Chapter 9

Conjugal Conundrums
Conversion and Marriage Delay in the Contemporary Caribbean

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Introduction

Legal or "traditional" marriage in the Caribbean has for decades posed a unique challenge for social scientists and Caribbean people alike. The problem, as it has been framed in the literature, is based on the disconnect between the ideals of religious doctrine—primarily the pervasive Christian ideal of marriage—and the prevailing reality of common-law unions in Caribbean family ideology and organization (including the regular attribution of "matrifocality" and "male marginality" to Caribbean domestic units). Historically, the Caribbean has consistently low marriage rates relative to the rest of the world. Conjugal ideals of "romantic, monogamous, enduring marriage and co-residence," while familiar and, at least in some ways, desirable, are largely impractical for many Caribbean peoples, often being viewed as inappropriate or deemed "not for us" (Barrow 1995: 57, 65). Instead, formal marriage is commonly avoided, as it does not represent a functional option to many men and women who see the institution as limiting. The conflict here between cultural ideal and practical reality is especially acute for evangelical Christian converts who must balance the demanding expectations of the faith with the

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actualities of everyday life and conventional negotiations of soci-
ality, intimacy, and relatedness in the region. Perhaps surprisingly,
even after conversion, common-law unions perdure despite addi-
tional pressure to formalize sexual relations through marriage upon
joining the church. Drawing on insights from my ethnographic
work in the Dominican Republic as well as the anthropological and
sociological literature on marriage and the family in the Caribbean,
this chapter considers the notion of "waithood"—or what it means
to postpone marriage—in an area of the world where deferred mar-
riage is more often the norm than the exception and where certain
conjugal unions, even for the faithful, remain quixotic and present
just as many relational conundrums as they do reasonable solutions
to the elemental matters of romance, reproduction, and prosperity
in today's Caribbean.

Delayed marriage has been the Caribbean norm for years. How-
ever, to postpone marriage here does not necessarily imply ex-
tended singlehood since any number of conjugal union types might
prevail in the place of formal marriage. The Caribbean, understood
in general terms, stands in contrast to other regional cases explored
in this volume, not only for its long-term and relatively stable com-
mitment to extra-legal unions and flexible approach to conjugality,
but also for the relatively permissive degree of sexual license men
and women enjoy alongside the widespread Christian propagation
of sexual modesty and restraint. With this considered, alongside the
data explored below, the emergent conditions of waithood globally
may not correspond evenly with the established and enduring pat-
terns of marriage delay, long observed in the Caribbean. If waithood
is to be theorized here, it must account for the strategic and routine
modes of deferral and avoidance that Caribbean people have em-
ployed for decades in their efforts to manage local desires as well as
social expectations when it comes to reproductive partnerships and
procreative goals.

It can be said that, while marriage in the Caribbean is religiously
valorized, it is difficult to enact. In what follows, I draw special atten-
tion to the key dilemmas fueling marriage delay by focusing on the
conjugal conundrums facing impoverished male converts who, by vir-
tue of competing obligations, are precariously situated between the
authoritative prescriptions of the church that oblige them to marry
and powerful sociocultural imperatives that discourage adoption of
the nuclear family model and disincentivize marriage at an early
age. Because of their structural position and, presumably, as devout
converts, their greater commitment to the church and its ideals, the

male faithful experience these dilemmas more forcefully than anyone else: marriage at once urgently compelled by their church membership but no more easily realized. A focus on these and other men helps throw the perennial question of whether or not to marry and when into sharper relief and sheds valuable light on how Caribbean men and women differentially experience the conjugal conundrums underlying deferred marriage throughout the region.

Considering marriage delay and the waithood concept in relation to the Caribbean is instructive because it reminds us that reproductive unions are by definition elastic; legal marriage is but one (albeit popular) possibility among many. The Christian institution of marriage, along with its endorsement of the nuclear family, cannot be viewed as essential to reproduction, even where Christian moral values predominate. Indeed, there is nothing natural or inherently superior about co-residential, monogamous, and/or stable unions, much less those that are "divinely ordained." Caribbean family ideology and organization demonstrate the limited and contextual efficacy of Christian marriage; time and again Caribbean people choose extra-legal partnerships over those sanctioned by law or religious rite in ways that belie the universal appeal of formal matrimony and betray its ostensible suitability and attractiveness across time and space.

Caribbean Family Ideology and Organization

The subject of marriage and family is not new to the sociology and anthropology of the Caribbean. In fact, research on the Caribbean family constituted an important segment of the primordial bedrock of Caribbean studies in social science from the 1950s through the 1970s and produced a great deal of empirical work illuminating the structure and function of kinship organization and ideology across the region.[1] The lion's share of this output highlights the frequency and apparent ordinariness of extra-legal family formation, delayed or late entry into marriage, and the prevalence of women-headed households, especially—though not exclusively—among Afro-Caribbean, poor, and working-class families (Rubenstein 1983: 283).[2]

Noting important deviations from the nuclear family model, this scholarship draws specific attention to three conjugal union types that are popular in Caribbean countries; these are commonly referred to as visiting, common-law, and legal marriage. *Legal mar-*

riage, the only union formally sanctioned by law or by religious rite, refers to a union where partners live together in the same household and are "married" by lawful or religious ceremony. *Common-law* marriage refers to unions where partners share a common household but are not legally married and therefore lack the social status and formal sanctioning afforded to couples in legal marriages. And, lastly, *visiting unions*, the most flexible if least prestigious of the three union types, refer to consensual partnerships between individuals who are neither officially married nor living in a common-law union; in visiting relationships, couples do not share a household and their union is not sanctioned by legal or religious prescription. Raymond T. Smith (1988: 111) summarizes the range of meanings as follows: *legal marriage* is a legally contracted union; *common-law marriage* is a co-residential non-legal union; and a *visiting union* is a union that is neither legal nor co-residential. Regardless of union status, Caribbean peoples might consider themselves or others to be "married" or refer to their partners as "spouses" in any three of these arrangements—that is to say that the legality of one's union status is sometimes obscured by the colloquial use of terms like "husband" and "wife" inasmuch as they are applied indiscriminately to a variety of conjugal scenarios. In the Dominican Republic, for instance, it is customary to refer to domestic partners or longtime romantic companions as *esposo* and *esposa*, whether or not the individuals concerned are legally married or even share a residence.

While the nuclear family model, along with formal, legal marriage, is aspirational throughout the Caribbean—a marker of social status and respectability (Wilson 1969: 78) and a cultural ideal readily acknowledged if not enthusiastically endorsed across economic classes—common-law and visiting unions are commonplace and tend to be institutionalized among the poor and working classes for whom childbirth out of wedlock is perceived as natural and transpires without social disgrace (Barrow 2001: 422). Caribbean people distinguish between legal and non-legal unions, to be sure, but generally acknowledge the range of unions to be legitimate, even inevitable, conjugal arrangements. At the same time, they assign varying degrees of respectability to each status according to pervasive patriarchal Eurocentric and Christian moral values that structure the ethics of family formation from above (Barrow 2001: 422; Reddock 2005: 80; Safa 1998: 206; also see Clarke 1957; Wilson 1969). Formal marriage, however unlikely for some, is nevertheless considered the most prestigious and respectable option, while visiting unions garner the least esteem but are no less prevalent (e.g.,

Roberts and Sinclair 1978: 64–65).[3] In general, the rules governing Caribbean family formation are not rigid, therefore permitting considerable sexual freedom and accommodating a variety of possible domestic configurations (Powell 1986: 83). Extra-legal unions are the prevailing norm, and it is not uncommon for married men to have mistresses or for women to have children with several different men throughout their lifetime. This relatively laissez-faire attitude toward conjugality and childbearing characterizes the flexible approach to marriage, residence, and partnering patterns typical of social and sexual relations in the Caribbean.

The normalcy afforded common-law and visiting unions and the resulting social dynamics are defining characteristics of the Caribbean region according to several demographic indicators. According to Powell (1986: 83) and others, roughly 70 percent of all births in the Caribbean happen in non-legal unions (compare that with only about 15 percent globally), and it is estimated that at least one-third of Caribbean households are headed by women.[4] These numbers have changed little over time. Despite a precipitous fall in fertility rates since the 1970s, for example, the ages of women at first marriage and birth of first child in Caribbean countries have remained fairly constant.[5] This contrasts with Europe, Central Asia, and other regions that have witnessed significant delays in family formation over the same time period (Chioda 2016: 45–46). Even considering significant advancements in economic and educational opportunities, especially where it concerns the progress of women—not to mention demographic changes and important political and cultural transformations across the region—family formation in the Caribbean has not changed appreciably for several generations (Barrow 1996, 2001; Douglas 1992: 15–16; McKenzie 1993; Reddock 2005; Roberts and Sinclair 1978; R. Smith 1988: 166).

Marriage and the Christian Church

Popular ideas about conjugal roles and relationships in the Caribbean differ drastically from those enshrined by Christian churches, which more or less unanimously promote marriage as the ideal union. From the perspective of both Catholicism and Protestantism (and any number of its seemingly infinite denominations), legal Christian marriage is the only legitimate and morally appropriate context for sexual contact and childbearing. Any other sexual arrangement outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage consti-

tutes "living in sin." Most conjugal unions in the Caribbean are, therefore, according to its primary religious institutions, immoral, deviant, and sinful, and, as a consequence, deemed incompatible with serving God.

The marriage ideal itself, seemingly ubiquitous throughout the Caribbean, is a product of the pervasive influence Catholic and Protestant Christianities have exercised over the region since it was first colonized (Thornton 2016). Subsequently, Christian churches (not to mention other religious institutions) have exerted strong pressure on couples to marry, but their efforts have been met with varying degrees of success. Caribbean couples remain firmly committed to common-law and visiting unions despite longstanding opposition from some of the largest and oldest cultural institutions in the region. Nearly two decades ago, Barrow (1996: 439) made the telling observation that even in response to ethical damnation, Caribbean people seem unlikely to change their cultural practices when it comes to reproduction and marriage.

Remarkably, even with the considerable expansion of evangelical and, in particular, Pentecostal-charismatic forms of Christianity over the past forty years, little has changed. Pentecostal Christianity tends to be more demanding than other Christian denominations when it comes to the moral identity and ascetic obligations of its flock, including the firm insistence on marriage by religious rite. The expectation is that conversion to Pentecostal Christianity will be followed by a strict transformation in the moral character of the convert. As part of their "rebirth in Christ," the born-again faithful are expected to reform aspects of their life once characterized as sinful. This often means severing social ties with familiars whom they fear might draw them back into sin. In order to ensure godliness, converts follow prohibitions on drinking, smoking, dancing, fornicating, fighting, and swearing, and abide by a bevy of behavioral prescriptions intended to distinguish them from the "unconverted." Among the prescriptions for living a righteous Christian life is formal marriage to another likeminded churchgoer who shares the same spiritual goals. Upon conversion, converts are instructed to terminate any illicit sexual relationships and to seek suitable partners for marriage who will help them in their quest for salvation.

Termination of common-law and visiting relationships, for many churches, is a prerequisite to full membership in the congregation (though it depends on the current policies of the specific church). In many churches, for example, baptism may be withheld until an unlawful union is severed or made regular through the appropri-

ate marriage rites. Some churches reject common-law unions out of hand, while others are more permissive and willing to recognize stable and committed unions as acceptable, if by no means ideal. Because of this, marriage might be sought for no other reason than to facilitate full participation in the faith community and to legitimize one's place among the devoted.

Little evidence exists to suggest that marriage practices have radically changed for the converted. Over the past several decades, Pentecostalism, and charismatic Christianity more broadly, are among the fastest growing forms of Christianity worldwide, with the vast majority of conversions occurring among the poor and popular classes in the Global South. Since the 1970s, Protestant growth throughout the Caribbean and Latin America can be described as impressive. In the Dominican Republic alone, for example, the number of Protestant Christians rose from 1.6 percent of the population in the 1960s to nearly 23 percent today, and of those Protestants, 81 percent are Pentecostal by denomination or identity. Added to that, 52 percent of all practicing Catholics in the country identify as charismatic, a "pentecostalized" form of Catholicism (Pew Research Center 2014: 64). Surprisingly, over that same period, the marriage rate has not changed appreciably. According to UNPD (2008) *World Marriage Data*, the crude marriage rate in the Dominican Republic in 1970 was 4.2 (annual marriages per thousand) and in 2005 it was recorded again as 4.2, exactly the same rate. For comparative purposes, Jamaica's crude marriage rate went up from 4.9 in 1970 to 8.7 in 2006; Cuba's went down from 13.4 in 1970 to 5.0 in 2006; Puerto Rico's decreased from 10.9 in 1970 to 5.8 in 2006; Martinique's marriage rate fell from 5.4 in 1970 to 3.7 in 2006; and Trinidad and Tobago's stayed relatively stable from 6.8 in 1970 to 6.3 in 2005.

It seems that Pentecostals and other evangelical Christian groups, while successful at converting Catholics and others to the faith, have not been as successful at convincing them to marry, at least in the widespread transformative cultural ways they so often claim. Scarce evidence exists to suggest a marriage revolution has attended the otherwise stark charismatic revival that has swept through the Caribbean in earnest since the 1970s and 1980s. To my knowledge, no systematic or comparative study of marriage rates among Protestant families in the Caribbean has ever been undertaken. Much more research in this area is needed to determine to what degree conversion has affected the marriage practices of believers who, by all other indications, appear to be following the same cultural trends of the region.

For the past fourteen years, my ongoing fieldwork and ethnographic research in the Caribbean has focused on impoverished urban communities and the role religious identity plays in the management of everyday life (Thornton 2013, 2016, 2018a, 2018b). Between 2007 and 2009 (with significant follow-up visits in 2010 and 2012), I conducted comprehensive ethnographic research with a Pentecostal community in a poor urban neighborhood of Villa Altagracia in the Dominican Republic. A primary focus of this research concerned conversion and the intersecting themes of gender, cultural change, and the politics of religious authority locally. Accordingly, I collected ethnographic data on a number of related topics, including information about family dynamics, past and present associations and relationships, demographic information, and personal histories. I frequently probed informants on the nature and quality of their social relationships, their evaluations of self and community identity, as well as their ideas about social roles and statuses. Over the course of this work, I observed that while talk about marriage was frequent, few people I knew or interacted with were married in the legal or religious senses. At times, I even observed churchgoers actively work against establishing marriage alliances (see Thornton 2018a). Despite the churches' pleas to the faithful to formalize their domestic unions, legal marriage was the exception rather than the rule. This observation is consistent with patterns of pluralistic family formation nationally and the prevalence of extra-legal unions evident throughout the country. It seems fair to say that, while the ideal is desirable in word, it is irregularly followed in practice. It is difficult to reconcile why so many people, even after conversion, are in no rush to marry.

The reasons, I think, have far less to do with the failures of the church in substantiating the benefits of marriage than they do with the institution's inability to address the structural contradictions in Caribbean culture that, historically, have constrained early marriage and incentivized more flexible alternatives to formal Christian matrimony. For Pentecostal and evangelical Christians specifically, marriage demands additional commitments that are especially difficult to adhere to when combined with the challenging requirements and moral expectations of the faith. Marriage remains a cultural ideal in the Caribbean, but one subordinate to reproduction and childrearing and subject to the evaluative concerns of prudent young adults for whom marriage matters, but often in ways that provide for its realization only later in life.

Reproduction and Childrearing

It is widely held in the Caribbean that while a woman may forego becoming a wife, she ought to become a mother (Powell 1986: 83, 121). Having or raising children is generally viewed as a compulsory, celebratory duty of adulthood, an index of divine favor. According to Dorian Powell's (1986) work on women's familial experiences in Antigua, St. Vincent, and Barbados, motherhood more than wifehood is understood to be the primary basis of feminine identity. She observes that while women are strongly marriage-oriented in these countries, there is little urgency regarding when exactly a woman gets married. Instead, womanhood is more directly tied to the experience of maternity. For the lower classes in particular, marriage is postponed, if it occurs at all, until after childbearing, while those from the upper classes, for whom "illegitimacy" comes at a higher social cost, marriage to someone of the same status and ethnic group is usually a prerequisite to childbirth (Barrow 2001: 422). Sociologist Christine Barrow (1995: 59) reports that for the country of Barbados, at least up to the 1990s, a gap of five years separated the average age of a woman at birth of her first child (her early twenties) and her age at first marriage (her late twenties). It is common for Caribbean women to remain in their natal homes even after childbirth since it is there where they may receive the most support in the face of potentially unreliable fathers. A corollary is that legal marriage is often entered into when partners are past childbearing (M. Smith 1966: xxxiv; Wilson 1969: 77).

The minor emphasis on marriage, it has been argued, is the result of the relatively weak and unstable conjugal bond observed as a hallmark of Caribbean family organization (Safa 2012). The relative indifference toward marriage expressed by the masses combined with the centering of motherhood reflects the high value assigned to familial networks based on consanguineal ties and on the markedly strong bond nurtured between a mother, her children, and her female kin. Based on her extensive work in the contemporary Hispanic Caribbean, anthropologist Helen Safa (1998: 203–4) contends that the conjugal bond between husbands and wives has been weakened over time through consensual unions, labor migration, liberalization of divorce, and the deterioration of men's ability to fulfill the role of economic provider. "Even in male-headed households," she notes, "the strongest bond is often that between mother and child and female kin, rather than the conjugal tie which is empha-

sized in the nuclear family." This is particularly the situation among the urban, low-income strata where women under stress must rely on their female kin group for stability and aid in cases where men are unreliable, unavailable, or incapable of supporting a family as the primary breadwinner (Safa 1998: 212–13; also see Safa 1995). These kinship networks play a vital role in the area of childcare, especially for those women who pursue economic activities outside of the home and provide the primary safety net against economic and social instability (Powell 1986). These relationships become the foundation for security in woman- and women-headed households where extended family networks based on the support of female kin are a major survival strategy in the absence of material contributions from men, especially for lower- and working-class single mothers (Safa 2012: 229).

Although men often play a dominant role in the household, it cannot be said that they are always or even most of the time the "heads of the family." This is the case if he is absent, his support is uncertain, or if he makes limited or otherwise inadequate contributions to his wife and children. In places throughout the Caribbean where women are more employable than their husbands, or where, because of emigration, women take over the affairs customarily reserved for men in order to compensate for their absence, the traditional father-husband role is undermined or devalued and may be rendered nonessential by the financial stewardship of women and the greater responsibility for childrearing they normally assume. It is based on these tendencies that the term "matrifocality" is so often applied to Caribbean family organization—namely, the central role women assume in the household and the supposedly peripheral role of the father/husband to the domestic sphere and nuclear family. According to the historical sociology and anthropology of the region, greatly influenced by the observations and writings of social anthropologist Peter Wilson (1969, [1973] 1995), men are "marginal" to the household and its affairs, an area defined as the woman's domain and the space where her interests are realized or prioritized and her authority most respected. The man's domain, alternatively, is defined by the street or public sphere where he finds complementary institutions, activities, and values that center on men and male interests, a space where menfolk are said to pursue "reputation," the primary means to social distinction apart from women (Wilson 1971). It follows that if the woman's main sphere of influence is the household, the man's is the rum shop, the street corner, and the public square. This dualistic character attributed to Caribbean

social structure is exemplified in the opposing but complementary values of *reputation* and *respectability* outlined by Wilson in his work on the island of Providencia. According to Wilson's model, the alternative values of *reputation* are developed among marginalized men as an adaptive response to their exclusion from more elevated forms of prestige that are epitomized by the principles of upper-class inflected *respectability*, a complex of cultural values rooted in hegemonic Christo-European ideals embodied by the church and nuclear family, and represented by the institution of marriage. The resulting dynamic is one that sees men spending much of their time and resources outside the home—on friends, mistresses, etc., in pursuit of reputation—at the inevitable expense of their wives and children, who would otherwise benefit from their exclusive investment in the household. The result is a weakened conjugal bond diminished by the constant strain of forces that direct husbands' attention and resources away from hearth and home.[6]

Benefits and Limits of Marriage

While legal marriage is viewed as having its benefits, the flexibility of common-law and visiting relationships in the Caribbean offers strategic advantages in a variety of scenarios. To begin with, traditional, legal marriage, from the perspective of many women, promises to afford them the stability and respectability that is unattainable in extra-legal unions. This is in no small part because it better assures them of their partner's financial commitment. This assurance is rooted in the enforceable legal claim to financial support and property rights attending lawful marriage contracts as well as any tangible rewards that may be derived from respectable status in the community (Dirks and Kerns 1976: 47). In a survey of attitudes about marriage conducted by sociologist Barbara Finlay in Azua, Dominican Republic, female respondents who preferred marriage over common-law unions cited the greater rights women could exercise against men if they were legally married, making such statements as: "There is more respect [in marriage], more responsibility, and the woman has more claims against the man"; "There's more support against the man" (Finlay 1989: 58). A lawfully married woman can more confidently depend on her husband's patronage if he is both legally and morally obligated to provide for her and her children. Accordingly, a woman tends not to marry a man until he can prove his economic viability and demonstrate his financial commitment

since without those reassurances, he is relatively free to spend his money wherever he wishes and disinclined to invest it primarily in his wife and her household.

Just as elsewhere, economically irresponsible men are viewed as poor spouses (however sufficient they may be as lovers): good enough, perhaps, for a visiting relationship but not good enough for marriage. Finlay's (1989: 63) survey of rural women in Azua, Dominican Republic, found that when asked to describe a good husband, the most common response given was that he should be a provider for his family, "that he spends what he earns on the family's needs and not just on himself." Safa (1998) finds that Dominican female heads of household often avoid marriage and prefer to support themselves if they cannot find a good provider. She contends that it is a lack of marriage partners willing and able to support a family that encourages women to have children out of wedlock and to resist marriage or remarriage (Safa 1998: 212). Marital alliances, following the conclusions of Dirks and Kerns (1976: 48), are typically founded on a couple's willingness to enter into a long-term economic commitment and the man's demonstration of his capacity to do so. Homeownership, in many cases, is the main indication of this capacity and the primary symbol of his readiness for a wife and children (also see Powell 1986: 88; R. Smith 1956: 139). Marriage is regularly postponed until a potential husband can provide and maintain a dwelling of his own. This autonomy is usually the first step toward legalizing a union and establishing co-residential accommodations independent of a wife-to-be's family and their support for her and her children. These and other economic prerequisites for marriage are common and, for the poor and working classes, likely represent the primary deterrent to marriage at an early age (Blake 1961: 134–48).

According to research conducted by Dirks and Kerns (1976: 49) in the British Virgin Islands, most extra-legal unions are initiated under a mode of reciprocity that favors the maximization of short-term social and economic interests and therefore appeals to individuals facing precarious straits or who, as younger individuals, wish to avoid burdensome claims on their resources or freedom. Legal marriage, on the other hand, is usually contracted with the prospect of an enduring, generalized exchange relationship. Although legal unions require investments that promise minimal immediate returns, their value lies in the maximization of long-term objectives, not the least of which include respectability and power in the local community, supportive offspring, and security in old age (Dirks

and Kerns 1976). For men and women alike, marriage offers mutual protection against the inclemencies that are bound to beset life over time (Dirks and Kerns 1976: 47). It is for this reason that, with age and changes in fortune or life circumstances, legal marriage becomes a more probable eventuality. By the time men reach their late twenties and early thirties, their commitment to peer groups is somewhat diminished and their potential for securing stable employment more likely achieved or within reach. At this time, formal marriage becomes not just viable, but more desirable. It is therefore possible to interpret differing conjugal elections as "adaptive strategies" to the changing circumstances in which individuals find themselves at different stages of their life cycle (Barrow 1996: 70; Dirks and Kerns 1976).

While legal marriage is viewed as having its benefits it is not always viewed as sensible or worthwhile, even as incentives for formal unions increase with age and changing circumstances. Barrow (1995: 59) observes that while, in general, Caribbean people believe that marriage is the right and proper context for sexual relations and childbearing, marriage can mean a bundle of prescriptions that are not always viewed as practical or even desirable. Among the reasons they might avoid or postpone marriage, women across the Caribbean cite aversions to housework and childcare, potential restrictions on their freedom and independence, constraints on their access to economic support from kin and other men, and greater exposure to domestic violence (Barrow 1995: 59; Finlay 1989: 57–67; Powell 1986: 88; Roberts and Sinclair 1978: 64–67). Moreover, for many women today, marriage and childrearing at too young an age can spoil plans for an education and career. For these reasons, and still others, legal marriage is not always the most expedient option for Caribbean women.

Lifelong fidelity and submission to a husband's authority means increased susceptibility to domestic violence, personal ambitions deferred, perhaps sexual desires suspended or compromised, and other conditions that suggest marriage does not necessarily provide the security or happiness it is purported to yield. Visiting unions, on the other hand, carry few of these disadvantages and are not as disruptive to female autonomy and the ideals of gender equality desired and often expressed by Caribbean women (Barrow 1995: 59). According to Roberts and Sinclair's (1978: 67) survey of women and patterns of reproduction in Jamaica, common-law unions were assessed to be of the lowest value by their female respondents since such unions restrict the freedoms enjoyed in visiting unions but

come with all of the constraints of legal marriage while offering none of the apparent benefits. In the Dominican Republic, Finlay's (1989: 57–58) survey of working rural women in Azua suggests more ambivalence; she finds that women there indicate little preference for legal marriage over living with a man in a "free union." According to her respondents, extra-legal unions are preferable to formal marriage since men are largely perceived as unfaithful by nature and, with such low expectations of them, "it's better if the ties are looser."

It is possible, as Safa (1998: 210) puts forward, that as women's expectations of men have increased over time, women are no longer willing to accept male abuse and domination and therefore eschew formal marriage in favor of more advantageous or attractive arrangements. Moreover, as a result of improved economic autonomy, women increasingly take the initiative to end unsatisfactory relationships and perhaps do so today with greater ease thanks to the widespread liberalization of divorce. In any case, incentives to marry early, or to marry at all, have always seemed to be insufficient when it comes to making reproductive decisions in the Caribbean.

Binding Obligations

For men, just as for women, legal marriage can mean respectability and security, but for many it comes at a price they either cannot afford or find too costly to warrant. Marriage may be a long-term goal for men, promising fulfillment of the nuclear family ideal with regular companionship, a respectable household, exclusive sexual access, patriarchal identity, supportive offspring, and security in old age. At the same time, however, marriage in the Caribbean context carries with it a complicated and sometimes irreconcilable division of loyalties leveraged unevenly against men. Whether or not a married or soon-to-be married man can financially support a family of his own is one issue; the other, perhaps more challenging issue, is whether he can manage divergent obligations to his wife and children, to his family of origin, particularly his mother and her household, to his male friends, to children he has fathered with other women, to his siblings, and possibly also to his father and other kinfolk (e.g., R. Smith 1956: 138–39). As these obligations multiply or divide on an individual basis, men, unlike their female counterparts, retain strong financial and moral commitments to individuals outside the nuclear family—even after marriage—putting considerable stress on their ability to meet their conjugal responsibilities. For the

poor and working classes, this strain is increased exponentially since the resources needed to fulfill these obligations satisfactorily are often out of reach. Women, comparatively, are bound by fewer financial commitments: a woman's moral obligations according to custom are limited to the household she lives in—that is, her children and the man she is involved with—and not to the extraneous and multiple people to whom men in this context are frequently beholden.

Legal marriage in this way contrasts with common-law and visiting unions that ultimately necessitate fewer and less binding commitments. The few mutual obligations attending common-law and visiting relationships are viewed by the partners to them, both male and female, as being relatively loose, voluntary, and non-binding (Blake 1961: 122). If a man or a woman wishes to end a common-law relationship, the task is not fettered by paperwork or a complicated division of communal possessions, much less the legal settling of debts or reconciliation of joint affairs. This is seen as an advantage, not just by men, but by women as well (Finlay 1989: 59). The flexibility inherent in more fluid, pluralistic approaches to family formation gives men and women alike a strategic advantage over the nuclear family ideal, since for men it lightens the moral burden of meeting conflicting obligations to a multitude of different people and for women it ensures the freedom to choose what is best and most desirable for them as individuals, or as mothers, and promises autonomy from the exercise and violence of male domestic authority. Informal unions benefit both men and women in a cultural context that esteems Christian marriage but does little in the way of providing for its practical achievement.

The cultural politics of marriage delay in the Caribbean are a social and economic negotiation structured by norms of expectation, the necessities of reproductive success, enduring bonds of reciprocal obligation, and desires for happiness, love, and autonomy that are familiar to most young adults across the globe. To postpone marriage in this context has always made sense, where the benefits of formal legal unions are contextual and might only become clear later in life, with increased economic stability and the more likely assurance of material and emotional satisfaction.

Waithood in the Caribbean has less to do with singlehood or "waiting" to form a domestic union (to bear children, to raise a family, etc.) and has more to do with the deliberate and strategic deferral of legal marriage contracts and their attending burdens and restrictions. Whatever new incentives to "wait" might arise, they are inevitably weighed against long-term evaluations of stability, repro-

ductive success, and overall happiness. Even as growing economic and educational opportunities lead men and women to postpone marriage longer than usual, these and other social changes only act to further reinforce a pattern of deferral and avoidance long evidenced in the region.

The Convert's Dilemma

Conventional Christian marriage affirms traditional gender roles for men and women. Once married, men in the Pentecostal church, for example, are expected to assume the responsibility of dependable patriarch, and their authority over the family is avowed and sanctioned by their congregation. For a woman to accept this "patriarchal bargain," her born-again husband is expected to be a reliable provider and to refrain from domestic violence, infidelity, and excessive spending outside the household (on alcohol, entertainment, or other women). With his conversion, his commitment is to be reoriented toward his immediate family and his role as husband and father. From this perspective, his conversion is more than welcome since it shores up the benefits of formal marriage by lessening the likelihood of domestic instability, therefore curtailing the most common conflict between spouses. In theory, the thinking goes, women should value such unions since Pentecostal Christian marriage reinforces the strongest conjugal ties to the nuclear family, ensuring additional support for the domestic sphere where, limited as they might be, women stand to gain the most from their spousal relationship. Moreover, in addition to the legal claims against their husbands that follow from lawful marriage, with their conversions, women also succeed in obtaining spiritual claims, levied by God and enforced by the greater church community. Through the "reformation of machismo" (Brusco 1995) that accompanies this type of conversion, Christian wives have the added reassurance that their husbands will provide for them, as well as remain faithful and non-violent, alleviating concerns a woman might have of a man's suitability as a long-term partner (Austin-Broos 1997; Thornton 2016). Thus, with conversion, marriage should become more likely, even if it provides no obvious incentive to marry young.

   At the same time, however, the adoption of a conservative Christian doctrine of marriage ushers in a difficult conflict for believers—one that pits the moral demands of the church, following the radical transformation of conversion, against the established patterns of

domestic and kinship relations in the region. While the pressure to regularize one's union before God increases after joining the church, the incentives or reasons to marry or not to marry remain unchanged outside of church doors. The conflict between the cultural ideal of legal marriage and the practical reality of common-law unions is especially acute for evangelical and Pentecostal Christian converts because they must balance the demanding expectations of the faith with the conventions of everyday Caribbean life. There is an assumption that those who have adopted a conservative Christian identity have resolved this dilemma in accordance with the ascetic discipline of the church; however, scarce evidence exists to confirm this to be the case, at least in any generalizable sense.

For younger male converts, conversion presents a conjugal conundrum. Male converts are expected to find an appropriate Christian spouse and marry her soon after joining the church. Once married, Pentecostal husbands must fulfill the lofty expectations that they be Christian patriarchs, spiritual and material wellsprings for family and familiars, and loyal servants of God; they must also, according to social convention, provide financially for their wives, perform as reliable sons to their mothers, and deliver as benefactors to their children. They are also beholden to siblings and friends with whom they have strong moral ties. The church adds additional pressure to fulfill these obligations since being a good Christian husband also means being charitable, reliable, and a moral exemplar to the community (Thornton 2016). With conversion, it becomes harder for men to neglect their conjugal responsibilities and their obligations outside the home because of the added weight of the faith's formal and informal discipline. If, for example, a male convert who has married cannot fulfill the minimum expectations of a born-again husband, his testimony will be thrown into question and the validity of his conversion scrutinized, not only by his wife but also by his congregation and the community at large. To not live up to the community's expectations for Christian men is tantamount to failure, made all the worse by a convert's profession of holiness and declarations of spiritual reform.

Men, therefore, may not be incentivized to marry with any haste, even after conversion. Elsewhere I have discussed several cases from my fieldwork in the Dominican Republic where men evaded the charge to get married despite the explicit directives of their church (see Thornton 2018a). Crucially, conversion alone does not alleviate the economic burden of marriage or resolve the issue of competing obligations to kinfolk. If many already find the obligatory demands

of marriage overwhelming and unmanageable, they are unlikely to be able to cope with the additional demands of their faith.

Instead of resolving the conflict through a secondary injunction against extramarital relations and extraneous spending, Christian converts are likely to avoid or delay marriage for many of the same reasons as everyone else. Ultimately, conversion does little to solve the structural contradictions that create irreconcilable expectations for men outside the home, despite reorienting much of their attention onto marriage and the nuclear family. Informal unions perdure because the dilemma of divergent loyalties persists, and men's enduring obligations remain unresolved even after joining the church. This conjugal conundrum is compounded by poverty and financial instability. For the poor and working classes, marriage and the dilemma of increasing obligations is experienced forcefully as an economic obstacle, one that rich people can afford to navigate since they have the resources to respond to proliferating financial responsibilities but which, inevitably, leaves the impoverished with inadequate means to warrant formal marriage.

Conclusion

The ethnographic record suggests that these deep-rooted cultural practices will be slow to change, especially given that even Christian conversion fails to solve the conditions that lead to deferred marriage in the first place. Waithood, or what it means to postpone marriage, in one form or another, has always been a negotiation of changing circumstances in light of demographic shifts or economic and educational advancements; it has also always been a strategic assessment of value in relation to enduring social conventions, economic motives, conflicting obligations, and customary expectations that draw individuals into difficult conjugal scenarios that, at different times and for different people, may or may not inspire entry into romantic monogamous lawful marriage with "respectable" designs on a nuclear family.

Too often it is assumed that marriage is the desirable and obvious answer to economic insecurity or social uncertainty—especially as it concerns the so-called Third World or Global South—when in many cases it may not be. Indeed, the conventional practices of family formation and the indifferent attitudes toward early marriage exhibited in the Caribbean, particularly for the most precarious citizens, indicate otherwise. Safa (1998: 203) makes the important point that

any negative view of female-headed households, for example, is largely based on the Eurocentric emphasis on the nuclear family as the preferential norm—and the embodiment of modernity and progress—and mistakenly holds that female-headed households are pathological because of the rupture of the conjugal bond. The same can be said for the generally negative assessment of extra-legal unions and the regular denunciation of what has derisively been called "concubinage" by political and religious leaders alike. Much of the pioneering work on the Caribbean family carried out by the likes of Raymond T. Smith (1956), based originally on his research in British Guyana, sought to denaturalize the nuclear family relationship as a taken-for-granted human universal. His work, along with that of others cited here, demonstrates the virtues of flexible family formation; together, their scholarship highlights the advantages of conjugal versatility while helping to explain the resiliency of informal unions throughout the region.

Delayed marriage or waithood, along with the diverse modes of conjugality observed throughout the Caribbean, is neither maladaptive nor pathological; it is also not new. Even as educational and employment opportunities for women rise in many areas of the world, including the Caribbean, and even as religious enthusiasm intensifies the call for sanctified unions, marriage trends in the Caribbean will be slow to change so long as the benefits of extra-legal alternatives prevail. By assessing the conjugal conundrums at the heart of early marriage delay and troubling the normativity and inherent desirability of the nuclear family model, we can take an important step toward untangling the complicated life decisions seemingly all people make when planning families and futures—whether inspired by God or broader cultural traditions—all while minding the multiple meanings attributed to reproductive and communal life in the contemporary Caribbean and beyond.

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Notes

1. Notable examples of this work include Blake (1961), Clarke (1957), Henriques (1953), Horowitz (1967), Otterbein (1966), Roberts (1975), Roberts and Sinclair (1978), Rodman (1971), M. Smith (1962a, 1962b), R. Smith (1956, 1973), and Solien (1960). For readers new to the region, the Caribbean has been treated for some time now in both anthropology and in sociology as a "socio-cultural area" (Mintz 1965; also see M. Smith 1965); that is, a diverse geopolitical space united by many shared social structural features owing, at least in part, to common historical experiences of conquest, colonization, slavery and/or peonage, and the development of multiracial and multicultural societies (M. Smith 1965: 19). Despite the diverse linguistic, political, and cultural realities marking the region as plural and divisible, there remains a convincing number of shared characteristics—social and cultural commonalities—that connect distinct Caribbean societies to one another and distinguish them as a group from other global regions. Throughout this chapter I cite studies from an array of Caribbean countries that arrive independently at similar conclusions about marriage and family formation, affirming that, at least in these areas, individual Caribbean societies are much more alike than they are different.

2. Important differences across ethnic groups have been observed—especially pertaining to East Indians (Innerarity 2000: 62; Roberts and Braithwaite 1962; Schwartz 1965; R. Smith and Jayawardena 1959)—not to mention differences across economic status groups. Significant similarities, however, have also been noted. Some work suggests that the same general structural patterns may hold for the middle and upper classes, though the full range of practices are assigned different values (Douglass 1992; R. Smith 1988; see also Barrow 2001: 421–22). Of course, we find unions of all types among all classes of people, regardless of race or ethnic group, but the relative incidence of their occurrence varies in ways that are difficult to measure (R. Smith 1988: 112), and attitudes toward specific family practices and the meanings assigned to them can differ across class, race, age, gender, and religious affiliation (Barrow 2001: 422).

3. It is necessary to point out that, while men might accrue prestige among their peers through demonstrations of virility and sexual potency and may flaunt the existence of "outside" children to enhance their masculinity, women's sexual freedom is constrained by the imposition of dissimilar rules of decorum and modesty (Barrow 2001: 422; Clarke 1957: 91, 96; R. Smith 1956: 141; Thornton 2016; Wilson 1969: 71–72).

In areas throughout the Caribbean, men, as a general rule, are viewed as incorrigible womanizers whose all but inevitable infidelity is treated as regrettable, if nevertheless expected (Otterbein 1966: 69; Thornton 2013). This oft-cited double standard of sexual morality—"what is fame for the man is shame for the woman" (Rodman 1971: 60)—is a pervasive assessment of what is considered respectable for the different sexes, but one that veils the prevalence of extramarital relationships not uncommonly pursued and maintained by women themselves.

4. The percentage of households headed by women in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica in the early 2000s, for example, was 26.8, 42.7, and 44.7 respectively (ECLAC 2000). For other Caribbean islands, see Massiah (1983). For the total number of births globally that occur out of wedlock see UNPD (2015) report *World Population Prospects*. According to World Bank data from 2014, fertility rates have declined steadily in the Caribbean over the past half-century. For example, the total fertility rate per woman dropped in the Dominican Republic from 5.6 (births per 1,000 women) in the early 1970s to 3.1 in the early 2000s; over that same period rates dropped in Cuba from 3.5 to 1.5, in Jamaica from 5.0 to 2.4, and in St. Lucia from 6.3 down to 2.0 (St. Bernard 2003: Table 12).

5. According to census data collected in the 1990s, the average age at first marriage for women in countries like Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Dominica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was between 31 and 34 years old; for men, it was greater than 34 years old (UNPD 2017).

6. To be sure, the binary that Wilson (1969, [1973] 1995) outlines is in practice much less orderly or prescriptive (see Besson 1993). The allegedly peripheral—or "marginal"—role Caribbean men are said to assume in relation to the family has been challenged by Barrow (1998) and others as essentialist and much too narrowly focused on male contributions to the nuclear family in co-residential conjugal scenarios and not beyond them (as sons, brothers, or uncles, for example). Such an interpretation, they argue, limits men's domestic role to strictly disciplinary and economic matters while reductively positioning men in opposition to women and to the family itself (also see Barriteau 2003).

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