's ritual duties, allowing the other wives to work outside of the home and earn wages to contribute to the family's upkeep.

Darma has little tolerance for arguments or jealousies among his wives, and does not hesitate to threaten physical force should they or his children disturb his peace. Although he admits to having deceived his wives by attracting them with the reassurance that he was single, he laughs off his trickery as the means to achieving his desires. He claims that even though he's no longer young, he could find another dozen wives if he so chose.

“It was my goal to have as many wives as possible so that I could have a lively household. The most important thing is that everyone gets along.”

—Made Darma

Ni Kamareni Kiawati

Darma's First Wife

“He kept pressing for another wife and I didn’t agree. The most important thing was that I could keep the children. Now, no one decides what I do. I’m the king.”

–Kiawati



Kiawati is a strong, independent woman in her late forties. She married Made Darma while still in high school at her parents’ urging. Because her parents had no sons, they wished to recruit Made Darma as a *nyentana*: a man who marries into a woman’s family and takes on the role of the son of the house. Kiawati bore three children to Made Darma, one of whom died shortly after birth. When she caught him having sex with the woman who would become his second wife, Kiawati was first worried that she would have to accept her husband’s infidelities.

However, because of their unique *nyentana* arrangement, which mandates that children stay with their mother’s family in instances of divorce (see more about *nyentana* marriage in section on “[Balinese Marriage Practices](#)” below), Kiawati decided to divorce instead.

Their breakup was amicable, with Made Darma returning to his own home, leaving her to raise the children on her own. While her life has been a struggle to make ends meet, often requiring harsh manual labor such as harvesting rice and lugging rocks from the river to make gravel, she feels proud that she has been able to survive as a single mother. Kiawati and her children now have a friendly relationship with Made Darma and his wives, and regularly visit his house to help with family rituals.

Ni Wayan Sulasih

Darma's Second Wife



“Because he has more than one wife, I can go wherever I want.”

–Ni Wayan Sulasih

Sulasih is an outgoing woman in her forties. She met Made Darma at a local drama performance when he was still married to his first wife. Captivated by his charm, she dated him for two years before he married both her and his third wife on the same day.

Sulasih is a vocal supporter of polygamy. She emphasizes that Made Darma is fair with his wives, sharing equally in his attention, money and sexual favors. She also appreciates the help of her co-wives around the house, which has allowed her to build her own business selling food and coffee at the local cockfights her husband organizes.

Sulasih has one daughter, Yuliantari (nicknamed Juli), who recently gave birth to Made Darma's first grandchild. Juli is opposed to polygamy, and Sulasih admits that not every woman is cut out for the challenges it presents.

Ni Wayan Rasti

Darma's Third Wife



Rasti is a vivacious woman in her early forties with a keen sense of humor. She and Made Darma had a whirlwind love affair that culminated in his proposal of marriage after only a few months. Rasti was shocked, however, when she arrived at Made Darma's house for the wedding and found out that he was already living with Sulasih, and planning on marrying them both at once.

Rasti remembers crying in the car on the way to the ceremony, but her love for him convinced her to go through with the marriage. She recalls feeling heartsick for months afterwards, until she realized that her husband was happy with her and that she could be happy with him. Today, Rasti laughs at the story of her wedding, and prides herself on no longer feeling any jealousy towards the other wives.

While she discourages Made Darma from pursuing new wives, worried he cannot afford the expense, she allows him to continue having affairs, even giving up her allotted nights with him so he can go out and "have fun." Rasti acknowledges that it's sometimes difficult to get along with her co-wives, but she appreciates that their mutual cooperation allows her to work outside of the home as a chef at a well-known tourist restaurant. Rasti has two children, and has used her wages to build her own living space within the family compound. Her co-wives often say that she is Made Darma's favorite wife.

"Before I had children, I was not happy. I was sad and became very thin. But then I got used to it. I don't feel jealous of anyone anymore. He loves me, I love him, that's all that matters."

—Ni Wayan Rasti

Gusti Ayu Suci Ati

Darma's Fourth Wife



Suci Ati is a sensitive, elegant, soft-spoken woman in her thirties. Made Darma spotted her while she was still a student in high school with her heart set on going to university and becoming a tour guide. He instructed a mutual friend to tell her that he was unmarried. He would pick her up after classes on his motorbike, and she felt flattered that an older man would pay such attention to her.

Eventually, Suci Ati found out that Made Darma was already married, and she tried to end their relationship. But one day while she was out shopping, he lured her into a car and took her to his house, where he forcibly married her, setting a group of his friends to stand guard outside of the bedroom door.

Suci Ati cries telling the story of how the next day Made Darma sent word of the marriage to her shocked parents, and how she felt in her shame and fear that she had no choice but to stay with him—“the rice had already been turned into porridge,” she says. Today, Suci Ati and Made Darma have two children and she works at a silver factory.

Suci Ati survives her polygamous marriage—and her traumatic memories of its beginnings—by focusing on educating her children and polishing her public image with nice clothes and a brave smile, determined not to feel shame in front of the community. She claims she would be willing to live as a divorced woman, but she would never want to risk giving up custody of her children to their father.

“When a woman’s husband wants her, she should be happy right? In my case, I’m smiling on the outside, but crying in my heart. Now I’m just afraid of him, but I hide it.”

—Gusti Ayu Suci Ati

Ni Nyoman Purnawati

Darma's Fifth Wife



“I never asked and he never told me. I just went along with things. By the time my friend told me he was already married, we had already been intimate. When we were dating, I was happy to be with him. My suffering started when I found out he already had many wives.”

–Ni Nyoman Purnawati

Purnawati, the youngest of Made Darma's wives, met her husband while she was still in junior high school. During their courtship, which she kept secret from her family, she was unaware that Made Darma already had multiple wives, only finding out after they had already been sexually intimate and she felt as though it was too late to turn back. Their marriage, when she was only 16 years old, outraged her family, who brought Made Darma to court for seducing an underage girl, an offense for which he spent weeks in jail.

Purnawati decided to stay in her marriage when she realized that she was pregnant and her son would need a father's name. Today, however, she and Made Darma no longer live together. Instead, she lives with her parents an hour's drive away, where she sells clothing door-to-door and cares for her preschool-age son. Although Purnawati admits to feeling anger and disappointment in her marriage, she stays officially married to Made Darma because she does not want to subject her child to the conflict and stigma of divorce.



History of Polygamy in Bali and Indonesia

Occurring on every continent worldwide, polygamy is the practice of having more than one spouse at the same time. There are generally three forms of polygamy: polygyny, polyandry, and group marriage. In the least common, group marriage, several men and women consider themselves married to all members of the group, sharing sexual access and parental responsibilities as a single-family unit.

In polyandry a wife takes more than one husband. This marriage structure is mainly found in the Himalayan areas of South Asia, but is also practiced in isolated patches in Africa, Oceania, America, and the Arctic (Zeitzen, 2008, p. 11).

By far and away the most common form of plural marriage, however, is polygyny, in which one man is married to two or more wives. Polygyny is present across cultures, despite the current global dominance of monogamy, or being married to one spouse at a time.

The different manifestations of polygamy in different cultural places reflect the social, political, and kinship structures of the given society in which it occurs.

Polygamy has long been present in Indonesia, practiced in both Muslim and non-Muslim families. It has also been frequently opposed by Indonesian men and women in both religious and secular groups.



Pre-Colonial

Located in the Indonesian archipelago, Bali is a small island, comprising less than one-third of 1% of Indonesia's land area, but it contains a population of about 4.2 million people (Pringle, 2004, p. 1). Anthropologists have been studying Bali's culture since the 1930s when Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson first arrived on the island to conduct fieldwork. Followed by Clifford Geertz in the 1950s, these early anthropological accounts have helped paint a picture of Balinese culture as enormously complex.

Of particular interest has been Balinese Hinduism, which contains so many uniquely Balinese aspects (and omits many important elements of Indian Hinduism) that some scholars have suggested that it is unsatisfactory to refer to it as "Hinduism" at all (Pringle, 2004, p. 26). Balinese Hinduism is characterized by worship at household temples, the preparation of numerous daily religious offerings, known as *sesajen*, and one of the most ritually dense calendars in the world (Eisman 1990; Hobart, Ramseyer and Leeman 1996).

The only form of polygamy practiced in Bali is polygyny, where one man is allowed to marry multiple wives. However, this guide uses the term "polygamy" because it is the more familiar term in the United States and it closely matches the term *poligami*, which is used in everyday discourse throughout Bali and Indonesia to refer to the practice of taking multiple wives.

The practice of polygamy in Bali can be traced back centuries through its presence in ancient sacred Hindu texts, illustrated folk tales, and plots in puppet theatre (known in Indonesian as *wayang kulit*). In pre-colonial days, high caste royal men took multiple wives in order to cement economic and political alliances between clans and kingdoms or to demonstrate power over vassal villagers, who would give up their daughters in exchange for the patronage of a local prince or king.

Brahmin priests, who served both the royal courts and their own communities of religious followers, also typically married multiple times, their wives chosen for their kinship ties to other powerful religious leaders or their ability to help with ritual duties.

In the past, it was not exceptional for powerful men to have dozens of wives; Balinese still tell stories of men whose spiritual and political potency enabled them to marry upwards of a hundred women.

Anthropologists working in Bali have mainly focused on polygamy as it occurred in these higher rungs of society, such as Geertz and Geertz (1975) who stated that polygamy was "the usual practice among well-to-do gentry families, and was an absolute necessity for a royal dadia with expansionist ambitions...virtually every king had a large number of sons by different mothers" (Geertz & Geertz, 1975, p. 131).

While common men were not forbidden to practice polygamy, usually only kings (known in Indonesian as *raja*) and members of Bali's ruling elite (known in Balinese as *triwangsa*) had the financial ability and political incentive to provide for multiple wives. This has meant that it has always been a minority practice among ordinary Balinese.



Colonial

Despite the emergence of a number of public opponents of polygamy, the practice continued into the colonial era. Among the aristocracy, women were seen as “a decoration in the home, ignorant about the wider world, and victims of polygamy” (Chandrakirana, Ratih, & Yentriyani, 2009, p. 16). In the 1920s, the Dutch government wanted to recognize customary laws throughout the Dutch Indies and created a name for this, *adat*.

Though these customary laws were primarily oral, changed over time, and varied from region to region, the Dutch codified Balinese *adat* into writing in 1924 (Pringle, 2004, p. 119). Under *adat*, polygamy was (and still is) permitted. According to a 1930 Dutch Census, 4.5% of Balinese men were polygamous—of those, 92.1% had two wives, 6.6% had three wives, and 1.2% had four wives or more (Jones, 1994, p. 269).

Toward the end of the colonial period, in the early 1930s, one of Bali’s most prominent feminists, I Gusti Ayu Rapeg founded the Balinese branch of the “Women Aware” movement (Putri Bali Sadar), which was noted for its strong public opposition to polygamy. Rapeg declared, “It is within the rights of Indonesian women to have justice and freedom, and polygamy is a genuine repudiation of that justice and freedom” (Chandrakirana et al., 2009).

The debate regarding polygamy intensified and in 1937, the colonial government passed a revised marriage law that called for the elimination of polygamy. The law gained support from Rapeg and her contemporaries (Vickers, 2013, p. 82). The government eventually canceled the bill after it faced strong opposition from Nationalist and Islamic groups, but women’s rights within the institution of marriage had become a national concern.



Modern Indonesia

In 1945, Indonesia declared itself an independent nation and adopted a constitution. In the constitution, a number of resolutions guaranteed women equal rights, instituted labor parity, ensured a social welfare system for women and children, and protected women from forced polygamy and arbitrary divorce (Chandrakirana et al., 2009, p. 41).

In 1950, the Indonesian government formed the Review Team on the Law Regulating Marriage, Divorce and Reunification (*Panitia Penyelidik Peraturan Hukum Perkawinan, Talak, dan Rujuk*, or P3HPTR), which outlawed forced marriages and only allowed polygamy under certain circumstances.

However, the first Indonesian president, President Sukarno, had multiple wives. While women's groups worried that Sukarno's marriages legitimized polygamy, many decided to silence their criticism, wary that raising the issue of polygamy could be interpreted as "disturbing the balance of national political powers" (Chandrakirana et al., 2009, p. 44).

In 1958, the Parliament was once again faced with a bill relating to marriage and polygamy—some, particularly Islamic groups on the neighboring island of Java, believed that polygamy could alleviate post-war struggles for widows and orphans as well as preventing men (who were believed to have a naturally stronger sex drive) from committing adultery.

In Islam, men may take multiple wives, although they are limited to four and are required by the Qur'an to treat their wives equally. Even female members of Parliament agreed that Islamic laws legitimate polygamy and it should stay legal in cases such as first/senior wife infertility, disability, or mental illness (Chandrakirana et al., 2009, p. 45).

In 1965, the state came under rule of Indonesia's second president, Suharto. A 1974 Marriage Act required that any man seeking to marry again receive the permission of the first wife or wives. It also banned civil servants, known as pegawai negeri—including bureaucrats, schoolteachers, and members of the military—from practicing polygamy. The legal age of marriage was raised to 16 for females and 19 for males. Over the past three decades, the prevalence of polygamy has begun to decline in Bali. In a 1986 survey, only 3% of Balinese men who were not of high caste were found to be practicing polygamy; at the same time, as recently as 1986, a member of Klungkung royalty was recorded as having 45 wives (Jennaway, 2000).



Polygamy in the Present Day

“He said, ‘Either let me take a second wife, or you must leave!’ So, ultimately, I let him.”

–Ketut, Sadra’s first wife

“[A signature from your first wife allowing you to take a second wife] is easy to fake...You can just get her thumbprint while she is lying there asleep!”

–Damai, Balinese villager

In today’s Indonesia, the prevalence of polygamy is unknown, as many second marriages are not officially registered with the state. In 1992, anthropologist Dr. Megan Jennaway conducted a genealogical study in a northern Balinese village, Punyanwangi, and found that out of the past three to four generations of 45 families, 4.4% of the marriages were registered as polygamous. However, in a household survey, she found the prevalence of polygamy to be 10.7% (Jennaway, 2002, p. 76).

Polygamy remains an option for Balinese and Indonesians. The current national law stipulates that in order for a husband to take an additional wife, he must first receive written consent from his existing wife(s). However, as Sadra’s co-workers jokingly observe in the film, these signatures are easy to fake or coerce. According to the law, if a man is found taking an additional wife without such consent, the wives are entitled to receive “fair” divorce settlements.

Polygamy continues to be an issue of significant concern to many, not just in Bali but throughout Indonesia, particularly among the Muslim majority. Public support for the practice has gained momentum over the past two decades, aided in part by

high-profile polygamous Indonesians, such as Megawati Sukarnoputri’s vice-president Hamzah Haz, singer Debby Nasution, and the well-known restaurateur Haji Puspo Wardoyo, who serves ‘polygamy juice,’ a blend of four different fruit flavors, at his establishments.

Some Indonesian Muslim supporters of polygamy cite the fact that Mohammad had multiple wives and continue to frame polygamy as a noble moral duty—men with means should take care of as many women as possible. They also argue that formal polygamy preserves the dignity of women romantically engaged with married men, by recognizing them as full wives rather than mistresses.

Both Muslim and secular critics of the practice counter-argue that polygamy is little more than the institutionalization of sexist ideas about women and practices which render them instruments of male lust and power (Robinson 2009).



Balinese Marriage Practices



Understanding something of the Balinese kinship system and of the ideas surrounding marriage, sex and childrearing, is important to contextualize the struggles some of the Bitter Honey characters have within their polygamous marriages.



Patrilineal Descent (*Purusa*) Courtship and Marriage

In Bali, remaining unmarried—for both sexes—is almost unthinkable. Marriage and having children is a primary goal and purpose in life. Following both adat and Balinese Hindu legal treatises, “all members of the Hindu-Balinese religion must marry, the self-evident goal being to beget children and thereby guarantee the continuity of the patriliney” (Hobart et al., 1996, p. 105).

In addition to continuing the patrilineal line of descent, having children is one of the only ways to secure a proper spiritual future. After death, only one’s own children can perform the sacred rituals that ensure the emancipation and purification of the soul, its successful rebirth, and preparation for reincarnation into the next life or metamorphosis into a deity. Thus, from a spiritual perspective, having children and getting married is not only a social duty, but also a sacred one.


In the Balinese principle of patrilineal descent, known in Balinese as *purusa*, descent is through the male line, with male heirs inheriting their parents’ wealth, caste status, and clan membership, along with the responsibility to maintain the family temple. Within this patrilineal kinship system, men are placed at the center of social belonging—husbands represent the family “before the law, before god, and before the deified ancestors” (Hobart, Ramseyer, & Leemann, 1996, p. 108).

“We got pregnant first, then got married... We were dating for about two years.”

—Yuliantri, Darma’s daughter and Nik, her husband

Meanwhile, both within their traditional domestic role as well as in familiar national constructions of femininity, a woman’s primary duty is as a wife and mother—or as the popular idiom puts it, a women’s primary importance is in kitchen, childbearing, and bedroom matters (in Indonesian this is “*dapur, sumur, kasur*”). Her role is a subordinate one, as demonstrated by the Balinese proverb, “*Anak luh mulu tongosne betenan, tusing dadi nglawan anak muani,*” meaning, “A woman’s place is below [the man], she should not oppose him” (Jennaway, 2002, p. 73). The “ideal” Balinese wife, mother, and daughter-in-law is soft and submissive (in Balinese *kerenan ane lemug, magelohan*), waiting upon her husband with proper deference (Jennaway, 2002, p. 74).

This system of descent and construction of gender roles affects courtship practices. Because Balinese men are under extreme pressure from their families to provide a son that will continue the patriline, a man often prefers not to marry a woman unless he is sure she is able to get pregnant first.



Despite attitudes about sex and pregnancy as an integral part of courtship, to be an unwed mother is stigmatized in Bali. If a woman becomes pregnant and she doesn't get married before the child is born, both mother and child will suffer strong repercussions such as social shaming, exclusion, and potential disownment by their own family. Abortion, while available in cases where the mother's life is endangered, is otherwise illegal and widely seen as immoral and dangerous. Therefore, a Balinese man with a pregnant girlfriend or paramour may feel a deep sense of responsibility and/or be hoping for a male heir from her.

“In Bali, if a woman were to give birth out of wedlock, she would get a terrible reputation. She would be seen as a slut, or a prostitute, or thrown out of her family.”

–Degung Santikarma, Balinese anthropologist

This may lead to polygamy if a man who has been enjoying an extra-marital affair takes his pregnant girlfriend as a second wife. Such a trajectory can be seen in Sadra's relationship with his second wife, Murni, and Darma's relationship with his fifth wife, Purnawati. These women became intimate with the men, believing them to be unmarried. Upon becoming pregnant, however, they realized that they had been misled but were no longer in a position to refuse a polygamous marriage. For their part, out of a combination of genuine affection and a sense of cultural and spiritual responsibility, the men decided to marry these women.

Whether or not a marriage results from a happy and above-board or misleading and manipulative romantic relationship, once a union is formalized, *purusa* has significant spiritual repercussions for wives. In leaving their birth families and becoming part of their husbands' families upon marriage, women bear children who will in turn belong to the father's patriline. In doing so, they also automatically surrender membership in their natal temples—shifting the focus of their religious and ritual duties from their father's ancestral deities to their husband's. According to Balinese Hindu belief, a wife will be reincarnated after death into her husband's extended family, linked to him across the generations. Maintaining membership in the new patriline, then, becomes crucial in a wife's spiritual journey.

“If she ends up pregnant, why wouldn't I take responsibility? Why would I throw her away after she was pregnant? I couldn't do that. I'd rather not hurt women. I'd rather take ten, or a hundred wives, if necessary.”

–Made Darma

In general, there are four types of marriage in Bali.

1 *(nganten ngidih)* by request

where the couple asks for permission to marry based on their mutual attraction and affection.

2 *(nganten merangkat, melaib)* by elopement

which occurs when the families of one or both partners disapprove of the union. Sometimes this disapproval is genuine, but in some cases it is only a formal disapproval, stated to protect the bridal family's honor, such as when the daughter is marrying a man from a lower caste.

3 *(nganten maksa)* by forced marriage

usually occurs in the case of an unplanned pre-marital pregnancy outside the context of an ongoing courtship. The woman's family will force the father to face his parental responsibility and marry their daughter.

4 *(nganten ngejuk)* by capture or abduction

can happen with or without the cooperation of the woman's parents, but it implies "the ignorance and often active resistance of the girl involved" and is sometimes a euphemism for rape (Jennaway 2002, p. 66).

In the film, Made Dharma's fourth wife, Suci Ati, was married in this fashion. Once realizing that Dharma was married, she attempted to end the relationship. Instead of accepting her decision, Dharma lured her into a car while she was out shopping and brought her to his house. Once there, he had his friends guard the bedroom door as he forcibly married her.

In many cases of *nganten ngejuk*, the girl's parents would rather accept the union than be subjected to humiliation—again, despite the selectively lenient views towards premarital sex in the context of ongoing courtship with an intention towards marriage, cases of casual premarital sex (including, in some understandings of the concept, rape), and unwed motherhood all shame the woman involved and dishonor her family.

Hence Suci Ati's parents, despite their shock and grief over her sudden marriage to Dharma, did not dispute or refuse the marriage.

“The night he took me to his house, I cried and asked him to let me go. He brought me here and had me guarded outside. The next day, the head of the village came and somehow the marriage certificate was already signed.”

—Gusti Ayu Suci Ati


Despite the structural disempowerment of women in some of these courtship practices and marital structures, women are not passive in deciding whom to marry—or, if forcibly married, in determining how to contend with their partnership. A recent ethnography by Dr. Megan Jennaway, “Sisters and Lovers”, portrays women as active agents seeking marriages that will provide them with the most desirable economic, emotional, and social outcomes.

According to the women’s narratives, their entry into marriage may not be as important as its trajectory. Whether or not a marriage remains monogamous, therefore, becomes a significant concern (Jennaway, 2002) and women are frequently loath to change their monogamous status. Tellingly, those in polygamous marriages refer to their circumstances in Balinese as *kamaduang* (being made into a co-wife), “implying that they [feel] a sense of powerlessness over their fate” (Jennaway, 2002, p. 79), or at the very least reluctance.

Outside royal families, all wives taken after the first are referred to as *madu*—a term that also translates to “honey”—and puns likening multiple wives to honey are typical. The title of the film, *Bitter Honey* plays on this local idiom, as the sweetness of courtship seems to often lead to a quite contrasting bitter appraisal of what it means to be a co-wife.

All this being said, some women might find a polygamous marriage desirable. In many cases, the women who knowingly wed already-married men (junior co-wives) “invariably have in common the fact that their prospects for marriage have been compromised in some way by their past life experiences” (Jennaway, 2002, p. 83). This can include women who are spinsters, divorcees, widows, ill/disabled, or women who became pregnant through a relationship with a man who does not ultimately agree to marry them.

Again, it is worth emphasizing that marriage is an expected goal and norm. It not just a crucial part of social identity and spiritual life—for women, there is also a significant financial incentive to marry. Since in Bali’s patrilineal system only sons inherit their parents’ wealth, and women are expected to marry and be cared for by their husbands, an aging adult woman who has remained single may not find her birth family a reliable source of financial support. Her parents may begrudge her as an ongoing financial burden and upon her parents’ death—and in some cases before—she may face destitution and potentially even homelessness.



Once a son takes over the natal compound, their unmarried sisters are frequently evicted, especially if the brother faces pressure from his own wife. In her book Megan Jennaway describes how her informants “invariably assured [her] that it was better to marry than to suffer the impoverishment of a spinster” (Jennaway, 2002, p. 72). Not only does marriage help avoid economic vulnerability in the present, but also in the future; having children who will take care of her is essential to a woman’s financial security in old age.

However, a child born out of wedlock does not have any inheritance rights, and hence will not ultimately be able to provide this stability for his mother. These significant financial considerations may also contribute to a woman’s decision to acquiesce to a polygamous marriage rather than try to live as a single mother.

“I did not want to be made into a co-wife at all, not at all. He is the one who wanted it...I tried to prevent it. I wasn’t happy about him taking a second wife. But she was already pregnant, so what could I do.”

–Ketut, Sadra’s 1st Wife

“Polygamy is complex in Bali...When a woman in a village is widowed, mentally ill, an outcast, or promiscuous, she would be eager to be a co-wife, in order to save her family name, and her own name as well. In these cases, polygamy can be seen as a kind of heroic act.”

–Degung Santikarma, Balinese anthropologist



Troubled Unions: Barriers to Balinese Divorce

The families presented in the film detail their experiences of marital troubles such as deception, adultery, and domestic violence. These problems affect monogamous and polygamous couples alike, and certainly not all polygamous families deal with these unhappy realities—of course, many monogamous and polygamous Balinese marriages are satisfactory to both husband and wife or wives.

But in cases where marriages are leading to a wife's unhappiness, it is important to take a closer look at the surrounding cultural norms and legal frameworks which influence how a woman experiences her marriage and why she might choose to stay in it, despite suffering and strife. The gendered structural limitations on women in courtship and marriage also provide a background for a nuanced understanding of the gendered structural barriers to divorce, which again are social, spiritual, and economic in nature.


While divorce is legal in Bali, as in the rest of Indonesia, the divorce rate remains much lower there than on other islands, such as Java, where divorce has been historically quite prevalent (Heaton et al. 2001). This may in part be due to stereotypes and social stigma; both widows and divorced women (the Indonesian and Balinese word *janda* does not distinguish between the two) are viewed with distrust in Bali, stereotyped as being disruptive women whose sexual desires have been awakened during their marriages but are now left without an outlet, leading to a predatory sexuality.

In addition to stealing others' husbands by magical means, *janda* are also rumored to be loud, ill-tempered, and sometimes alcoholic. This contributes to the idea that there is something "off" about the divorcee, that she lacks the qualities of respectable and sober married women, in essence "blaming" her for the divorce (Duff-Cooper, 1985, p. 414).

In cases of property rights during divorce, it is legally important who initiated the divorce. If the wife is the initiator, she automatically forfeits any claim on her husband's estate, regardless of the reason for the divorce. On the other hand, if the husband is the initiator, the wife is eligible to receive up to half of his property.

"For a Balinese woman, getting divorced is almost unthinkable. Hindu reincarnation beliefs dictate that if I die, I will be reborn within my husband's family. Same with my male children. But if we divorce, when we die our souls will be in limbo because they can't reincarnate into our husband's family."

—Murni, Sadra's Second Wife



Since men have the option to take on another wife when they are unhappy in their current marriage, there is little incentive for them to initiate divorce and risk losing half of their property.


Furthermore, as previously described, when a woman gets married, she leaves her natal descent group and joins that of her husband, and from that point forward it is believed that she will reincarnate into his extended family line.

Any male children born also belong to her husband's patriline and will be reincarnated through his lineage from that point forward. However, if a woman becomes divorced, the future of her soul falls into question as she is now in a proverbial spiritual "no man's land," excommunicated from her natal temple but no longer part of her husband's temple, unless her family is willing to conduct a ceremony to welcome her back into their spiritual lineage.

"If it weren't for
my kids, I would
have left him."

—Murni, Sadra's Second Wife





Sadra's second wife, Murni is very conscious of this fact. She knows that if she divorces Sadra, not only will she incur the stigma of society but, worse than that, she will have nowhere to reincarnate. Hence, divorce has the capability to put women in a dire financial situation in this life, and potentially spiritually dire situation in the afterlife.


Perhaps the greatest emotional hardship faced by women who want to divorce, however, is the fact that Balinese customary law does not recognize a woman's rights to custody of her children, who belong to the husband's patriline. Hence, a mother requesting a divorce would usually be forced to leave her children to be cared by her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, or a co-wife.

While there are cases—such as between Made Darma and Kiawati—in which the husband voluntarily relinquishes custody, it is uncommon, and this ultimatum of staying married or leaving one's children behind is perhaps the main deterrent to divorce in Bali. For example, Suci Ati claims that she would be willing to suffer the stigmatization and economic hardship of life as a divorced woman, but she would never want to risk giving up custody of her children to their father.

“According to me...the law is very unfair. It treats men and women very differently.”

-Luh Putu Anggreni, Women's Rights Attorney

Only a small minority of Balinese women who divorce have their cases tried in a state court, with the majority relying upon the decisions of village-level officials charged with carrying out customary law (*adat*) which grants full custody rights to the father. Although *adat* and state regulations are formally distinct, Balinese judges have generally relied upon *adat* in making determinations about child custody, almost always drawing upon notions of the patriline to award full custody to the husband.




Women who are economically marginalized have little recourse to appeal a judge's decision and there is no complaint mechanism in place to report abuses by law enforcement or other civil servants (Rosenberg, 2003, p. 214). Like the aforementioned forfeit of property rights by wives who request divorce, there are a number of gender-biased policies and laws that would give women reason to be skeptical; for example, a law mandates that women must wait a specified amount of time before remarrying, while divorced husbands can remarry immediately ("Indonesia 2012 Human Rights Report," 2012).

In short, while the addition of a new *madu* "invariably represents a deterioration in a senior wife's economic, social, and probably emotional circumstances," many women realize that it is more advantageous to adapt to the new marriage structure than it is to face the prospect of living as a divorcee (Jennaway, 2002, p. 82). It may seem like a better choice to live with a marriage that is unhappy—either due to polygamy or other stressors—than to live without a home to live in, without a temple to worship, without one's children, and without a family to carry out the rituals for her soul's well-being upon death.

"Some mothers leave their children because they choose to divorce. But their children suffer, and this is my concern. I could have pursued my own happiness, but my children would suffer."

-Suci Ati, Darma's Forth Wife





Nyentana Marriage: A Rare Exception to Patrilineal Descent



There is one exception to seemingly inevitable and far-reaching implications of patrilineal descent for women in romantic and domestic relationships. It arises when a family does not have any sons, and hence is without a male heir. In this case, when it is time to marry, a daughter may assume a role that structurally resembles that of a typical son; she and her family may propose marriage to a man, who will be “adopted” into the family in order to guarantee the proper patrilineal transmission of wealth and inheritance. This is called *nyentana* marriage.

Unlike in the majority of Balinese unions, in *nyentana* marriage the woman “proposes” to the man and it is the man’s parents who must give their consent. In these cases, the wife is the actual successor (in Balinese, *sentana*) to her father and she is considered to be a man for legal purposes (Geertz & Geertz, 1975, p. 54).

Since the husband is marrying into another family’s descent line (like a woman), he relinquishes all of his natal inheritance rights and joins his wife’s temple, allowing his children to become members of her family’s descent group. It is understood that the woman will be the head of the family and thus descent will follow along her father’s line, with the couple’s children bearing her last name.

Many men are reluctant to accept these types of marriages because it emasculates them, as they are placed in a feminine position within their family (known in Balinese as *mawak luh*). Additionally, this arrangement can be seen as an act of treason against their natal ancestors (in Balinese, *kawitan*). However, they may accept such a marriage if their chances for inheritance within their natal family are low.



An example of this type of marriage is Made Darma's first marriage to Kiawati. Kiawati was an only child and therefore her parents had no male offspring to inherit their agricultural holdings. Made Darma, who was a younger sibling in a large polygamous family and therefore unlikely to receive significant inheritance, dropped out of high school to marry Kiawati. However, Darma soon grew uncomfortable in his wife's home, where, as an in-marrying man in a patrilineal society, he felt that his masculinity was threatened. When Kiawati caught him having an affair, he agreed to a divorce, granted her custody of their children, and moved back to his own village. It is due to their *nyentana* marriage agreement that Kiawati was able to divorce without critically endangering her economic security and maternal rights; she now lives in

her natal home and her children still belong to her father's patriline.

Since her family had no sons and adopted Made Darma as a substitute heir, she never had to give up many of the things that most Balinese women have to resign at marriage—her membership in her natal family, her temple, her village or her family compound. Her children belonged to her father's patriline.

The breakup was cooperative and harmonious, and today Kiawati and her children have a friendly relationship with Made Darma and his wives, regularly visiting his house to help with family rituals. While Kiawati often struggles to make ends meet with low-paying menial labor, she has never had to worry about becoming destitute, losing property rights, or rejection from her natal family. Her ability to care for her children (and now grandchildren) as a single mother is an accomplishment from which she derives much pride. At the end of the film, she exclaims that she is "free."

.....
: "Now no one :
: decides what I do. :
: I'm the king." :
: -Kiawati, Darma's First Wife :
:
.....



Anthropological Perspectives on Domestic Violence

Almost all of the wives portrayed in the film acknowledge that violence has been an issue in their marriages. Tuaji's wives admit that their husband "used to be vicious," with fellow villagers and with his own family. Sadra's first wife Ketut is so distressed by his ongoing violence that she requests outside mediation. Meanwhile Darma's wives all say he uses violence to "keep the family in line."

According to Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women, Komnas Perempuan, the women in the film are not alone; while still poorly documented and significantly underreported, in Indonesia domestic violence is the most common form of violence against women and 96% of reported cases were wives being abused by their husbands (Khusnaeny et al., 2010, p. 3).

Of course, not all polygamous marriages are violent, and domestic violence is not limited to any particular kinship form. Indeed, gender-based partner violence against women is a pervasive global problem for women and families. The United Nations has worked to address the issue, defining gender-based violence as any act "that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, where occurring in public or private life" (Article 1, adopted in 1993).

While the most common explanations for domestic violence tend to be either personal (i.e. men beat women because of their own pathology) or sociopolitical (i.e. domestic violence is symptomatic of pervasive gender

inequality), social scientists who investigate domestic violence cross-culturally have proposed an "ecological perspective," that sees violence against women occurring within a nesting set of personal, situational, and socio-cultural contexts. In this perspective, factors in the individual life histories of those involved; in the family, in the social structures and institutions; and in the wider beliefs, views, and attitudes of a culture, will all influence the prevalence and severity of domestic violence that occurs in intimate relationships (Heise 1998).

Certain vulnerabilities making domestic violence more likely do seem to hold constant cross-culturally (while of course not completely universal and to a certain extent contingent upon locally specific kinship structures and practices [Fernandez 1997]). On a personal or individual level, a highly significant factor that raises the likelihood of involvement in domestic violence as an adult across cultures—whether as a perpetrator or victim—is witnessing or experiencing abuse as a child (e.g. Holtaling and Sugarman, 1986; Johnson, 1996; Nelson and Zimmerman, 1996).

Within the family system, household structures where men hold most of the economic or decision making power, where the family finances are stressed, where wives are isolated from their family and friends, and where there are frequent marital disagreements and conflict are all strong predictors of violence against women. Socially and structurally, domestic violence tends to increase in situations where "family matters" are seen to be off-limits and outsiders feel uncomfortable intervening; where gender roles are sharply delineated, men are valued for their dominant or aggressive qualities, and women are seen to be men's property; and where there are restrictions on divorce (Heise 1998).



Many of the factors holding true cross-culturally that contribute to likelihood of domestic violence are present in the lives of some of the Bitter Honey families, and Balinese culture inflects these similar underlying structures in specific ways.

Of the three husbands, Sadra speaks at length about his personal experience of witnessing domestic abuse as a child; his father beat his mother, and he reflects on how this behavior enraged him and yet he finds himself almost helplessly repeating similar patterns. In making sense of this, Sadra calls upon the Balinese Hindu idea of karma—a belief that one’s current circumstances are predestined by his or her or family members’ actions in previous lives (Lansing, 1995, p. 28). Sadra views his violence against his wives as an effect of his karma, either earned through his bad deeds in a past life or inherited from his father—seemingly destined to violence, he feels like it’s “out of his hands.”

Factors Contributing to Domestic Violence in Bali

“As Hindu’s we learn that divorce is not right...for my child’s sake, because I love my son, I don’t want him to be devastated by his parent’s divorce.”


-Purnawati

“He never gives me any money. I pay for our kid’s school on my own. I have to borrow money for that. My husband never pays for the telephone or electricity bills. He hasn’t paid the rent here in over a year!”

-Murni, Sadra’s second wife

“Once I went back to my parents house when my husband was violent. My father told me to go back to my husband. He said, ‘Think of your children, all alone there. You will live and die there, and that’s it.’ There is no place for me at my father’s house. I have in-laws and my father is embarrassed.”

-Ketut, Sadra’s first wife



Purusa principles and kinship structures that privilege male heirs and lead women to be structurally dependent on their husbands mean that Balinese men do in fact hold much of the decision-making power in the family, perhaps especially because women's recourse to divorce is highly restricted. Women's structurally vulnerable position within the patrilineal family system undoubtedly makes it more difficult for them to leave violent marital situations due to the economic, social, and spiritual repercussions.

Balinese wives may to a certain extent also be isolated, despite the fact that they often live in multi-generational extended family compounds. Because they most often leave their family of origin to go live with their husband in his family's home, depending on the new family climate and their distance from home, they may be far from friends and family.

Wives do sometimes return to their family of origin in times of distress; in the film, Ketut and Purnawati both report seeking refuge with their parents during times of escalating marital strife. However, each woman's particular family will determine whether or not she will be allowed to stay; Ketut was promptly sent back to Sadra despite the abuse, while Purnawati remains with her family, although technically still married to Darma.

"I never told anyone or reported [the abuse]. I'm ashamed with the neighbors if they know that we fight all the time. So I am quiet and I submit. What else can I do."

-Ketut, Sadra's first wife

If they find themselves in a polygamous marriage, as the lawyer and women's advocate Luh Putu Anggreni points out, women may miss an opportunity for solidarity and support with the other co-wives if they view one another as competitors for resources and affection, instead feeling further isolated.

Another factor that makes families vulnerable to domestic violence is ongoing marital conflict, whether over finances or other matters. Polygamy may contribute to both of these ongoing challenges, since larger families with multiple wives and sets of children will stretch available resources thin and a wife's resentment about being "made" into a co-wife may lead to ongoing friction.

"When the second wife comes for a visit, I have to sleep in my son's room. When I am sleeping with my children and Sadra is with his other wife, it's really painful for me. My heart is really in pain to see them sleeping together."

-Murni, Sadra's second wife

"We don't fight, but we are not that close. If we need something, we talk. But if not, we just ignore each other."

-Suci Ati, Darma's fourth wife



Feelings of loneliness, isolation, and stress may rise once domestic violence does occur. Bali is known for having a social climate where “family matters” are off limits for community discussion or intervention, famed for values of collective harmony and a smooth presentation of self (Belo 1970). Public conflict of any kind, let alone public family conflict, is considered shameful and highly inappropriate outside of certain rare conditions.

Maintaining this appearance of harmony often requires intense internal “emotion work” as individuals seek to manage their own emotions and present a calm and positive exterior. The affective responsibility for this harmony falls on most stringently on Balinese women, who are expected to exhibit “bright faces” and “shining smiles” not matter their struggle or strife. To do less would not necessarily evoke sympathy, but might perhaps be met with teasing, reprimands or other social sanctions (Wikan 1990).

“Women often aren’t aware that they are being manipulated. Women should communicate clearly so that each wife will not blame the others for her situation. Women instead need to work together to better their situation.”
-Luh Putu Anggreni, lawyer and women’s rights advocate

“The village elders do not dare intervene into private family affairs.”
-Senin, Sadra’s sister

Perhaps ironically, then, while in some cases an emphasis on harmony might serve to successfully diffuse marital tension, in other cases this Balinese cultural emphasis on social harmony may actually disempower victims of domestic violence, who seek to avoid shame and uphold their duty as a woman to seem cheerful and untroubled; indeed, their ability to do so may become a source of cultural value and self-worth, as when Suci Ati takes pride in her careful and elegant appearance although she is “crying on the inside.” Of course, a desire to avoid the public shame and stigma of domestic violence and put on a brave face is not unique to Bali, and many women are wary of speaking about their abuse, whether out of fear of further abuse, victim blaming, or being ignored (Lawless 2001). However, Balinese values about interpersonal conduct do inflect these common fears in particular ways.



Outcomes of Domestic Violence on Women's Health

Cross-culturally, domestic violence is associated with health and social problems for women including depression and poverty. Worldwide, it is also associated with wives' increased exposure to STD's and HIV. The experience of Bitter Honey families illustrates such an association: it seems that both polygamy and exposure to STDs result from similar patterns of male thought and behavior.

“There is an old school of thought in Bali which believes that you get power from having many wives. The more wives you have, the more powerful you'll be. This is still practiced... It's like the concept of *Bhairawa* in Hinduism, which says that lust should not be restrained. Lust should not be suppressed, but it must be followed, until you reach your limit...”

-Degung Santikarma, Balinese anthropologist

One element in this pattern is the idea that men are naturally more lustful than women, and that male desire should not be confined or restricted but rather indulged. Constructions of Balinese male sexuality and manhood endorse the acquisition of multiple girlfriends before marriage and those men who are able to do so are admired. This continues into marriage as husbands' extramarital affairs are tolerated as a “natural, if unfortunate, biological predilection of the masculine sex” (Jennaway, 2002, p. 79).

“Men look for a sexy girl because the one they have at home is stale. They're not satisfied with what's at home, so they look for more outside.”

-Village woman

“If a woman offers herself, of course a man will take her. Men are like cats. Give them a fish, and they’ll eat it.”

-Damai, Balinese village man

This may lead to a more accepting or indulgent attitude about male romantic and sexual relationships outside the formal bonds of monogamous or polygamous marriage. A sense of male prerogative, combined with the Balinese preference for domestic harmony may also take an understanding or forgiving view of men keeping these extramarital relationships secret from their wives; for their part, wives may choose not to take issues with these behaviors for the sake of domestic tranquility.

“I know he goes to the café but I remain silent. Because if I say something, it will cause a problem in our family. It won’t be good if I confront him because he’ll think that I am trying to disrespect him.”

-Rasti, Darma’s third wife

Finally, attitudes towards contraception and pregnancy throughout Indonesia tend to be lax, with many men preferring not to wear condoms for their own enjoyment or, as described above, due to fairly low anxiety about unplanned pregnancy. It may also be due to inaccurate understandings of the symptoms, transmission, and implications of contracting STD’s (Simon and Paxton 2004). Unfortunately, this behavior means that husbands, especially those who seek out sexual relationships in cafes and brothels, may be putting their wives at risk for STD’s, including HIV and AIDS, which is on the rise in Indonesia and is known to be more prevalent among commercial sex workers (Joesoef et al. 1997; Sugihantono et al. 2003).

“According to doctors, you can tell when a girl has AIDS from the smell of her breath or her discharge. If those smell bad, it’s better not to have sex with her.”

-Damai, Balinese village man

Darma’s wives are somewhat aware of the potential sexual health risks involved with their husband’s patronage of prostitutes and they act to protect themselves by demanding that he wash himself before they become intimate; however this is not effective protection against STD’s.

Outcomes of Domestic Violence on Children

Domestic violence also impacts the children in the household. Most immediately, it may endanger their immediate physical safety if they too become victim to it, as in Bitter Honey, when Darma's children recount becoming the target of his occasional wrath, including in one memorable episode where he held two of his son's heads under water and tied them to a tree crawling with fire ants.

“Once, we emptied out the pool and all the water went everywhere... Our father got angry and chased us with a piece of wood. We ran to the East side of the house. He caught us and tied our hands to a tree covered with fire ants. Then he held our heads underwater, kicking and hitting us.”

-Kadek and Mahardika, Darma's son

However, even just witnessing domestic abuse also has impacts on children's relationships with their fathers, and their own psychological wellbeing, leading to increased vulnerability to emotional and behavioral difficulties and further abuse from others (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan 2008).

“I felt angry. I wanted to grab my father's hands and stop him. But my grandmother locked me in my room and wouldn't let me get near my father. Now if I come out of my room, my father doesn't dare do that. He doesn't really beat my mother if he sees that I'm at home.”

-Artawan, Sadra's son with Ketut



“I can’t forgive my own father, even now. Because he was harsh.. I have been harsh with my wife and kids. So I am worried. ‘Just wait until you’re old,’ my son must definitely feel that way. That’s always on my mind. I told my wife, ‘If my son doesn’t take care of me, don’t wash away my piss or shit, just let me die....”

-Wayan Sadra



Domestic Violence Legislation and Intervention in Bali

Again, when studied cross-culturally, women's vulnerability to domestic or partner violence may be exacerbated by legislative inequality and public policy.


Trying to overcome the complacency regarding gender-based violence, women's rights advocates across the globe have increasingly attempted to frame women's protection against such violence as a human rights issue.

Indonesia has had a strong women's movement since the mid-20th century. Indonesian feminists have pressed for a broader recognition of women's rights, especially in the arena of marriage and domestic violence. In late 2004, Indonesia's first female President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, signed groundbreaking legislation defining domestic violence in a comprehensive way, as comprising "every action...that results in physical, sexual, or psychological suffering or causes hardship within the household, including threats to carry out actions, acts of force, or the deprivation of freedoms that violate the law" and "acts that result in fear, the deprivation of self-confidence, the deprivation of the ability to act, feelings of disempowerment, and/or serious psychological suffering."

The addition of psychological and sexual violence to physical violence is not trivial. For the first time in Indonesia's history, this law defines and criminalizes marital rape and psychological abuse. The legislation also calls for the provision of comprehensive

social services to victims, including special units devoted to domestic violence within police offices; the provision of healthcare, social workers and spiritual counselors for victims; and guaranteed protection for victims, witnesses, and families of victims. It also stipulates that abusive husbands who are found guilty in court face a maximum of ten years in prison or up to a Rp. 15 million (USD \$1,530) fine.

Despite the radical breadth of this legislation, in practice, little has changed in terms of official reporting of domestic violence and recourse for victims. Many women may simply still be unaware of their rights and the social welfare services at their disposal. Few domestic violence survivors know about the availability of counseling or legal aid services and this social welfare sector remains underutilized. Furthermore, cultural beliefs and social mores also may be a more significant influence on what a woman considers to be domestic violence than legal definitions.



.....
: “As his wife, I :
: can’t reject him :
: when he wants :
: to have sex.” :
: -Suciati, Darma’s forth wife :
:
.....

For example, despite her evident misery in her marriage and palpable fear of and disgust with her husband, Suci Ati still believes it is her duty to submit to Darma sexually.

If servicing or satisfying one’s husband’s sexual needs is considered to be part of a wife’s duty and identity, then a wife may not see herself as having a right to refuse advances, let alone think that should she refuse and her husband persists that it could be considered a crime. Legal rights under national law simply may not make much of a difference in the family realm, where so many other cultural factors impact marital expectations and perceived options. Therefore women’s rights activists, such as Luh Putu Anggreni, who runs a legal aid clinic for women, are trying to find ways to not just educate Balinese men, women, community leaders and village about the new laws and what it means for couples, but also introduce new ideas and expectations about women’s empowerment and what it means to be a husband or wife.

“Being violent towards your wife and children is now a crime, according to new laws. Our focus is to mediate and intervene in family disputes in order to help women and children. There are high rates of domestic violence in Bali today, and this has an effect on relationships between men and women.”

-Luh Putu Anggreni, lawyer and women’s rights advocate

These efforts have led to some recent changes. A recent decision by the High Council of Customary Law Villages, which oversees the administration of adat law in Bali, now provides for women to receive inheritance and allows women to have custody of their children in the case of divorce. This has the potential to lift some of the structural restrictions that prevent women from leaving troubled marriages.

It may be that a combination of new legal protections and traditional forms of conflict resolution—such as mediation with respected elders—will better protect Balinese women from domestic violence.

Anthropological Inquiry: What Makes a “Good Marriage?”

Evaluating Marriage in Cultural Context



Both in popular conception and in anthropological literature, some sort of “marriage” is often taken as a cross-cultural given; while the exact structure and expectations of marriage may differ, the creation of a some sort of stable family unit for the purpose of sharing resources, building alliances, reproducing and caring for kin is usually thought of as a key element in the human life course. However, there are many different forms and functions of marriage in different cultures at different times (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006).



An “Experience-Near” Account of Marriage

Part of the issue may be a significant gap in research: despite the assumed universality of marriage, and a canonical interest in the rituals and customs involved in finding a mate and marrying (e.g. Applbaum 1995), surprising little ethnographic or anthropological material about marriage has been generated from an experience near, person-centered perspective.

In other words, much remains to be learned about the hopes, fears, desires, frustrations, and satisfaction experienced by married individuals, and many questions remain to be asked. For example, what is the emotional or affective experience of marriage like? What assumptions do people have about marriage, what do they expect to give and get in their marriage, how do they feel when these expectations aren't met, what do they value most in their marriage, and how do they adjust over time? What makes “a good marriage”?

The answers to these questions may be very different for different people in different cultures. The expectations and experiences of a new Balinese wife leaving her family's compound for the first time to go live with her husband's extended family and join his spiritual patriline may be very different from that of an upper-middle class secular urban American male ‘thirty-something’ who has been living with his partner for years. What makes “a good marriage” in millennial America may not be what makes a good marriage in contemporary Bali.

The psychological anthropologist Naomi Quinn has devoted significant effort to researching what she calls the “American cultural model of marriage” (Quinn 1982; 1987). According to her findings, for many Americans marriage is focused on the couple and expected to be mutually beneficial and fulfilling in terms of shared tasks and, just as importantly, feelings and affection.

While status and role performance are certainly components of the American model, they are less likely to be emphasized by married people of either gender. While some elements of marriage may be globally universal, different cultural models of marriage may emphasize different aspects of the union, such as childrearing, continuity of lineage, or property ownership, and be focused more on the entire extended family unit.


Living and Evaluating Polygamous Marriage in a Changing Bali



Of course, even within a single culture, marital institutions and common domestic practices are dynamic, changing over time in response to shifting economic systems, educational practices, social norms, and even popular culture (see Dunn 2004 on Japan, or Seymour 1999 on India). So given these different cultural models, how do people in marriages evaluate them?

More specifically, in the case of *Bitter Honey*, is there a Balinese cultural model of polygamous marriage upon which husbands and wives are basing their evaluation—and is it changing? While of course based on a small sample of only three families, the film provides some clues.

Two key aspects of marriage are brought up by many of the people in the film, suggesting that they may be of key importance to couples and families. One of these is financial support and shared household duties and obligations; another is women's autonomy as it relates to ideas about fate and karma.



It seems to be that in the traditional Balinese cultural model of marriage, the husband is expected to provide for his wife or wives, and a key element of married life and family life is sharing in the ongoing domestic labor associated with Balinese spirituality—in particular, crafting daily offerings and preparing for numerous expensive cyclical ceremonies. It may be that when this model works fairly smoothly, wives will be generally satisfied. Tuaji's wives and neighbors state approval of him and his polygamous marriage, predominantly on financial terms.

“I think he is fair.
He bought three
of his wives land
in another village,
and the two others
a house in this
village.”

-Oka, Tuaji's neighbor


Even in households founded by members of a younger generation where some of the wives work outside the home, as long as the wife feels like these expectations are being fulfilled, she may still feel satisfied.

Financial Support and Shared Obligations

It's when the reality doesn't match the model, or parameters aren't being fulfilled that unhappiness arises. Women seem more likely to express dissatisfaction with their polygamous marriage when they feel their husbands are not providing them the financial or material support they or their children need. In this scenario, the structure of polygamous marriage becomes an easy target.

“If there is work to
be done at the house,
there are four of
us, so it is easy to
split work amongst
ourselves.”

-Rasti, Darma's third wife



“I earn my own money. My husband never gives me any money. He gets his wages and always takes them straight to his second wife. He tells me he pays for her boarding house, and gives some to their sons for school.”

-Ketut, Sadra's first wife

It may not be polygamy in and of itself that seems to preclude or lead to an unhappy marriage for a co-wife, but a disjunction between the cultural model of polygamous marriage and the lived economic reality.

“He never gives me any money. I pay for our kids' school on my own. I have to borrow money for that! My husband never pays for the telephone or electricity bills. He hasn't paid the rent here in over a year!”

-Murni, Sadra's second wife

The effect of this disjunction is felt not just by wives, but also by husbands—indeed, in Sadra's case, the costs of supporting two wives and eight children, including school fees, taxes, rent payments, gasoline, electricity bills, clothing and food, has left him in a state of near-constant anxiety. Many Balinese men now say that even if they are attracted to the polygamous lifestyle, it is a path only an affluent few can pursue without financial hardship or emotional stress.



Fate, Karma, and Women's Autonomy


The lived experience of Balinese polygamy may also depend to a certain extent upon the broader changes in attitudes towards marriage and women's rights.

In the past, most Balinese marriages, especially among nobles, were arranged by parents to strengthen political ties, preserve caste standing, or keep wealth within an extended family. Marriage was not considered exclusively a joining of two individuals, but a partnering of their respective kin. The purpose of a marriage was to produce sons who would inherit their family's status and wealth, and take ritual care of their deceased ancestors by making offerings in the family temple; these arranged unions often took variable account of a woman's desires. As such, parents might agree to allow their daughter to become the second (or third, fourth, etc.) wife of a powerful man in order to raise their own status through alliance (Geertz & Geertz, 1975).

These days, marriage in Bali is changing. Most Balinese youth now pick their own marriage partners. While completing ritual responsibilities through shared family labor is still very important to couples, young Balinese people also now have access to a wide range of global media, which have promoted ideals of romantic love. Meanwhile, increased access to education and global and local women's rights promote women's independence and support women's self-fulfillment; women now expect a greater deal of autonomy in their lives, including their domestic lives. Earlier generations of women may have been better prepared to accept that many aspects of their life would be out of their control; this attitude can be seen exemplified by Tuaji's wives, who project an air of peaceful acceptance.

“No, I wasn't angry.
What could I do?
That was a typical
way to live in Bali.
We are used to
having a husband
with many wives.”

-Manis, Tuaji's seventh wife




Many Indonesians believe that fate, karma, and divine reason plays a large part in how their lives unfold and explain positive, negative, and unusual things that happen to them by citing either past lives of their ancestors, or the mysterious workings of supernatural powers. By viewing their relationships with women as predetermined by a divine balance sheet of past actions, men are no longer agents, but rather victims of their own fate. In this way, polygamy is being done to them.

It seems that some husbands are still ready to accept cosmic logic to explain how they ended up in a polygamous marriage; however other Balinese, even Balinese men, no longer accept this explanation. These long-standing cultural schemas of life one's unfolding course are even coming to be viewed with skepticism by some with regards to interpersonal relationships. In the film, anthropologist Degung Santikarma posits that identifying karma as the cause of their polygamous lifestyles is merely an excuse and a way for men to skirt responsibility for their choices.

“When they are asked, ‘Why are you a polygamist?’ their main excuse would be, ‘Oh, this is my karma.’ Karma is the result of one’s actions from past lives. Karma becomes a way for people to escape responsibility for their actions. They’d say, ‘Oh this is my karma, this is fate.’ It’s a defense mechanism to escape from their responsibilities.”

-Suciati, Dharma's fourth wife



“Don’t think like that, don’t blame it on your ancestors. If you believe it’s passed down, you’ll continue with your behavior. The important thing is that you realize this isn’t right.”

-Alit, Sadra’s employer

A newer generation of wives may find it more difficult to balance familiar cultural mandates of acceptance, fate, and karma, and familiar gendered expectations of obedience with their own feelings of frustration, anger, or betrayal—and yet for women who are already married, with divorce mostly not an option, they are left to manage their own sometimes powerfully negative emotions.


For the three Balinese families whose lives are the subject of this film, this shifting socio-cultural ground makes for a complex contemporary practice of polygamy. All of the women portrayed in the film believe it is a Balinese woman’s role to be a dutiful wife and mother. Yet none of these women wish to see their own daughters and sons enter into polygamy.

All three polygamous husbands claim to treat their wives fairly, dividing sexual attention and economic sustenance equally, yet they also admit they have used violence or the threat of physical harm to gain wives and keep control of their families and worry about the long-term repercussions of this, particularly when it comes to their relationships with their children.

While some of the wives living in polygamy emphasize its benefits, including the practical contributions of co-wives to a household, they all stress the suffering it may bring upon women and their children. Indeed, the general consensus of the wives and children in the film is that their own personal experience of polygamy suggest that it may no longer be a satisfying, viable, or sustainable option for future generations. Popular opinion of the practice seems to be following suit (for example see Couteau et al. 2014).

“I don’t believe in polygamy. It destroys families.”

-Balinese villager



“People have insulted me, saying ‘How could your father have five wives?’”

-Kadek, son of Rasti, Dharma's third wife

“No one ever says it's good for a man to have many wives. His children will be looked down upon by others. I had a few girlfriends in high school... even my current girlfriend's parents do not agree with us dating. They see my dad, who has many wives—and he also likes to cheat...”

-Saputra, Dharma's son with first wife, Kiawati

“I would be upset if he became like my father. I know what it's like to be in a polygamous family...it's sad. I was happy to have many mothers because they all took care of me, but if my husband had other wives, I wouldn't be happy.”

-Yuliantari, Dharma's son with second wife, Sulasih



This guide has illustrated how the practice of polygamy is shaped by and reflects values embedded in Balinese kinship, spiritual, social, and legal systems that are both enduring and evolving; as these do evolve they change the expectations about what makes a good marriage, influencing the lived experience of and levels of satisfaction with contemporary Balinese polygamy.



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“Heartbreaking...”

-LAEL LOWENSTEIN

“Gut wrenching...”

-WADE MAJORS

“An intimate and
provocative film.”

“An exposé and call
for social reform in
Bali, [director Robert]
Lemelson offers an
eye-opening look
behind Bali’s profile as
a tourist Shangri-la.”

-SHERI LINDEN, LA TIMES



Press

“Forget the Bali you see in pictures, the shocking documentary “Bitter Honey” shows a side of the tropical paradise where polygamy and domestic abuse reigns.”

-DORRI OLDS, THEBLOT MAGAZINE

“Fascinating and undoubtedly important, this is a doc you’ll want to keep an eye out for.”

-INDIEWIRE



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The background of the entire image is a detailed illustration of a garden scene. On the left, a large bush of pink and white daisy-like flowers stands next to a body of water with lily pads and pink flowers. In the center and right, five women are depicted in various poses, seemingly dancing or moving through the garden. They are wearing colorful, patterned saris. The bottom right corner features large, stylized green leaves and white flowers. The overall style is artistic and painterly.

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